

## 6 • Listening to Noise and Silence

it introduces the themes central to a philosophy of sound art: subjectivity, objectivity, communication, collective relations, meaning and sense making.

### Being Honeyed

In 1948 Maurice Merleau-Ponty was commissioned by the French National radio to give seven audio-lectures on 'The Development of Ideas' to be broadcast as part of 'The French Culture Hour', on each Saturday between the 9th of October and the 13th of November. His series, which focused on the World of Perception, is kept in the archives of the Institut National de L'Audiovisuel (INA) in Paris and has also been published first in French, and now in an English translation, as a small booklet by Routledge.<sup>4</sup> Here I will consider both my experience of the spoken causeries, listening to it by appointment at the National Archive and the statements of the written texts. In these lectures Merleau-Ponty considers the perception of the world not as a passive gazing at its *a priori* attributes but instates visual perception via modern painting and everyday objects an **active role**. Merleau-Ponty talks about painting and the artistic demand to see beyond the intellectual expectation of a representational reality into the perception of **'a space in which we too are located'**. Talking about painting since Cézanne he suggests:

The lazy viewer will see 'errors of perspective' here, while those who look closely will get the feel of a world in which no two objects are seen simultaneously, a world in which regions of space are separated by the **time** it takes to move our gaze from one to the other a world in which being is not given but rather emerges over time.<sup>5</sup>

In his descriptions he outlines a phenomenology of perception, a world and art **perceived** rather than known. He understands conventional, representational and perspectival painting to be polite in that

it facilitates a single perception of what is in reality multi-layered and complex. To him such painting kills 'their trembling life' that is perpetually unfolding. Instead he prefers those works that deal with the emergence of being over time.<sup>6</sup>

What he means by this painterly emergence is clarified in his in 1945 written essay 'Cézanne's Doubt', where he articulates the doubt in the singular and habitual veracity of the seen as the prime motivator of the artist's production. He suggests that Cézanne paints incessantly, again and again the landscape before him from the doubt in the referential and prespectival reality of the visible world. This doubt is suspended in the motility of painting out of which the landscape emerges rather than is represented by. He understands such paintings as 'a drive to rediscover the world as we apprehend it in lived experience', and states that painters of that time refused the laws of perspective and instead struggled with the birth of the landscape, the thing, before them.<sup>7</sup> They pushed the body into the mêlé of reality and it is through the bodily experience that that reality becomes real in all its complexity rather than as a detached and firm fact. However, in print his ideas retain the notion of a finished painting rather than the movement of unfolding that he attributes to the sensory material. It remains a description of a work that is the finished product of a complex, bodily engagement; it is not the bodily engagement itself.

What he writes about is the artist's body, his doubt, his need to perpetually rework, to remain fleetingly certain, which evokes in me the certainty of his painting, validated by the painter's struggle and hard work. Cézanne's individual and ceaseless struggle against one point of view is the modernist aura of the painting as a manual fact.<sup>8</sup> The painting remains certain as a painting that I can view from a distance, hanging heavy on the wall. I empathize intellectually but not physically. This is not my doubt being worked through here. It remains the painter's. The multi-layered complexity becomes again one viewpoint in the perspective of the gallery. In the certainty of the museum's context I understand rather than experience doubt. By contrast, through the spoken words of the broadcast the painting unfolds,



refolds, from me, as an audio work. I hear and participate in the process of layers, distances, time and separations. The painting emerges over time in my ears. This is not to say that the written text or the painted image really represent a simple and certain unity. But their already-there-ness, their existence before my viewing them and the certainty of their published context, allows my vision to observe rather than participate in the complexity of their unfolding. The physical distance and autonomy of the work as image, as text, allows reading and shapes the interpretation of the read in its own image. This interpretation *is* the work in perception but this perception is spatial and brightly lit. By contrast, the dark serendipity of radio grants no room: its nearness and temporality is not that of my interpretation but that of its own unfolding, out of the dark into my ears, in the physical time of the broadcast. My ears perform the complexity of the work bodily and in some haste. The text as writing is the musical work, framed by convention; it allows entry to scrutinizing eyes that interpret it, while granting it the space for that interpretation. The issue here is not a distinction between music and sound art, but how both of them are listened to. This book includes the discussion of what conventionally could be termed musical works, but attempts to listen to them for the sound they make rather than their musical organization. Since, sound does not allow for an interpretation on top of its work-ness but *is* interpretation as all there is, temporal and contingent. It is the 'unseen' painting as it emerges from Merleau-Ponty's voice that reveals the complex intersubjectivity of its experience. The text as voice is the bodily fragment of its sound, and the painting unfolding in that voice takes that body to meet mine in a dark and transient conduit. Here the painting is experienced in all its complexity rather than appreciated as a firm fact: trembling and in doubt it *is* the motility of being.

What I hear in Merleau-Ponty's *Causeries* is not the body of the text but the body of Merleau-Ponty, whose complex unity, contingent, fragmented and doubtful, meets me in my listening. When, in another broadcast in the series, Merleau-Ponty explains the complex unity of perception through the yellow sourness of a lemon and the liquid



**stickiness of honey**, it is from his voice, the bodily and transient sound of his appearance out of the darkness of the broadcast, that the lemon and honey get formed in my listening as uncertain and complex unities that reveal my own unsure intricacy.

This is the case with the quality of being-honeyed. Honey is a slow-moving liquid; while it undoubtedly has a certain consistency and allows itself to be grasped, it soon creeps slyly from the fingers and returns to where it started from. It comes apart as soon as it has been given a particular shape, and what is more, it reverses the roles, by grasping the hands of whoever would take hold of it.<sup>9</sup>

Being honeyed expresses the reciprocity of his phenomenological intersubjectivity. The honey can only be felt through my stickiness. It cannot be grasped as a remote object but comes to being in my honeyed-hands as a complex phenomenon of no certain shape but a demanding nature. While the text describes the process, the voice produces it. His voice becomes the honey that drips into my ears and engages me without taking certain shape; it remains a roving complexity that grasps me.

The paintings, sour lemons and sticky honey that Merleau-Ponty talks about in his radio broadcasts are imagined by the listeners, produced in their imagination, invented and tasted through their ears. My cheeks pull together and my saliva starts flowing to the sound of yellow juicy lemon-ness. The image of a lemon sums it up, the sound adds up: adding ever more complex layers that are the object as auditory phenomenon. The adding never reaches a totality but only a contingent realization, which is never ideal but remains the fantasy of Adorno's interpretative process.

While the modernist painter grapples with the multi-perspectuality of the world, **in listening I imagine the world**: it emerges between his words from my imagination in which I am located. This is not an act of interpretation as much as the **fantasy of** my audition: it is not the



modernist painting nor the golden honey but his voice, his body in his mouth meeting mine in my ears, that shapes the perceived in the sensory-motor action of my perception.

Merleau-Ponty talks about his world of perception in visual terms. The sensibility of his perception however is not that of vision. It is not vision that painting and philosophy has liberated from representation; it is sonic perception, which is free of the visual stranglehold on knowledge and experience. Sound does not describe but produces the object/phenomenon under consideration. It shares nothing of the totalizing ability of the visual. It does not deny visual reality but practises its own fleeting actuality, augmenting the seen through the heard. The sonic reality is intersubjective in that it does not exist without my being in it and I in turn only exist in my complicity with it; and it is generative in that it *is* the sensory-motor process of listening: presently producing one's honeyed-ness from one's position of listening centrifugally into the world.<sup>10</sup>

The listening subject invents, he practises an innovative listening that produces the world for him in a phenomenological sensory-motor action towards the heard, and his auditory self is part of the heard in reciprocal intersubjectivity. Listening as a critical motility practises Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a process of doubt: the critical listener himself is full of doubt about the heard, and doubtful in his complicity he needs to hear and hear again, to know himself as an intersubjective being in a sonic life-world.<sup>11</sup> The difficulty arises when this experiential, subjective world is measured and communicated in written language that pretends the objectivity and knowledge of the visual exchange. The transcript of the radio broadcasts gives me a description of the complexity of honey and lemons, the sounds of Merleau-Ponty's voice binds me to honey's sugary stickiness and the lemon's sour flesh. This difference in my perceptual engagement highlights an aesthetic difference.

One intention of *Listening* is to unpack and articulate this distinction through listening to sound work and the everyday acoustic environment, to bring to light the consequences of a sonic perception and

subjectivity as a philosophical experience. Another is to bring sounds' particularity to bear on our notion of communication, language and shared meaning, and to celebrate experiential non-sense, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological sense that comes out of sensation rather than rationality and transgresses the collective through individual sense-making.

### **To Listen**

Sounds constantly enter my ears, bounding around in there, declaring their interest even if I am not listening. As I walk through a busy urban street I try to ignore the incessant hum of thick traffic, the noisy commotion and vocal drone of people around me. However, the fact that I do not listen to them consciously or willingly does not mean that these sounds do not shape the reality as it presents itself to me. Sound renders the crowd massive and pervasive, becoming ever denser and more intimidating, encroaching on my physical space. Their stomping feet reverberate off the hard and shiny architecture. A stampede: emerging from behind my back and stretching ahead of me beyond my visual horizon. They are everywhere, coming closer and closer, engulfing me in their physical presence.

Switch off the drone of hammering footsteps and the aural hub-bub of human activity, the crowd shrinks immediately, the frightful beast is tamed. All I see now are people bumbling along, minding their own businesses, nothing to do with me. However, such a visual autonomy does not exist.<sup>12</sup> Listening produces a sonic life-world that we inhabit, with or against our will, generating its complex unity. Sound involves me closely in what I see; it pulls the seen towards me as it grasps me by my ears. Sound renders the object dynamic. It makes it 'tremble with life' and gives it a sense of process rather than a mute stability. Stability is mute, not silent but mute. Silence still involves listening and hearing as a generative action of perception. Muteness by contrast numbs the auditory engagement. It applies a local anaesthetic and disables the hearing process. Stability in this sense is the