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THE LIMITS OF LISTENING: THREE CONVERSATIONS ON SOUND PRACTICE DURING A COVID-19 LOCKDOWN[1)]

"We still want to keep up with musicians and djs around, and as we feel that digitals streams are irretrievably lacking the social energy of live music events and are not able to compensate for it, we are looking for consolation in words," writes Viennese experimental electronic music curator, promoter, and dj Shilla Strelka when launching the interview series *Insides* on her platform STRUMA+IODINE in late April 2020.[2)] Strelka is speaking at the height of what residents in the region should remember as their first in a series of COVID-19 lockdowns, which abruptly and effectively shut down most forms of public artistic life relevant for musicians and performers in physical spaces from March 16, 2020 onward.[3)] Her post captures a sentiment that was widely shared at the time in my own bubble of DIY punk musicians, synth wavers, and other artists performing with their bodies and with sound: that playing online, though often the only opportunity left to play at all, was a poor substitute for running a show in a physical venue, in assembly with and close proximity to a live, equally corporeal audience.

In my circles, the loss experienced did not just concern the professional aspects of being a musician and/or performer working in Vienna (including the loss of income, though this remains a crucial problem too), but also the loss of a sense of personal connection. In large part, the small, specialized 'scenes' that crowd around local venues, like Venster99, or labels, like unrecords, form an extended network of friends, acquaintances, collaborators, and mutual fans who know and often also genuinely care about each other's personal lives, and who are used to connecting regularly at live events. Many of these relationships are close enough that one would talk for an hour when bumping into each other at a club, but too casual to warrant a video call or an outdoor walk-and-talk date, which during lockdowns meant that people would usually lose touch completely. Between April and June 2020, *Insides* alleviated this sense of disintegration by posting forty-nine short interviews asking fifty-one electronic musicians with strong local ties how they spent their time now, how the pandemic affected their work and productivity, and how they were dealing with the restrictions on playing shows. Strelka's collection is a timely document, granting insights to the wide range of very different coping strategies that a small sample of Viennese musicians came up with early on,

1)
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2)
https://strumaandiodine.wordpress.com/2020/04/23/insides/ (18 February 2021)

3)
In Austria, venues remained closed from March 13 to May 2020. Seated indoor shows for a very limited number of people were possible between May and October 2020, which allowed theaters and live music venues that could implement the regulations to host events during that time. Clubs and music venues whose concepts or economic situation depended on hosting a larger number of people – or on audiences being able to freely move, for instance, because of dancing – mostly remained closed even during the months with lighter COVID-19 regulations. All cultural venues – including clubs, theaters, and museums – were closed down again in November 2020 for a second and then third lockdown that lasted until February 8, 2021. While museums were open at the time of writing this article in February 2021, all music venues, theaters, and clubs were still shut.

after severe COVID-19 restrictions had been imposed upon their work for the first time. It lays no claim to offering a comprehensive analysis or assessment of its present situation – which was, after all, not only unprecedented (and thus hard to process) for many of the artists featured, but very obviously also still ongoing, with uncertain outcome.

To me, Strelka's interview series not only provided much needed "consolation in words" during long stretches of social isolation, but was also the spark that inspired me to edit and co-author this section of the present issue of FKW. When revisiting *Insides* for updates throughout last spring, I frequently imagined having to write about the 2020 lockdowns as a different person, in the future, and realized what a welcome empirical resource the format could offer for later engagement with the current crisis. Its commitment to recording what *could* be known at its present moment, while fully accepting that this knowledge was necessarily limited, helped shape my decision to assemble a similar resource for this special issue of FKW. Taking *Insides* as a cue, the following pages compile three conversations with four artists who are based in Vienna, who play/perform with/study/teach/research sound and listening, whose work I admire, and whose artistic, personal, and political strategies of working with sound within the present challenges I was wildly and longingly curious about while having to keep my physical distance.

In September 2020, I met performance artist Denise Palmieri, noid (Arnold Haberl) and Christine Schörkhuber of the digital venue echoraeume, and Zosia Hołubowska of the queer feminist electronic music collective Sounds Queer? for one long (60 minutes plus) talk each about their sound practice since COVID-19. We talked along a semi-structured catalogue of questions, organizing each conversation around three topics: what role does sound and listening play in the co-authors' current artistic, curatorial, and pedagogic practice? What sound and listening spaces are they creating in their work, and how does the necessary move to digital means of connection co-shape these spaces? How can listening – as a practice and concept that possibly, and arguably, escapes the power structures that dominate large parts of the visual field – invite egalitarian ways of relating to each other? As will become apparent in my discussion below, the questions were open enough for each artist to take them into the directions that were most important to them. Each conversation was sound recorded, transcribed in full by me, and later edited for clarity and length in a collaboration with all authors. Though formally and methodologically different (they are longer

and more in-depth, and the results of a months-long process of spoken and written exchange) and not as large in sample size (they offer five points of audition, instead of fifty-one), our collection of texts shares with Strelka's *Insides* the awareness that we, the authors, did not yet know enough to give comprehensive explanations, but that we would need to document our present processes and insights if we wanted to make sense with them in times to come.

SITUATING 'LISTENING' As temporary and preliminary utterances, the following texts probe into particular, and differing, experiences of listening. As the titles of the respective conversations indicate, Denise Palmieri, noid and Christine Schörkhuber, and Zosia Hołubowska needed and wanted to address what limited and challenged their artistic/aesthetic, social, and political agency in their current sound work, and they amplified that these limits were demarcated by questions of space and power. This did not come as a surprise, as all four artists are, in addition to and in dialogue with their pursuit of aesthetic practices that could empower them individually as producing subjects, also activists in a more 'traditionally' political realm: they lobby for political change through representation.

Denise Palmieri is co-president of the Austrian Association of Women Artists (VBKÖ), which dates back to 1910 and has maintained a feminist work and exhibition space in Vienna's first district since then. Highly aware of the classism and imperialist, National Socialist, and ensuing structural racisms that are part and parcel of many strains of historical and present-day Austrian feminisms, and especially also of their own history of becoming,[4] VBKÖ now hosts queer feminist activities that reflect on these entanglements and amplify voices that remain marginalized in Austrian art scenes and institutions. In 2019, VBKÖ premiered *Gorgonx*,[5] a group work developed by Denise Palmieri, Naya Freire/Tieta Lux, Ivy Monteiro, and Mavi Veloso that confronts – in song, dance, lip-syncing, poetic recitation, and a final noisy fireworks of money-shaped confetti, green slime, and hard Euro cash – the in/visibilities the artists find themselves expected to inhabit as trans* and gender non-conforming Brazilian immigrants of color in Europe. Palmieri's position with the association reflects a central interest of her solo work, which has long employed vocalizing as both artistic tool and crucial site of inquiry. In performances like *As Lived Our Parents* (Kunsthalle Wien, 2015),[6] *Almost Naked, Almost Black* (Q21 Vienna, 2017),[7] and in the video works based on her live pieces,[8] Palmieri contrasts her singing of pop songs,

4) https://www.vbkoe.org/home/?lang=en (18 February 2021)

5) https://www.denisepalmieri.net/gorgonxs, https://www.vbkoe.org/2019/07/15/gorgonxs/ (18 February 2021)

6) https://www.denisepalmieri.net/as-lived-our-parents, https://kunsthallewien.at/en/exhibition/destination-vienna-2015/ (18 February 18 2021)

7) https://www.denisepalmieri.net/quase-negra-quase-nua; https://www.mqw.at/en/institutions/q21/frei-raum-q21-exhibition-space/2017/06/welt-kompakt/ (18 February 2021)

8) http://avstream.akbild.ac.at/eyebase/eyebase.data.offline/mandant_1/avmedien/1/1/00011062_1.mp4 (18 February 2021)

as a seemingly universally intelligible and lighthearted form of communication with her audience, with a demonstration of how synchronically symbolic and corporeal objects (Austrian Imperial architecture, a cloak and a *Dirndl*[9] drenched in plaster slowly hardening as the show progresses) facilitate the audience reading her body as gendered, racialized, sexualized, and fetishized, thus relentlessly fixing her in place. The current artistic and political projects she spoke about with me for this volume of FKW continue to vocally counter projections of 'the human voice' as a given means of agency that was universally granted and equally accessible to, literally and figuratively, every-body alike.

_____noid and Christine Schörkhuber are active in the lobby group mitderstadtreden ('talking to the city'), which since 2017 has negotiated with the City Government of Vienna about more, and more programmatic, public funding for experimental, DIY, and contemporary music ("neue Musik"). Aiming to act as 'the mouthpiece of Austria's free music scene,'[10] the group wants to heighten local policy-makers' sensibility for concerns like fair pay for self-employed artists, and the need for independently run performance spaces for musicians with little or no access to commercial markets. noid and Schörkhuber take part in mitderstadtreden's work group for the provision of performance spaces (AG Räume), which addresses the disastrous consequences that corporate real estate 'development' and property speculation by private business ventures bear on non-commercial, self-organized Vienna venues. Steinergasse, for instance, which has long hosted noid's concert series der bloede dritte mittwoch,[11] was recently sold to investors, and will very likely shut down in late 2021. Echoraum, which remains an important cooperation partner for Schörkhuber's festival Klangmanifeste,[12] was under serious threat in 2017. mo.ë Thelemangasse, which has offered a space for larger cooperations between experimental artists and activists since 2010, was lost to real estate speculators in 2017 and has stood empty ever since.[13] By holding their wishes for autonomously run, trans-disciplinary centers for experimental and DIY (sound) art, and an interest in keeping local rents affordable for all tenants and neighbors, as two equally important aspects of the same struggle for a communal right to the city, these and other precarious, self-organized physical venue projects in Vienna often try to link artistic practice to broader community politics. The virtual venue echoraeume, which noid and Schörkhuber co-organize in a larger collective and which we spoke about for our text in this volume, pursues similar goals for the Internet, which, as the only performance space available at the

9)
Dirndl **is a German and Austrian national costume for women* which was invented by fashion designers in the 1930s, and instrumentalized by the National Socialist and Austro Fascist regimes to propagate the idea of a 'Germanness' that was historically, culturally, and racially unified by a shared pre-modern, rural tradition. See Elsbeth Wallnöfer, 2020, Tracht Macht Politik, Innsbruck: Haymon.**

10)
"Sprachrohr der freien Musikszene Österreichs": https://mitderstadtreden.at/aktivitaeten/ (18 February 2021)

11)
http://bloedermittwoch.klingt.org/ (18 February 2021)

12)
http://www.klangmanifeste.at (18 February 2021)

13)
Alisa Beck and Marie-Christine Rissinger (ed.) 2019: Die Akte mo.ë. Protokolle einer abgesagten Zukunft. Vienna: edition mono/monochrom.

time of COVID-19 regulations, has gained importance when physical locations shut down. Looking to open up opportunities beyond the proprietary offerings of companies like YouTube and Zoom, the echoraeume team asks how to build and maintain self-organized, distributed performance platforms that manage to keep non-commercial artists and organizers in the loop, while at the same time affording a level of control over the means of production and (re-) presentation that compares to the physical DIY venues they had to temporarily and/or permanently leave behind.

Zosia Hołubowska's community work, which takes place across a number of collectives in local and international contexts, seeks to empower women*, trans*, queer, non-binary, gender-nonconforming electronic musicians by sharing knowledge and tools for self-expression and promoting their work. Their main activist format is providing education and disseminating information: in lectures, radio shows, and workshops, they teach how to compose and produce with analog and digital sound synthesis, as well as how to listen more closely to the muffled histories of early synthesizer development by female and non-binary artists and engineers, and to overheard contemporary music histories as they are written today by queer artists working in DIY electronic music production. Hołubowska co-runs the Polish platform Oramics,[14] which empowers women*, non-binary and queer artists and promotes the Eastern European electronic music scene. Most recently, the Oramics organizers have used their platform to raise awareness for Belarussian and Polish activists rallying against repression from their authoritarian national governments.[15] Hołubowska's Vienna-based collective Sounds Queer?, which they talk about in our co-authored text (and which also delivers the edition for this issue of FKW, see Birgit Michlmayr's text), provides low-cost, low-threshold access to shared hardware and shared knowledge for prospective and practicing musicians of all levels, and organizes shows and jams that pay attention to how the emotional and material labor of sounding and listening (cf. Thompson 2018) could be distributed in novel, more mutually empowering ways among musicians, audiences, and facilitators. With their solo project Mala Herba, Hołubowska reworks archival traditional songs from Eastern Europe by resounding their vibrations with their body and their synths to craft them into hard-hitting dance hymns about pulverizing the borders of present-day nation states and gender norms.[16]

Palmieri's, noid's, Schörkhuber's, and Hołubowska's active and productive interest for political representation considerably shapes how they speak about their artistic work. Sounding out

14) https://oramics.pl/ (18 February 2021) The collective takes its name from an optical synthesizer system developed in the 1950s and 1960s by the British musician and sound engineer Daphne Oram (1925–2003).

15) https://soundcloud.com/oramicspl/sets/oramics-belarus, https://wepresent.wetransfer.com/story/oramics-poland/, https://www.facebook.com/CTMFestival/videos/502356100733749/ (18 February 2021)

16) https://aufnahmeundwiedergabe.bandcamp.com/album/demonologia (18 February 2021)

problems that resonate loudly with Donna Haraway's epistemological engagement with "partial perspective" in Western conceptualizations of vision and feminist science studies (1988)[17] for their own auditory practices, my co-authors demanded of us, who were speaking together, to listen to listening as a *situated* practice.

PRACTICE TEST To me, the amplification of listening as situatedness in our conversations meant rephrasing as a question, and testing against concrete practices, one suggestion commonly found in phenomenological, ontological, and artistic research-inspired theorizations of sound: is there a potential for egalitarian, ethically accountable, and politically imaginative relating that is *specific* to auditory engagement? As Marie Thompson observes in this volume, listening is currently heralded as bringing forth an aware and responsible relationality between listeners, the listened-to, and the concrete worlds that they meet in. Theorists and practitioners of sound art in particular have often routinely extrapolated this exceptional potentiality of listening by pointing to a set of presumably fundamental[18] differences between 'sound' and 'vision' (Sterne 2003, Sterne 2012: 9f), or, more precisely, to the presumably different ways of engaging that sound (qua listening) and vision (qua looking) would afford (Ruhm 2010). In contrast to vision, which many authors cast in terms of dictating a distance, and thus a clear-cut separation, of the looking subject from the object of the gaze, and of privileging a single perspective or point of view, sound has been described as "expansive[…] and leak[y]" and able to "diffuse[…] in all directions" (Connor 2005: 48), as "multiplying and expanding the point of attention" by "appearing at multiple locations" at once (LaBelle 2015 [2006]: xiii), as "connot[ing] companionship" and "remind[ing] the listener of his [sic] own presence in a living world" (Licht 2019 [2007]), and as inviting the listening subject, by way of intimate proximity of ear and audio signal, to perceive themselves not just as reflected by, but *as* the very "auditory object" of their own contemplation (Voegelin 2010: xii).

Given its impressive track record on paper, it is astonishing that my interlocutors remained somewhat reserved when asked to speculate about listening's social and political promise and potentialities for their own practices. One possible explanation might be the marginal role that sound art theories can assign to representation as a field of political agency, which, as sketched out above, looms large in my co-authors' lives. Two recent monographs, Brandon LaBelle's *Sonic Agency* (2018) and Salomé Voegelin's *The Political Possibility of Sound* (2019), may serve as examples. Both

17) "So, I think my problem, and 'our' problem, is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims, and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects to finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness" (Haraway 1988: 579, italics in original).

18) For recent assessments of the epistemological dangers of theorizing these differences as "unchanging and transhistorical givens," see Thompson, Marie (2017): Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies. In: Parallax July 2017. doi:10.1080/13534645.2017.1339967, Kane, Brian (2015): Sound Studies without Auditory Culture: A Critique of the Ontological Turn. In: Sound Studies vol.1, issue 1, pp. 2-21. doi:10.1080/20551940.2015.1079063, Steingo, Gavin and Sykes, Jim (eds.) (2019): Remapping Sound Studies, Durham: Duke University Press.

publications explicitly locate the egalitarian promise of listening in a complicity of sound and *in*visibility. They draw and expand upon Voegelin's earlier conceptualization of "sonic sensibility," a philosophical and poetic writing practice that crucially relies on engaging with "fleeting and ephemeral" energies, vibrancies, intensities, "presences," and "thingings" that remained beyond visible but that were, as contingencies, ready to unfold in contact with listening subjects that attuned to them with the necessary delicacy and care (Voegelin 2014: 1-3). The political promise of such an engagement, Voegelin suggests, was "to question [...] singular actuality and to hear other possibilities that are probable too, but which, for reasons of ideology, power and coincidence do not take equal part in the production of knowledge, reality, value, and truth" (2014: 3). The agency LaBelle attributes to the sonic similarly hinges on paying close and careful attention to "deep matters and shared energies" that would allow disenfranchised political actors to form intimate alliances for "*undercover* activity" out of sight of those seeking to police them (2018: 3, 32, italics in original). As a (visual) grammar, it is implied, representation answers only to things (subjects, relations, scenarios for the future) it has already seen, and thus has no capacity to imagine anything outside itself. In contrast, listening is projected as moving dynamically through the folds of invisibility, and thus as able to put one in very real touch with literally everything else – which leads Salomé Voegelin to the boldly optimistic conclusion that sound, by holding "the cavernous simultaneity of all the possible possibilities of this world," acted "not as metaphor and parable [...], but as a portal into real possibility" (2019: 27f).

Voegelin's and LaBelle's investment in invisibility tries to answer to a central problem of representation that Johanna Schaffer has termed the 'ambivalences of visibility' ("*Ambivalenzen der Sichtbarkeit*"): within discourses that separate populations into 'marked' minoritized and 'unmarked' universal subjects along (hetero-)sexist, racist, classist, ableist scripts, representational politics that push for 'more visibility' as their central strategy for empowerment will produce subjects that need to reaffirm these very scripts in order to be recognized (Schaffer 2008: 12, 51-59). LaBelle and Voegelin similarly suggest their strategic modes as means to counter "identification, ocular arrest, and visual capture" (LaBelle 2018: 32), and as an invitation to perceive possibilities beyond the "ideology" that "is" representation (Voegelin 2019: 121). As a speculative practice, LaBelle's and Voegelin's championship of the invisible seeks to tackle the hard task of imagining "*otherwise*

and *elsewhere*" (Gordon 2016: 4, italics in original), of earnestly engaging with ideas about sound and relationality that are utopian insofar as they want to do more than provide criticism of presently existing forms of living (cf. Gordon 2016). This can be a useful and necessary offer for left activism, art, and academic writing, especially when caught up in what Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed, and Simon O'Sullivan, in their recent edited volume on cultural imaginations of possible political futures, call "the impasses of neoliberalism" (Gunkel, Hameed and Sullivan 2017). Echoes of similar strategies do resonate in the following conversations: for instance, when Denise Palmieri stages her *Humbling Exercise* in the public pool of Vienna's Stadthallenbad, where narrator and listener feel out for stories amplifying the importance of collectives as political agents in the intimacy and flow of a shared body of water, when noid and Christine Schörkhuber entertain the option of (dis-)organizing the echoraeume digital archive in an "underview" ("*Unübersicht*") that exposes, confuses, and complexifies the logic of common categorizations on online platforms, or when Zosia Hołubowska's communally corporeal engagement with folk songs – singing together, learning how to store vibrations produced by the body of a group in one's own bodily tissues – actualizes a meaning beyond the hierarchical grammars of anthropological archives.

What LaBelle's and Voegelin's methodology cannot always account for, however, and what I think is expressed most saliently in the following conversations, is Schaffer's crucial caveat that invisibility grants no out and away from visual representation, but co-produces its very power structures and codes (2008: 55). Schaffer reminds her readers that invisibility also entails the privilege of appearing as unmarked, as embodying an individualized exemplification of a visual, cultural, and moral norm. This privilege invests subjects holding positions of hegemonic majority with the power to present their perspective as universal, instead of partial and situated (Schaffer 2008: 54, also see hooks 1992). As many scholars of visuality have repeatedly demonstrated for different contexts – I pick out, as examples for this introduction, Donna Haraway (1988), Richard Dyer (1997), Linda Alcoff (1999), and Belinda Kazeem-Kaminski (2018) – this power privilege extends from individual to social structure when hegemonic ways of seeing and knowing deny that the differences in access to in/visibility and 'universal' subjecthood exist in the first place. As it is an important part of the logic that grounds their argument, LaBelle and Voegelin are aware of the mutually co-productive dynamics of in/visibility, and at times address them explicitly. Still, their primarily positive

framing of invisibility as such presupposes that knowledge about the complexities of being absent from view, and especially about the very different consequences such an absence can have for the everyday, present-day lives of differently situated subjects, was already shared by all of their readers. Their methodology, and related theoretical and artistic strategies that highlight sound's presumed independence from the binary epistemology of scopic regimes, thus do not readily provide tools to grapple with sonic situations, relations, and spaces that confront listeners invested in political change with agents that simply renounce engaging with existing representational politics at all, and thus reify hegemonic unmarked-ness.[19)]

In their texts for this volume, Denise Palmieri, noid, Christine Schörkhuber, and Zosia Hołubowska instead amplify strategies that allow them to address how intricately concrete, historically and geopolitically situated forms of looking and listening, scopic and aural regimes, sound and visuality, in/visibility and in/audibility, in different discursive, material, technological and corporeal sedimentations, weave into each other to activate the ambivalences of representation the authors encounter in their artistic and activist practices. Palmieri's work with language and visibility in *white* racialized spaces, noid's and Schörkhuber's investment in opto-sonic aesthetics and sensibility for sound as concept, idea, and code, and Hołubowska's care for sounding as an embodied practice all call into question the artistic and political values of separating 'sound' from 'vision.' However, none of these artists is interested in such relationality because it was boundless and/or all-encompassing, and they are not pointing to it in order to remain attuned to 'all the possible possibilities of this world.' When Denise Palmieri's performative language refracts dominant Eurological conceptualizations of her subject position as hyper-visible, but intellectually muffled spectacle, when noid and Christine Schörkhuber interrogate as linguistic the tacit "agreements" between user and code enacted by 'black box' digital audiovisual technologies, and when Zosia Hołubowska's collectives try to find grammars of more accountable forms of holding and giving sonic space, they choose to enter relations that can recognize privileges as a privilege, norms as a norm, structuring hierarchies as a structural hierarchy.

THREE CONVERSATIONS: LISTENING TO/AS AGENTIAL CUTS

Contrary to what US pop star Madonna announced in an infamously ignorant Instagram video in March 2020,[20)] the global

19) Marie Thompson discusses examples of such theoretical and artistic strategies in her article "Whiteness and the ontological turn in sound studies." In: Parallax July 2017. doi:10.1080/13534645.2017.1339967

20) https://www.cbsnews.com/news/madonna-posts-video-calling-coronavirus-the-great-equalizer-from-a-bathtub-filled-with-rose-petals/ (18 February 2021)

COVID-19 pandemic does not hit every person and population equally hard, but continues to draw urgent attention to the very lines that cynically separate subjects and systems worth preserving and protecting from expendable forms of life (cf. Redecker 2020, Sanin 2020, Bertz 2021, ZeroCovid 2021). While an artistic and academic thinking through and with sound, as happens in this volume of FKW and especially in the three following conversations, can suggest only small and soft tools to tackle the manifold and overwhelming political injustices the pandemic continues to aggravate in many contexts, it nevertheless offers a practice field for re-engaging questions of when to amplify the relationality of all actors involved, and when, in the words of Eva Haifa Giraud, to pay attention to the agential cuts, the "particular points within these assemblages when things stabilize as things" (Giraud 2019: 67). The following conversations move between uncutting 'sound' as productively relational with visual and tactile fields of agency, and carefully differentiating within the tangle of political representation of and in sounding and listening as to which nodes and corners weigh most heavily for whom. Hopefully, hearing about how much work can be, and is already, still, being done, and being done well, will not only come as a 'consolation in words,' but also as a call to good cheer for those of our readers who presently practice from rooms that feel empty of public assembly. It has for me. Thank you everybody who helped this volume of FKW into being!

// Links to artist / project homepages

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