

“You don't only listen with your ears, you also listen with your muscles and your bones.” : A conversation on the challenges of sharing sonic space online.

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“YOU DON’T ONLY LISTEN WITH YOUR EARS, YOU ALSO LISTEN WITH YOUR MUSCLES AND YOUR BONES.”

A CONVERSATION ON THE CHALLENGES OF SHARING SONIC SPACE ONLINE

KRISTINA PIA HOFER — Tell me about your artistic practice, and the work you do with the Sounds Queer? collective. What role does sound play in these contexts?

ZOSIA HOŁUBOWSKA — Sound is one of the few ways in which I can relate to and communicate with people. I find it difficult to talk and make friends. I can express myself better, and find easier connection and understanding, through sound. I am not educated as a musician or an artist, though. I come from punk and DIY, where everyone was making music, but no one was calling themselves a musician. I am trained as an anthropologist. Up to my master’s studies, I treated those two things separately. I was looking for methodologies that were based on activism and had a strong ethical basis. I realized too late that it was not possible to conduct anarchist anthropology based on activism and relational ethics within academia, so I moved to artistic research where I had more space for my practice. At some point, I just decided to call myself a musician and focus entirely on sound. Now, it’s the main thing I do: I produce electronic music, I teach electronic music, I do performances, radio pieces, and sound design for theater and movies.

— With Sounds Queer? (SQ?) we treat sound as a tool to strengthen agency. In 2015, I started holding workshops like “How to start playing music without knowing how to play an instrument” in rented or squatted practice spaces. They were about operating a drum machine, playing a riff on the bass, and adding some cheap keyboard sounds – I wanted to show that it’s really easy to make sounds, even with just two mp3 players and some downloaded samples from the Internet. When I moved to Vienna, I got a grant from KùltürGemma¹⁾ for a series of workshops, and for developing a performance exploring the idea of animating a safer space in queer activism through making music together. I asked Adele Knall and Violeta Gil Martínez to join, we registered as a *Verein*,²⁾ got funding from the City of Vienna, and broadened the scope of our enterprise (laughs). Together, we treat sound as an act that is able to conjure a safer space. Through playing sounds together, we can find a feeling of belonging, an exchange with people that have

1)
www.kueltuergemma.at (18 February 2021)

2)
In Austria, a registered association (Verein) is eligible to apply for public funding.

different experiences than our own. We were running a physical space until recently, a synth lab with a program of workshops and jam sessions. We also created an interactive sound and video installation together at the Austrian Association of Women Artists (VBKÖ) as part of an exhibition celebrating the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage.³⁾ The installation showcased the documentation of a performance I curated and organized in December 2017. We added a DIY synth to the setup, so that audiences could watch the documentation and intervene in the soundscape. We had also scheduled a SQ? exhibition at VBKÖ in November 2020, within the framework of their "Agency of Failure" program. We had to move it to April 2021 because of COVID.

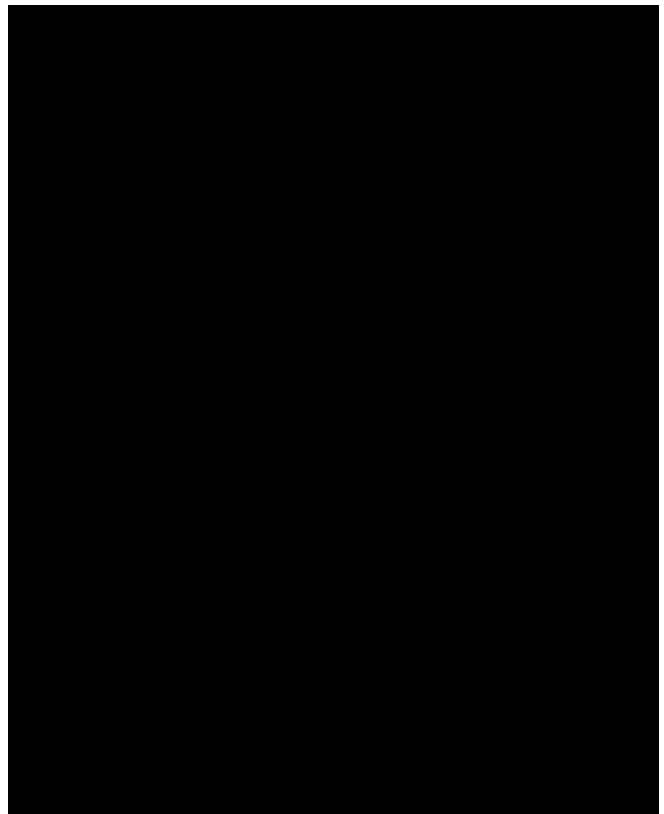
KPH — What does "safer space" mean in the context of SQ?

ZH — My interpretation of the term is inspired by my activism. I worked in a conflict mediation team in a queer festival in Copenhagen, where we developed a toolkit based on Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed.⁴⁾ We tried to think of conflict as a collective responsibility, a dynamic with power structures behind it, not only as a situation between two individuals. We tried to uphold a relational ethical approach: all experiences and emotions are valid, and it's about listening and understanding each other, but also about recognizing your privileges. We followed a line of thinking from intersectional queer feminism, as I have experienced it in various groups, collectives, and DIY zines: that you can be a migrant and also be racist, for instance. We wanted to keep in mind the different obstacles that a person can encounter, so that we wouldn't erase each other's trajectories. Obstacles do not annul the privileges we might have, but it is crucial to reevaluate your actions in a dynamic process. The process should be centered around giving space to others, rather than demanding that something be provided to you. That's how I define a safer space: a situation where different experiences can be voiced and heard.

— And then I realized that it's possible to create this situation through music too, especially when organizing an event: by paying careful attention to what the performing band's message is, how

3) <https://www.vbkoe.org/2018/09/18/nothing-less-100-jahre-frauenwahlrecht/> (18 February 2021)

4) Boal, Augusto (1994 [1979]): *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.



// Figure 1
Workshop at Sounds Queer? Festival,
SSTR6, Vienna, 9–13 January 2019.
© Sounds Queer?

the band presents itself, where the event is organized, who's doing the door, what the prices of admission are, and what the entrance policy is. We applied this idea to the way we organize workshops and teach music at SQ?. Of course, we are still learning a lot, and we make mistakes as we go. But we try to be better and better at what it actually means to make something accessible. Because it's not enough to just say it. You have to work really hard.

KPH — What strategies do you employ to make SQ? accessible? And who are we talking about when we talk accessibility?

ZH — One strategy is the way we formulate an invitation. We don't have what we call an identity policy. We prioritize people that don't identify as cis straight male, but everyone is welcome. However, in a workshop, when I ask "Who wants to try something?" I make sure that it's not a man that jumps ahead to the front of the line. We also have a social spot policy for people who can't afford the regular fee: at every workshop, we offer one or two spots for free or on a sliding scale.

— One thing that doesn't work is that we don't reach some communities we'd like to reach out to, like queer refugees and other migrant communities. SQ? only functions in English, because I don't speak German so well, and some of these communities don't prioritize speaking English. That's something we need to address. In general, we still have a hard time getting out of our own bubble. We don't often have the time to go around and spread flyers and posters, we rely on newsletters, and these newsletters usually serve students. So we have a lot of students, who are not my priority to serve. Also, our former physical space was on the first floor without a lift. And after a while we realized that because of our limited budget, we had really crappy, fragile plastic chairs, which are uncomfortable when someone is bigger. So we learn as we go, but it's important to learn. At some point, we actually stopped to use the word 'accessible' for our studio, because we are not an accessible studio. We now say that we're an open studio.

KPH — At the studio, you put an emphasis on working with synthesizers. Why does this choice of instrument matter?

ZH — Let me start a little bit poetically (laughs). One of my favorite books is *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* by Freya Jarman-Ivens.⁵⁾ In her introduction, Jarman-Ivens recalls being obsessed with Alison Stamp's

5)

Jarman-Ivens, Freya (2011): *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

performance in a 1980s recording of Allegri's *Miserere*, specifically with the tension between the peak of the highest note and the melodic resolution right afterwards to a new harmony. She connected this listening experience with her personal struggle with coming to terms with her queer identity. Later on, the research on tension and operatic voice became the focus of her academic career – but it all started with an emotion, a fascination, an attraction. I relate to that. I have been obsessed with synthesizers for as long as I can remember, and I cannot tell you why (laughs). When I started researching on the pioneers of electronic music, they were all women, or gender non-conforming individuals. It fascinated me that the development of this technology, at a time that granted greater access to technology and education to women in general, created a perfect situation to reinvent music *and* gender roles. Women could pick up an instrument that didn't yet have stigma or history attached to it, and try anything that was possible.

KPH — What time are you speaking about?

ZH — I am specifically speaking about Wendy Carlos, Delia Derbyshire, Daphne Oram, Éliane Radigue, Elżbieta Sikora, Pauline Oliveros, and lots of other women that were around in the 1960s. It fascinates me that they had this instrument that was not really an instrument, that no one even knew what it could sound like, and that women were on the forefront of creating this genre, this art. And they were pushing the technology forward. Wendy Carlos was heavily involved in coming up with the interface for the first Moogs, which had been clunky and easily got out of tune. Carlos basically turned them into instruments. At SQ? we start all our workshops by referring to these artists. For me, as a femme-recognized person, it's important to finally have a place where I belong, historically. Because when you study history, and you cannot find a person that looks like you... It's not that they don't exist, but the way history is being presented, you're always like: "But where was I? Where am I in this?" That's another reason why I am drawn to electronic music.

KPH — What does listening mean to you? For you as an artist, and for your practice with the SQ? collective?

ZH — I think listening is the core of composing and producing music. Listening is much more important than actually making a noise, or a sound. Obviously, I am very fascinated with Pauline Oliveros, and the emotionally gentle and empathic listening she

suggests that engages the whole body.⁶⁾ In my work, however, I use listening as a learning tool. I research a lot in archives of traditional music from Poland and Ukraine. I don't use transcriptions and I don't do recreations or reconstructions, I *listen* to the recordings, and then I try to learn how to sing the melody. This is not because I don't read notes. I think that this music is deprived of something crucial when it's being transcribed. Especially when transferred to the twelve sharp tone structure.

KPH ____ What's missing?

ZH ____ First, the meaning of this music. It's not only a melody. The melody and the lyrics are one thing, one identity. Second, music always has a function and a purpose, and its magical consequences on reality. But something that is transcribed, catalogued alphabetically, and released under the name of a researcher... that's pointless to me. I am talking about the violence and anxiety of archives: taking things out of the context, disseminating them in a way that people who created this knowledge have no control over it, and cataloging texts of shared culture under the name of one researcher.

____ Coming back to your question of listening: I am interested in collective improvisation. In many collective improvisations that I witness, there is very little actual listening between the participants. Everyone's looking for their five minutes to solo, or to get louder and more experimental than the others. In December 2017, as a final presentation for a workshop I did when SQ? was still my solo project, I invited the workshop participants (Verena Schwab, Edwina Sasse, Nicole Sabella, and Miña Tarilonte Rodríguez) and two artists, Aja Ireland and DJ Morgiana HZ, to improvise at the Prospekthof at Semperdepot in Vienna, which is a very large space with a very high ceiling. The musicians were so far away from each other, with their own signal amplified so loudly close to them, that they could not hear anyone else when they were playing. If they wanted to listen to other people, they literally had to stop playing, and start walking around in the space. I wanted to create a multi-layered conversation, a polyphonic dialogue. I told them before what the setup would be, and they were terrified. But I told them to trust the silence, and that we didn't have to create a full-on symphony all the time. I liked thinking about composing as listening. When I have the opportunity, I like composing and creating in a way that has the audience participate in creating the composition, either by triggering sensors, or by just moving in space and mixing

6)

Oliveros, Pauline (2005): *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. Lincoln: iUniverse.

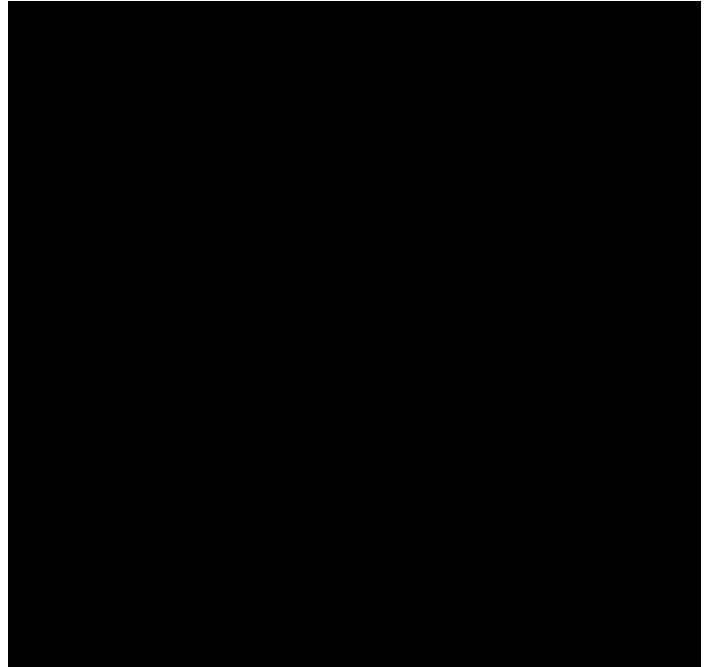
the sounds that come from the different sources in the room, so they decide for themselves how much they hear of what source.

KPH — What about listening in the pedagogic space of SQ?

ZH — At the beginning, people had no headphones, and each workshop was an hour of noise. No one could hear what they were doing, and everybody was only interested in trying out the gear. Now they are using headphones and try the synthesizers one by one, which is better for everybody's ears. When we do jams at SQ? it can be a challenge to be inviting, while also taking care that the space doesn't get squashed by somebody who's very eager. Our last jam was called "Gentle listening to unfinished tracks." People brought songs that they were working on, and we listened to each song collectively, two or three times in a row. The first time we just listened, the second and third times we tried to jam to the song. That's a format I'd like to repeat. It worked, people were enjoying themselves.

KPH — In sound art studies, it is often suggested that sound and listening don't answer to the same dominant power dynamics that structure looking and relating via visible codes. The hope expressed in these publications is that listening opens up spaces for less hierarchical ways for humans to engage with each other. Without going into the details of the particular theories: how does this general suggestion resonate with you?

ZH — I think that there is a lot of vulnerability connected to listening, because you cannot shut it off. This is why I always have the audience in mind when I compose or play. I don't want to hurt them. I understand that art doesn't always need to be pleasant, and that we're also here to challenge each other, but I don't think that playing an hour of extremely loud, high-pitched tones is artistically new, or a revelation. It's very unpleasant for the audience. I have the feeling that some artists just forget that they compose for people with ears and a human hearing range. Listening, teaching, and power – that's delicate, too. When I'm teaching workshops, I am sometimes annoyed with myself that the first hour is just me talking. I really don't know how to do it differently yet.



// Figure 2
Sounds Queer? sound installation at
the exhibition at Format.strk, Vienna,
31 January 2020. © Sounds Queer?

KPH ____ As a workshop participant, I loved it that you talked in the beginning.

ZH ____ (laughs)

KPH ____ It was a good way of learning for me. To hear you speak.

ZH ____ Yeah? I also like learning through listening. I learned it from the vocal trainer I was studying with. She doesn't allow you to record when you learn a song, because you don't only listen with your ears, you also listen with your muscles and your bones, and she wants you to observe how the sound feels in your throat when you sing back, how it resonates in your muscle and bones. This is how you learn. Especially when you learn group singing, it's vital that you experience the relationship between the voices through your bones and muscles. That's the best way to study harmony. A recording can't capture that vibration, this resonance. You need to learn how it should feel in your bodies, like muscle memory.

KPH ____ Let's move to your experience of the spring 2020 lockdown, and the situation it put you in, especially with the SQ? workshop space. Most of your workshops, as I know them, are presence-based. This is necessary because you provide the equipment the participants play with. What happened to your teaching work when physical gatherings were no longer possible?

ZH ____ We stopped doing workshops. The difficult thing in the spring of 2020 was not having a timeline. At first, the lockdown was announced for a week, then for a month, then for another and another, and we never knew how much longer it would take. I hated this limbo. We kept the space empty for two months, losing money, before we decided to pack up and leave. Now, in September 2020, we still have the funding, but we don't know how smart it is to organize events. We don't know if another lockdown is going to be imposed over the next months. We don't know if we should look for a temporary space, or another permanent space. We spend so much time on worrying. It really eats us up. I was thinking about doing SQ? workshops online, but then I did one online workshop, and didn't like it much.

KPH ____ What workshop was it? How was it different from teaching in presence?

ZH — Teaching online, you can never make sure that you and the participants are on the same page. My workshop was for the Academy of Fine Arts, about making a podcast, or a radio piece. You'd think that the technologies for streaming and online learning were developed enough for such a task, but they're not. When you are using a digital audio workstation and a stream, it's not always possible to route the audio properly, so you have to switch back and forth between two or more streaming platforms – between Zoom and Twitch, for instance. On Zoom, the participants cannot always see all the windows that are popping up in the software that you want to show them. When you're using Twitch, they cannot ask you questions unless they have an account. They can join a chat, but the chat takes time, so their questions always come in five minutes late. If I have the participants in the same room, in front of their computers, I can walk over to them and show them the button they are looking for. But when I'm teaching software online, I don't even know which sound monitors they're using. If the participants are using their computer speakers, they won't be able to hear the low frequencies of the spectrum, so it is impossible to explain certain features of the software where hearing these frequencies becomes important. The other thing I hated about the move online was how overloaded the Internet became, and I don't want to contribute to that. People asked why I didn't just make tutorials. I answered that there are already so many tutorials, on everything. A lot of them are crappy, commercially sponsored content produced by bro-y bros, but I don't have the energy to retrain myself. I spent many years learning how to produce music and teach workshops, and then suddenly, within two months, I'm supposed to figure out how to make a tutorial?

KPH — I remember a lockdown article by a New York City-based theater maker called Nicholas Berger that you reposted on Facebook in April 2020.⁷⁾ Berger argued that artforms that depended on assembly to unfold their artistic and social relevance couldn't easily be moved online. "Assembly," to him, is a gathering of artists and audiences in real time, physical presence and a shared physical space, with the participants giving their undivided attention to the immediate experience they share – a situation of corporeal liveness and togetherness that the Internet wouldn't accommodate. Speaking from your experience: could teaching be considered an artform that works better in assembly, as well?

ZH — A thousand times yes. I cannot handle the Zoom dynamic.

7)
<https://medium.com/@nicholas-berger/the-forgotten-art-of-assembly-a94e164edf0f> (18 February 2021)

To me, Zoom is an uncanny valley.⁸⁾ It's close enough to a real interaction, but it's actually so awful as an experience – dropping connections, yelling “Can you hear me!” for ten minutes. It's hard to focus for me that way. I can't imagine teaching any more workshops in this setting.

KPH ____ What about your music practice? Did you participate in online showings at all?

ZH ____ A little bit. It was fine, because I didn't have to organize it, I just had to show up in a room and play. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't had professional technical help, with someone else bringing all the cameras and doing all the lights. I'm a musician. I'm not a PR person or a cameraperson, and I'm not going to spread myself thin to provide disposable content-on-demand for free. I am wary of the ‘pandemic content’ some artists are putting out. Just because you have a lot of free time, it doesn't mean that you are obliged to be creative, put out ten records, and write a book. What I'd rather wish for this experience to teach us is to break the cycle of completely unsustainable self-exploitation.

KPH ____ For you as an artist, what's the difference between playing a live show in a physical space, and performing for an online broadcast?

ZH ____ Playing live, I feed off the energy of the audience. I see their reactions, they keep me going. And I have a message, which I think transgresses words. The message is in the melody, and in the rhythm. Having a big PA allows for a completely different experience than listening to something on your headphones, it affects your entire body. I believe that dancing together, and listening to music together, is something really sacred. In contrast, performances online that isolate me from the audience feel like theater to me. And I don't want my music to be theater. I have theatrical costumes and makeup, but paradoxically, it's not for people to sit and look at me.

KPH ____ When you stream, do you record a show and then broadcast it? Or do you do live performances that are transmitted in real time?

ZH ____ I did two real time live sets during the lockdown. And I'll be broadcasting two prerecorded performances over the fall of

8)

Mori, Masahiro (2012 [1970]): The Uncanny Valley. In: IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine, Vol.19, issue 2, pp. 98–100. doi:10.1109/MRA.2012.2192811

2020. However, even though I do miss playing for live audiences, I'm not so miserable that I cannot play gigs. I enjoy getting a break from worrying about everything that comes with DIY touring, like arriving in a city that you don't know on your own, having to drag the equipment around, not knowing your promoter or where you're going to sleep, not knowing whether it's going to be cold, and how many stairs you'll have to climb (laughs).

KPH ____ Do you miss your work with SQ?

ZH ____ I don't think we miss it that much. The last project was hard work, ten times as hard as we thought it would be. We really didn't know what it means to run a space. Of course it was sad that we closed down, but we were also a little relieved to have a break. It opened up space for us to do our own things, to go in our different directions.

KPH ____ Have you heard from any of the workshop participants during the lockdown?

ZH ____ One or two of them wrote us that they miss it. I don't think we've broken too many hearts by stopping.

KPH ____ I have one last question that is addressed to you as an audience member: did you watch and listen to online shows during the spring 2020 lockdown?

ZH ____ I listened to a lot of streams, but I didn't look at them. I listened to them while I was cooking. I didn't watch shows online, I didn't watch festivals online, I only watch music streams when they are paired with visuals, or some animations. I like the format *Twelve Minutes Live* on OKTO TV,⁹⁾ for instance, I already enjoyed watching it before the pandemic. With Oramics,¹⁰⁾ a collective platform for femme, non-binary, and queer musicians that promotes electronic music from Eastern Europe, we did a digital festival for our third birthday. We included multi-media collages (DJ and live music sets, animations and artistic texts ranging from poetry to essays), discussions on the Eastern European music scene, and workshops. It was supported by an artistic grant from Krytyka Polityczna. That was fun too.

KPH ____ Did I miss anything to ask? Is there anything you'd like to add?

9)
<https://www.okto.tv/de/sendung/12minuteslive> (18 February 2021)

10)
www.oramics.pl (18 February 2021)

ZH — I'm not so sad that we stopped doing workshops at SQ?. I learned that I cannot continue this self-exhaustion. And now we can figure out what we are going to do next.

(Editors' note, February 2021: Sounds Queer? started offering online workshops in December 2020, and is still active at the time of publication of this special issue of FKW.)

Sounds Queer? can be followed online at: <https://www.soundsqueer.org>

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// Image credits

Fig. 1: Circuit bending workshop at Sounds Queer? Festival, SSTR6, Vienna, 9–13 January 2019. © Sounds Queer?

Fig. 2: Sounds Queer? sound installation at the exhibition at Format.strk, Vienna, 31 January 2020. © Sounds Queer?

//About the Authors

Zosia Hołubowska (born 1988 in Poland) is a queer sound artist, musician, and music curator, working and living in Vienna since 2016. They also create sound designs for performances. Most recently they have been curating and coordinating a queer synth laboratory Sounds Queer? where they organize, facilitate, and run workshops on electronic and synthesizer music for women, queer and non-binary people. Currently, they are a Ph.D. Fellow at the Academy of Fine Arts. Their research deals with experimental queer methodologies in sound art and singing as a knowledge creation process.

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