

Thinking Like a Mountain

Supplement

Listening Like a Mountain

Gaia Martino

*Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that
the bottoms of your feet become ears*

Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations*, 1974

Let us imagine a flat wall placed at a certain distance: its position determines the delay with which an echo reaches us; its surface affects the intensity of the sounds reflected, while the materials it is made of modulate the frequency. In this way, the wall becomes audible.¹ But every environment is far more complex than a single wall: the human listening apparatus—whatever it may be—is naturally predisposed to perceive multiple nuances through an interplay of reflections, resonances, and ongoing adjustments to the surrounding space.

Our ears, our skin, our bones, the structure of our bodies, the way we move or stay still are all designed for the

¹ Barry Blesser, Linda Ruth-Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts London, 2007.

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external world, where the complexity of forms, materials, voices, sounds, and surfaces offers a far richer range of stimuli than that of enclosed spaces. Outdoors, our senses are heightened, and in the endless exercise offered by difference and layering, we are always physically active participants in the ecosystems we inhabit. Yet most of the time, we limit our understanding of listening to notions of care, attention, or empathy—concepts that are evidently no longer sufficient to reestablish structures of equity and justice.² We linger on the single wall and limit ourselves to our ears.

To explore the reasons for this numbness, let us consider one clear fact: in the Italian language, there is no proper word to say that a space is flooded with sound. When a listener gains a detailed impression of the environment, we say they “visualize” or “reconfigure” the space—terms borrowed from sight.

The timidity of our verbal language in describing listening experiences is thus indicative of how we translate perception into meaning: we tend to render the object discrete, possessed by words, validated by the logic of isolation and definitions arising from observation. But meaning systems can only offer a partial idea—a metaphor, almost—of the lived and felt experience.

² Arouna D’Souza, *Imperfect Solidarities*, Floating Opera Press, Berlin, 2024.

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As a result, even listening is often thought of through the illusion of knowing the world by breaking it down into units, definitions, and words—without considering that every sensory experience is capable of illuminating something essential: the reality we sense does not exist beyond the web of connections and relationships we are part of.³

In this tangle, nobody—with their movements and the extraordinary variety of their cultural, human, and perceptual apparatus—is ever an isolated system. Thus, behind the attempt to build a taxonomy of listening intentions lies the mechanism of an attitude that seeks to domesticate and bring home that which, by its nature, might instead be left free: the living experience of listening, staying, hybridizing ideas, letting a cultural feeling emerge—an action, rather than a meaning.

Listening with intention, quite simply, is a powerful strategy for diluting the importance of the individual subject⁴ and accessing the vertigo of relationships that intertwine and move within the living fabric we are part of. Tying

³ cf. Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 28, no. 3, 2003.

⁴ cnf. Édouard Glissant: « Ogni individuo e ogni comunità si formano di echi-mondo che hanno immaginato, di potenza o di iattanza, di sofferenza o di impazienza, per vivere o esprimere. Ogni individuo produce questa musica come pure ogni comunità e anche la totalità realizzata dagli individui e delle comunità», in Édouard Glissant, *Poetica della Relazione*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2007, 109 (original edition 1990).

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ourselves to what happens—to the concrete weaving of our bodies in action, to presences in the environment, to sounds or anything else, aware of the linguistic, historical, and political structures we inhabit (without relying exclusively on them to give meaning to sensory experience)—constantly places us in an interstice, that privileged threshold which is the possibility to listen: a place that doesn't exist in the abstract, but is humid, full of shadows and layers like a mountain, where truth is not necessary and knowing in terms of understanding is, ultimately, not the final aim of all actions.

This disposition toward listening does not concern only the perception of sounds, but involves a broader reorganization of our sensory perceptions.

The expression “organization of the senses” refers to the process through which we integrate and interpret sensory information from the environment and the body: a complex activity by which the brain processes sensations and makes them functional for our relationship with the surrounding world.

Rethinking our existence as intimately entangled with everything that happens in a place also invites us to handle the malleability of the senses and our thought structures with greater agility. It in fact shows us that feeling never operates in isolation but is the result of a dynamic

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network of experiences, habits, conventions, relationships, and everyday practices.

The organization of sensory perceptions in daily life is not merely a passive response to environmental or social changes, nor is it a simple and semi-conscious adaptation of the way we feel, but a two-way process: it can become an active path, a form of mutual and transformative learning between the perceiver and their ecosystem. By exploring different ways of activating our senses in handling daily activities—both as individuals and as communities—we can affect how we think, develop a more subtle sensitivity toward the environment and social interactions, and achieve a deeper, more integrated understanding of the vibrant, living entanglements that shape our reality.

All this carries with it an ecological sentiment that passes through our bodies via continuous and regenerative sensory and affective contaminations with the external world. Thinking of listening not only as a physical act of reception but as an interactive and transformative process involving the sounds we encounter—on a broader scale—can shift our perception and relationship with the environment and its biodiversity.

Listening, after all, is one of the many strategies by which we bind ourselves to the world—acknowledging the

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relationships between existences, spaces, sonic environments, contamination, and shared vulnerabilities.

Every sound, every vibration, every noise becomes a clue to intra-connection with someone or something: whether human or more-than-human, what we hear concerns us.

In an existence marked by constant exposure to information overload, this ecological feeling—embodied, among other ways, in the intentional act of listening—trains us to cultivate a critical and heightened sensitivity, one capable of keeping the collective sense of our being-here alive, beyond any objective or shared meaning.

It's not just about refining attention or empathy toward others in the name of our resemblance, but rather an attitude of open and intentional listening invites us to value variation and difference—to experience them as fundamental resources for the survival of the ecosystem we belong to, and to move toward a search for balance and justice, the only coordinates that can truly sustain respect for diversity.

Porous, relational, and affective listening—which continuously entwines our bodies with those of others through the senses and experience, to the point of

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blurring the very importance of maintaining fixed boundaries and distinctions—also carries a radical creative potential.⁵

The wonder and surprise that may arise from intentional listening connect us to a dimension of profound collaboration. At times, without the need for rational understanding but simply by being enchanted by our listening to recordings, records, concerts, people, animals, environments, or sonic phenomena happening around us and through our actions, may we feel the unfolding of a polyphonic marvel in which every form of life contributes to the dynamic balance of that moment.

Feeling then becomes a gesture of relation rather than domination: not an individual act, but a return to a collective vision, where perception of the world is continuously reformulated and recreated, like an endless circle of learning, opacity, mutual disturbance, and sharing.

Thus, thinking of sounds and voices no longer as isolated and projected products, but as forces entwined with the environment, with those who generate them, and those who listen⁶—what happens if we shift our attention from the stories that sonic worlds tell to the micro-

⁵ David George Haskell, *Sound Wild and Broken: Sonic Marvels, Evolution's Creativity, and the Crisis of Sensory Extinction*, Faber & Faber, London, 2022.

⁶ Tim Ingold, *Ecologia della cultura*, Meltemi, Sesto San Giovanni, 2016.

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processes that construct these stories, both in their being played and being heard?

It's about stepping out of the habit of synthesis and changing perspective: setting as our only goal the act of resonating with a polyphonic work, where the act of listening—unique and different for each person—intertwines with the present moment and with the memories that each person carries, and from there expands, weaving the fabric of a heterogeneous, multifaceted, never-stable but always living and ever becoming space.⁷

Moving away from the stability of a linear narrative leads us into flows of multiple stories that exist simultaneously. On a broader scale, attuning ourselves to the sonic worlds that inhabit the same environment can become a radically creative force: the plurality of sound-based narratives opens us up to multiple species, epistemologies, and temporalities—different existences and worldviews that coexist in the same moment and are physically accessible to us. We come to know them through experience, through listening—not through correspondence, exclusion, or belonging.

And if we remember that our human organism is naturally predisposed to perceiving a complexity far greater than any wall or parameter of coherence, then this

⁷ Doreen Massey, *For Space*, Sage Publications, London, 2005.

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simultaneity is only seemingly chaotic. In fact, the heterogeneity of sounds within the same environment and narrative layering seems disturbing only to those who listen solely to confirm what they already know and recognize.

On the contrary, we can try to break free from our habits⁸ and take pleasure—without contradiction—in those messy, noisy, and untamed spaces that exist both outside and within us.⁹ We may do so with the awareness that dwelling daily in that open, damp, and shaded space that is the intention to listen (or not to listen) can expand the exploration of our own lives.

⁸ On July 12, as a guest of the Public Program of *Due qui / To Hear*, Nina Sun Eidsheim invites each person present in the Giardino delle Vergini of the Italian Pavilion to assemble and fill out a booklet she calls a “listening kit.” The first question is: “What is listening?”

⁹ Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, “The Wild Beyond,” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black*, Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson, 2013.

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Biographical Notes

Gaia Martino is a curator, facilitator, and cultural organizer whose work stems from direct collaboration with people from diverse backgrounds, primarily in independent contexts.

Her research explores the intersection of spatial, sonic, and performative practices as an active strategy of engagement; she is particularly interested in dynamics of reciprocity and opacity, the moving proximity of bodies, and the disposition toward listening or not listening as a situated and political choice.

She holds a PhD from the IUAV University of Venice and UdK Berlin, with a dissertation on the performativity of listening and the plurality of aesthetics as a critical and curatorial project for sound arts.

She is currently the Research Visiting Curator for the UNIDEE Residency Modules at Cittadellarte—Fondazione Michelangelo Pistoletto in Biella, where she co-curates the 2025–26 program with Nina Fiocco.

She is co-founder and member of SSH!—Sound Studies Hub at IUAV University of Venice and was co-curator of the Public Program Due qui / To Hear, a project by Massimo Bartolini curated by Luca Cerizza for the Italian Pavilion at the 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, which featured a series of lectures, performances, workshops, and an anthology published by Quodlibet.

She was part of the artistic direction of Standards in Milan, an independent space dedicated to performative arts where she co-designed projects with local communities and curated music programming, residencies, convivial gatherings, workshops, sound installations, and exhibitions.

She has been a lecturer and course designer at NABA, Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan, and part of Archive Books, a nonprofit publishing house and cultural organization based in Berlin, where she currently lives.

She has undertaken research residencies in Europe and Mexico and received awards from the Italian Ministry of Culture and the Berlin Senate for curatorial research.