

Being Heard: Wayfaring with Sound and Listening

Reflections of *Hi-Viz 2023* by Klare Lanson

Walking along the streets of Naarm, the hot air on this December morning is stifling. Already the atmosphere is palpable, a slow-moving yet powerful trajectory. I had just travelled from Djarra Country in regional Victoria and now head towards Melbourne University's Market Hall for the 2023 *Hi Viz Satellites Gathering*, an event for women, gender diverse and non-binary artists. As a creative collaboration between Chamber Made (Melbourne), Punctum (Castlemaine) and SAtheCollective (Singapore) this event has been presented in various guises for over five years. This year's *Hi-Viz* facilitated a day-long experience of presentations, conversation, artist-led workshops, creative activity, and mind-mapping, all aspects centred around the importance of being both highly visible *and* heard, where the meeting of minds in relation to the practical and creative process of making as an artist is acknowledged as multisensorial activity.

Conversely, it also pays homage to the importance of blocking out space in our lives—for thinking, imagining, bodily inactivity and the importance of the slow, a community mooring of sorts. As artists, we often struggle to find time for much needed reflection on our various work practices and experiences. Moving through place, even though the geography of my destination is known, I pull out my phone, open the Google Maps app and double check my building location. My mobile companion transforms into mobile geography. This is the digital tether, bound both within and of the mapping of place. The materiality of the digital is problematic too, we know its impact on the natural environment now. Sun strikes the face with anthropocentric harshness as hot wind pushes me forward. This summer in the city has its own smell, its own pace, and alongside it is an extended form of mobility.

*you follow a path
unknown and determined
the day begins to pull westward
leaves lift towards sky
clouds slow and full
breached by fingers of day*

A mingling of small talk occurs outside the Market Hall and there is anticipation around what will be harvested throughout the day. As our movement inside begins, thoughts emerge about what might be reaped by the end of this event and the irony of the colonised modern architecture of the Frank

Lloyd Wright building located nearby is not lost on us. We are situated by these architectural times, including the architecture of the technological, and its impact on the body. We also tell time with our body. Each finger on an outstretched arm placed between the bottom of the sun and the horizon represents approximately 15 minutes of time, but it is difficult to see the horizon here in this constructed city. As I check emails on my mobile and then flick it to silent mode, the welcome to country begins, *wominjeka*. We are all here with the threefold purpose of connection, conversation, and creative thinking. The welcome speaks to *yawa*, a journey towards understanding and deep listening practices. Introducing the activity of the day, Chamber Made's Artistic Director Tamara Saulwick personifies the emotional privilege to be on this land and speaks of the sincere intention to support artists to expand their creative practice. I wonder if my mobile is listening too.

The group icebreaker occurs next, led by Emilie Collyer. This is a series of informal exercises that physicalise time and space, in terms of the geography alongside our practice. The emphasis on body and voice is also felt as movement in space, a kind of social proprioception. Participation in a fast-writing exercise follows, in direct relation to our creative practice, asking questions of ourselves to convey one key aspect of our practice that needs an activation of forward momentum. We begin to share ideas with each other both during and after the writing process. As someone who often utilises mobile media thinking in some shape or form, I write about the need to extend my networked and participatory performance practice of mobile poetics.

*a slow and searing route
walked with intention
you anticipate each surface
the blue of the sky is deafening*

We listen to the workshop descriptions by artist practitioners; Samara Hersch's focus on distance and intimacy through walking with mobile technology; Alex Walker who works with young people to create space for the relationship between safety and risk; Aviva Endean's sound and listening practices and exploration of score and composition to harness human connection to each other and environment; and Jen Rae's speculative futuring approach towards mobility, indigenous pedagogies, and intergenerational justice. As a group, we slowly continue to talk to each other, to feel embodied in our shared creativity and shifting of the inner spirit.

With the hat of participant firmly in place, I am drawn to the workshop by Samara Hersch, who will utilise mobile phones as the creative device for experimenting with techniques of sound and

listening to place. As noted on Hersch's website, "Samara's practice explores conversation as performance and performance as conversation. She is particularly interested in ways to stage absence and in exploring notions of presence, of remote performance and of the tension between distance and intimacy".¹ Over the past three decades, mobile media have been investigated from a range of different perspectives across creative disciplines. During this time, it has grown from a technology to a range of creative media practices. With mobile phone usage ubiquitous at a global level, every aspect of our everyday life is shaped by and through mobile media.² Throughout this transformation, culture, creativity, and related gender issues have been central to mobile media practices.

*conversations forgotten are
as important as those remembered
above the ebb and flow of discussion
you are drawn to these disremembered sounds*

In direct alignment with the *Hi-Viz* event being centred around women, non-binary and gender diverse participants, mobile media have also had a huge impact on the social and political representations of women and the LGBTQIA+ community made visible through feminist and queer theory analyses of online images and cultural construction. As suggested by Rosalind Gill in *Gender and the Media*, it is important to understand how media is connected to inequalities and power relations, in particular representation and "different understandings of how media images relate to individuals' sense of identity and subjectivity".³ It is this 'mapping' of mobile media subjectivities that can also be entertained within the agency of creative practice utilising sound and listening. Sound as an event also has its own form of mobility. Intimate relations previously recognised between two people and close physical group settings now navigate both online and offline publics with ease. In this way, they can be understood as shared connection and enhanced capability, a feminist mode of thinking. Further enhanced of course, by human practices of listening.

Thinking about the mobility of sound and listening also invokes understanding about our relationships to the technologies we use and the power relationships that emerge from their

¹ See <https://samarahersch.com/works/call-me-anytime-you-want/>

² Lanson, K., and Hjorth, L. (2020). Mobile Cultures and the Asia Pacific. The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication. New Jersey, US: Wiley.

³Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the Media*. Malden, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

production, use, and appropriation. Thinking through these relations was illuminated by the recent global COVID-19 pandemic. As we navigated through mobile media practices to work remotely, home-school children, and stay connected with family and friends during intense periods of physical lockdown, these questions around access and the digital divide in relation to affordability became intensely heard. With the entry back into public spaces after lockdown experiences, the mobile phone is even more tethered to navigation and our bodies. For example, the previous *Hi-Viz 2022* was a hybrid experience of in-person and online participation, highlighting the normalisation process of the digital self in everyday life.

*the ambition of networked listening generates
images that settle like atmospheric storms
creating both remoteness and intimacy
the patterns of this movement declares itself
you now know more; the colours of skyline, you think,
are measurements of time and distance*

Samara Hersch utilised the mobile phone as a tool of distance and intimacy with simplistic beauty, applying ideas of both human-to-human communication and digital social networking for us to create intimate sound walks. The sound walk experience has been popularised for mobile media art projects by a range of creative practitioners around the world. Since the late 1990s, American locative media artist Teri Rueb has made audio walks as spatial practices using sound and site with mobile media, also known for establishing the form of GPS-based interactive installation art. Canadian artist Janet Cardiff is renowned for her audio and video walks, often in collaboration with George Bures Miller. UK based Blast Theory are renowned for mobile media in art making. Australian sound artist and composer Cat Hope has mapped a historical trajectory of early sound experiments of locative listening practice using mobile media.⁴ The considered choice Samara Hersch made to create a minimal set of mobile media workshop guidelines that highlighted human connectivity, sharing and intimate storytelling in a time-restricted workshop environment was highly successful.

Hersch began by introducing herself, briefly discussing her practice and performance works. This fostered the process of participant conversation about their various modes of making via the 'Bip Bop' exercise, which playfully assisted us to say whatever we think needs to be said about ourselves.

⁴ Hope, C. (2020). "From Early Soundings to Locative Listing in Mobile Media Art" in Hjorth, L., de Souza e Silva, A., & Lanson, K. (eds). *The Routledge Companion to Mobile Media Art*. New York: Routledge, pp 46–56.

The voice is key here, both in the creation of memory via the body and employing the capacity of voice towards a deep process of listening. Hersch then proceeded to describe a workshop framework around the poetics of a disembodied voice and listening using our mobile phones. The process was outlined; we were to set the timer on our mobile phones to 10 minutes. During this countdown, we were then asked to intuitively map a physical path with our body. Then we repeated our self-mapped walk whilst speaking into the voice recorder in our mobile, activated to highlight the physicality of voice and to act as a 'guide' for the future listener of our audio walk. Imagining someone else doing our walk as we guided them via our voice. The temporal slippage that occurred through movement was fascinating, where a strange form of progressive distortion occurred in the body that heightened the experience of creative maker and hopefully in turn the person who was to physically perform our audio walk. Samara then collected our recordings via the WhatsApp instant messaging and voice-over-IP service, and then redistributed them for other participants to re-enact. The simplicity of the workshop's rules-based exercise created by Hersch was beautifully executed, ending with a wide variety of individual reflective responses.

an instance of what went before
an instant of how you foresaw
transforms into what you will become
moments of listening and being heard

We gathered afterwards to discuss our individual experiences of another participant's audio walk. There was the collective approach where various forms of reality were suggested, "this may happen" or "some people may experience a feeling of...". Then a diarised approach was described where the listener experienced a third person perspective using a poetic form of repetition, full of joy and laughter. There was also the intimate approach where the first-person private point of view voice (think Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room*) was favoured over the more persuasive second person voice. A windy and playful approach where a narrative based story was constructed out of being present with nature; "smell the flowers", "pick up a flower that has fallen on the ground", "cherish it", "take it with you as you walk towards the stone wall on your left". A personal favourite was the calming approach, where the musicality and pace of voice performed a beautiful momentum that almost enacted a process of loss, moments of pause and then offering the listener a personal choice of movement—to run, to skip, to slide. The beauty of commonality prevailed, knowing that you have sat in the same place as the voice you were hearing. Overall, the workshop with Samara Hersch was very interesting and highly enjoyable.

After lunch, Artistic Director of Punctum Jude Anderson spoke to the idea of collective sharing through the poetics of voice, a ‘vocal balm’ of calmness and listening. Jude then introduced the collective voice session with Gelareh Pour, a contemporary Iranian musician with a focus on Neo-Persian Experimentalism. A striking performance using loop pedals and lamenting vocals, where the environment becomes collaborative instrument; the birds chiming in from outside, the fans above, occasional whispering. Whilst the work was meant for audience participation (think of the collaborative clapping of thanks to the health workers that occurred from apartment building windows in New York during Covid lockdown), the collective voice was minimal due to the overwhelming heat and feelings of tiredness from the day’s activity. However, in brilliant improvisation mode, Gelareh Pour shifted her performance by using her pedals to construct multiple vocals from self, a choral momentum with one voice. A highly innovative and enjoyable work.

The final activity of *Hi-Viz 2023* was the Hive Mind Group Workshop. The Post-it notes finally made an appearance, used to document pickings from our collective brain. Utilising traditional forms of design thinking, we formed small groups and noted keywords of specific problems that came out of our discussions about creative practice and varied modes of making. Discussions were had, a gathering of words and phrases were collected and stuck on butchers’ paper, offerings of wisdom and advice from the hive acknowledged. Whilst this was an important and valuable process towards the completion of the *Hi-Viz* program of activity, the combination of extreme heat and end of day thinking made the final conversations a little tricky. Perhaps new forms of collective and more playful modes could have been activated within the final workshoping process. Where did all that valuable collective data go? Hopefully not just to the governmental funding bodies acquittal process but rather applied towards the development of shared futures for arts practice activity.

Overall, *Hi-Viz 2023* was an interesting and valuable experience of the collective creative thinking process. It was a great opportunity to meet likeminded others—to converse, think, play, and work together with other artists and thinkers from many walks of life.