



Headphones: Sound Without Space

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Part of 1 of 3 in the series *Sound + Space: Headphones | Architecture | Transmission*

Headphones are the norm. The new addiction replacing smoking, headphones frame the head and the perception of most urbanites today in some form or other. Whether commuting with an iPod, exercising to the radio, talking on a hands-free cellphone... or actually listening to music, headphones create a mobile and continually changing architecture that follows the listener, wrapping them in a private bubble. As the world rapidly interfaces, overlaps and confronts the boundaries of Private and Public through technologies and legislation, headphones become a quiet and invisible site of investigation. The audio tracks in this collection attempt to define a body of work that is fundamentally connected to the phenomenon of headphone listening. Some work was made specifically for headphones such as Bernhard Leitner or Janet Cardiff, other work was not originally composed for headphones, but when played over headphones a unique experience of the work is created—sometimes against the original intention of the artist or at least as a surprising by-product. While the most common thread between the works is the unique spatialisation of headphones, other attributes of headphone listening—such as intimacy and privacy—are also explored and included.

Headphones: Sound Without Space stems from the research consolidated in “From Stethoscopes to Headphones: An Acoustic Spatialization of Subjectivity” in *Leonardo Music Journal* (MIT Press), Vol. 17, 2007.

01 3M. NORMAL FIRST AND SECOND HEART SOUNDS (2003):

Original Format: Pedagogical Audio CD: *Cardiac Auscultation: 3M Littman Stethoscope*. 3M Health Care,

3M's demonstration sound recording for instruction in the use of the stethoscope for cardiac auscultation (heart sounds). With Laennec 's invention of the stethoscope we have for the first time in history where a sound object is place between the ears and not external to the body. One body cavity is mapped to another: heart chamber to cranial cavity.

02 Ikeda, Ryoji. C7 : : CONTINUUM (1998):

Original Format: Audio CD + / - Touch Records: TO#38.

Interior space metabolized. Interior space punctured. Laennec revisited.

03 Kirkegaard, Jacob. LAYBRINTHITIS (2008) – excerpt:

Original Format: Audio CD. Touch Records: Tone #35

Kirkegaard working with an audiology laboratory attempts to self-reflectively turn the organ of the ear from receiver to transmitter. Embedding tiny microphones into the ear canal and playing two specific frequencies with a ratio of 1.3, a third frequency is generated in the ear. The sound source sound for Kirkegaards record literally comes from the interior of the body. This recording presented here is documentation of his process.

04 Leitner, Bernhard. HT_A (2003):

05 Leitner, Bernhard. WLB (2003):

Original Format: Audio CD. *Kopfräume—Headscapes*. Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz Verlag,

<HEADSCAPES are works specifically created for the interior of the head. They can only be experienced with earphones. The head is here conceived as hollow volume, as a globe-like receptacle for time-based acoustic-geometric spaces. Sensing, hearing space in motion within the resonant inner space of the head. Hearing, contemplating the interior, the inside –however unfathomable it may be.>

06 Mathieu, Stephan + Ekkehard Ehlers. BABY BLUE I (2001):

Original Format: Audio CD. *Heroin*. Staalplaat: Brombon Series #02.

A Kleinnian bottle of sound with slight pitch shifts coinciding with minimal spatial manipulation.

07 Stankievech, Charles. MÖBIUS FIELDS (SOUNDWALK) (2006):

Original Format: Audio CD: "Interpreting the Soundscape" *Leonardo Music Journal* (MIT Press), Vol. 16.

Acoustic and electromagnetic recordings made for headphone listening with a particular topological twist in spatial perception. A narrative audio walk in the city of Montreal, Canada that compares the acoustic environment of objects with their electromagnetic radiation.

08 Lucier, Alvin. SFERICS (1981) - excerpt:

Original Format: Audio recording released on vinyl from Lovely Music, 1988. Also created as a sound installation in the desert at *Siteworks Southwest, Artists of Earthwatch Project*

Sound installation and recordings of ionospheric disturbances, for large-loop antennas, tape recorder and playback system. Also setup as an installation in the desert where people listened with headphones to battery powered receivers. DXing the Kosmos

09 Ikeda, Ryoji. +/- (1996):

Original Format: Audio CD. +/- Touch Records. TO#30.

<A high frequency sound is used that the listener becomes aware of only upon its disappearance.>

Reboot. Shifting from form to content, from space to voice. Ikeda's title track comes from the album with the liner notes that claim: "the listener can experience a particular difference between speaker playback and headphone listening." Listening to this track on headphones, Ikeda focus on the second sound Johan Cage famously discovered when sitting in an anechoic chamber. *Continuum* referenced the eternal sound of the heartbeat, while +/- taps into the high pitched buzz of the central nervous system. Does Ikeda's high frequency disappear because it slides into the bodies CNS frequency, or is it simply on the threshold of hearing?

10 Nauman, Bruce. GET OUT OF MY MIND. GET OUT OF THIS ROOM (1968)

Original Format: Audio Installation (Collection Jack Wendler)

Get out of my mind. Get into *your* head. What does this piece mean after the invention of the Sony Walkman in 1978 and mobile and virtual audio architecture goes mainstream?

11 Migone, Christof. Excavation (1996; edited 2004):

Original Format: Audio CD. *Hole in the Head* (Quebec: Avatar/Ohm éditions.)

«Quietly, let's unplug everything, blindfold. Ears plugged, nose clamped tongue tied, let's strip the hardware off radio. The exciter, heart of the FM transmitter, comes last. Once off, the purring winds down and we find ourselves radiophonic without transmitter. Commonly, the resultant dead air spells anguish and panic. No longer can the signal signify the voice and radiate it with power. For the moment, however, we will dwell and even revel in the air dead. There are remnants and potentials in our voices hereto untapped that will be sufficient to carry this broadcast home.»

The Bends from Trepanation. Christof Migone is a sound artist based in Montreal whose PhD. dissertation was on failure and the body, discussing such neuroses as stuttering. This short loop played repetitively attempts to express the permeability of the radio body, as much ethereal as material. Ambiguously, the question arises, is the head opening up or imploding?

12 Kubisch, Christina. LISTENING THROUGH THE WALLS (1984) – excerpt:

Original Format: Audio Installation: Documented on audio CD "On Air"

"It is paradoxically easier to introduce new music than a new way of listening. I abandoned concert halls in favour of new sound environments.... The result is a 'magnetic trail' formed by a network of electrical cables which creates a visible [or invisible] labyrinth. With the aid of special earphones, specially designed for these works, the trails are then transformed from a visual structure into a musical one."

Christina Kubisch is a German sound artist and one of the earlier composers who made the switch from musical compositions to art exhibitions. She is one of the few artist, whose work almost always relies on some time of headphone technology: either special receiving headphones picking up purposefully installed wires transmitting a pre-arranged composition or simply a designated walking route through a saturated electromagnetic location, such as a busy urban neighbourhood.

13 Cardiff, Janet. (with George Bures Miller) VILLA MEDICI WALK (2001) – excerpt:

Original Format: Site-Specific Sound Art Walk

Perhaps a way to engage Cardiff and Miller's work—and headphone listening in general—is with Lacan's concept *l'extimité*. Developed in the later phase of Lacan's writing, the idea of the *l'extimité* continues the importance of the voice in the psychoanalytic tradition since Freud first outlined the foundations for the "talking cure." *L'extimité* is a neologism by Lacan that combines exterior and intimacy. Linked in his seminar VII with the German term *das Ding*, Lacan defines the concept as that "something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me." This phrase could be used to describe the fundamental listening experience wearing headphones, but a phantom voice inside the head suspended by headphones is the ideal example of this strangeness.. In a dynamic space that links the exterior with the interior via the topology of a Möbius loop or better yet a Kleinian bottle, the subject listens. And in this listening the outside is on the inside of the listener. The difference between contained and container slides, as does the difference between you and I. We easily identify with our phantasies once we have become the Hollow Men making room for an Other. Janet's words commands us to listen, and touched by a phantom intimacy we do. "Listen to me" Janet's voice seems to beg, and already having donned headphones I "always already" have obeyed before even hearing her voice. I listen carefully and confess with the words of Roland Barthes, "The Other collects [her] whole body in [her] voice and announces that I am collecting all of myself in my ear."

14 Westerkamp, Hildegard. WHISPER STUDY (1975-79) - excerpt

Original Format: Audio Tape. This release: 20 Jahre inventionen II. Edition RZ 4004.

«Whisper Study started out as an exercise in exploring basic tape techniques in the analogue studio of the 1970's and using the whispered voice as sound material. Eventually, it become a piece about silence, aural perceptions and acoustic imagination. Whisper Study explores the place or moment where sound ends and its image begins.»

Westerkamp was one of the original people behind the foundation of the *World Soundscape Project* in 1970 with R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax. With the Soundscape project, environmental sounds suddenly came

to the world's attention as they started to disappear or be drowned out by the increasing noise levels of industrialization. Field-recording became the fundamental research tool for composers/researchers like Schafer and Westerkamp, and as such the following questions arise, 'Does a soundscape exist without headphones? Is the entire field of soundscape recording and archiving separable from the technology of headphones—a mobile sound studio that provides an isolating booth and auditory microscope for the analysis of the external world? What unique sound image is created with headphones?

15 Chris Watson. *Oceanus Pacificus: 10M.*

Original Format: 7" vinyl. Touch Sevens Series. # TS02.

Using two hydrophones, field-recordist Chris Watson records a Galapagos Island current 10m below the surface. The physical properties of sound transmission in water are different than air, so all bets for normal spatialisation are off with this track. We end this collection of work for headphones with a repeating locked groove of a record—gone perhaps so interior we're trapped in our own cranial fluid.