

sound is a process, and other field notes

Adam Basanta

Adam Basanta is a sound artist, composer and performer based in Montreal. His sculptural sound installations are minimalistic choreographies of speakers and microphones, replicating real or imagined scenarios of listening. These installations operate around an alternative perception of sound, through attuning to sensations that are not necessarily perceived by the human ear — and through recognising that what may appear to be empty space is full of sonic phenomena that is material.

Basanta may translate statistical information — a dossier that documents geospatial, and thus social, patterns in movement between cities — by codifying it into a different medium than we are accustomed to reading. Information is processed not through text or image, but through sound, as in the documentation of domestic and international flights of *Going Nowhere Fast*. By making audible the ratios, lengths or repetitions of individual travel, raw data attains a curious musicality.

This visceral relationship to sound is explored further in *Closer then farther away*, where the materiality of distance is amplified by microphones that move closer or farther from a speaker, and from one another. The gesture of closing or increasing distance is made audible, reminding of the intimacy of acoustic and corporeal proximity. But distance is more than the measurable space between two points. The density of air affects what is perceived as being far, its emptiness then convincing the listener that something is close with unnatural amplification. *The loudest sound in the room experienced very quietly* emphasises this physical discordance between distance, and perceptual or conceptual volume. The material effect of the ambient environment transforms the character of sound — a disorienting perturbation of a stable relationship between a sonic event and its spatial origins.

A seemingly passive spatial element is translated into an acoustic event — as in *A Room Listening to Itself*, where architecture becomes a listening entity by fluctuating its output according to the changing resonance of the space in which the installation is found. Amplifying the surrounding acoustic space, the listening room responds to the material changes of bodies and objects it contains, or the stasis of the empty room — a sonic mirror for the fluctuations in the density of presence. Self-generating feedback in Basanta's *Pirouette* inquires into the agency of non-human listening by recalibrating the distinction of listening, hearing

and deciding, and uncovering these technical capacities within the sculpture itself. The decision of listening may also reconfigure what is considered as unwanted noise — feedback, distortion or dissonance — into something of significance, into a deliberate musicality, as with the project *Invisible Lines*.

Our listening, be it that we perceive acoustic phenomena through our ears or through other parts of our body, is primarily attuned to the human experience and to human-made sounds as a primary way of hearing the world. Such an enormous limit permits only a single world. What is possible beyond the fleshy constraints and the surfaces of our acoustic devices? Through Basanta's scenarios, the listener is deflected away from the banal experience of human hearing and its biological limits, towards an attention to the invisible atmospheres or inhuman makers of sound. This inquisitiveness, characteristic of Basanta's sound sculptures and performances, encourages a broader palate for the interiorities of our selective acoustic sensations and the meanings that are applied to sonic events.

— Lital Khaikin

"Sound is a process, and other field notes" – Adam Basanta

A series of reflections and observations, a result of contemplating listening, transitioning from composer to sound installation artist, and working with microphone feedback between 2014-2016.

1. Sound is a process, not an object.
2. To speak of sound is to speak about relation to a subject, not a scientific process. Not necessarily heard, sound has the potential to be. Sound is to the measurable vibration of objects as sight is to the measurable spectrum of electromagnetism.
3. If we speak of sound, then it is a verb, not a noun. It is an unstable negotiation between a multitude of human and non-human agencies.

4. Some of these agencies embody both the meaningful and the banal. For instance, the human ear canal is approximately 3 centimeters in length. A winding tube closed on one end, it functions as a resonator, acoustically amplifying certain frequencies. This is the same principle behind the resonant tone heard when blowing into a bottle or jar. With an ear canal twice the length, all would "sound" differently; for instance, human speech would be less intelligible.
5. What would sound be like with an ear canal 3 meters long? What would sound be like with the outer ears of an elephant?



(Vessel. 2015. Photo by Emily Gan.)

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6. Listening is always a conceptual act. To listen is to engage with a series of conscious and unconscious decisions and social agreements.
7. The first thing we decide is that we are listening. This simple choice has as much effect on our impression of sound as any measurable sonic property. This is how music becomes noise and noise becomes music.
8. The second choice is how to perform listening. To perform "musical" listening — to attend to sonic characteristics of pitch, rhythm, timbre, and gesture; to socially constructed variations on structure, genre,

and style — is a conceptual choice through which performance is enacted.

9. To say “I am listening” is to listen to one’s own personal history of listening. To listen to a loud sound is to negotiate the experience of sound pressure levels in relation to a mental notion of loudness, a loudness experienced previously which is in the current moment, quiet.
10. To listen to sound, to sound out by listening, is to negotiate a relationship between the listener, the movement of vibrating bodies, and acoustic space.



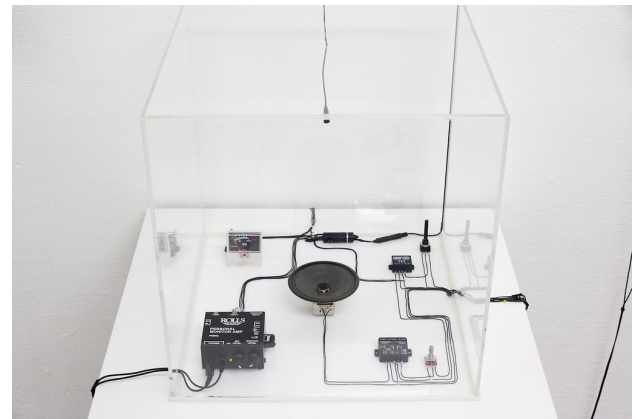
(A Room Listening to Itself. 2015. Photo by Angie Rizzo.)

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11. A sound isn’t in space. It is an aural manifestation of, through, and with space.
12. To make a camera frame with our index fingers and thumbs and say “here is the sound, this is where the sound is” is inaccurate: all we frame is a vibrating object.
13. It is often said that space “colours” sound, as if sound is an object which space lightly tints. In truth, a change in acoustic space reshapes sound, changes its internal construction.
14. For instance, human speech is rendered

unintelligible when acoustically contained in a small plastic box. A handclap is reshaped within the space of a grand cathedral, the original moment of sharp contact gaining a reverberant tail, which we listen to beyond the final bouncing of sound waves off of reflective surfaces, and into the silence that follows in anticipation.

15. For instance, what is the sound of a jet plane flying within the interior of an aluminum pop can? Like a closed feedback loop, sound cannot be separated from the space within which it sounds.



(Listening through a small plastic box. 2015. Photo by Hertta Kiiski.)

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16. Feedback, otherwise known as Larsen tones, embodies the non-locative, intertwined, processual nature of sound and of listening.
17. To create a feedback loop, one points a microphone at a speaker, often inadvertently. As the output signal is folded back into the input, the system reaches its saturation point.
18. Feedback is not produced by a microphone. Nor is it produced by a speaker. It is produced by the relationship between microphone, speaker, and acoustic space: an emergent property of a technological network with

constituting parts. Changing one component in this system of relation will modify the feedback in pitch or volume, or cause it to disappear completely.

19. As a self-generating phenomena, feedback has no beginning and no end. It is an equilibrium in which notions of cause and effect are rendered meaningless.



(*A Room Listening to Itself*. 2015. Photo by Angie Rizzo.)

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20. To listen is to engage in a political dynamic. When one listens by choice or by coercion (whether personal or social), when one listens alone or in participation with others, power dynamics are enacted and modified.
21. To listen collectively, by choice, to forfeit time of day to concentrated public listening, is one of the most beautiful and benign collective human behaviours. For instance, to listen to Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, in a large crowd, on the radio or television.
22. To listen collectively, by choice, to forfeit time of day to concentrated public listening, is one of the most dangerous collective human behaviours. For instance, to listen to a fascist speech in a large crowd, on the radio or television.
23. In both cases, electronic amplification may

be an interface for shared sonic experience. Systems of electronic amplifications are in their essence, systems for communication: a microphone is the ear, a speaker is the mouth.

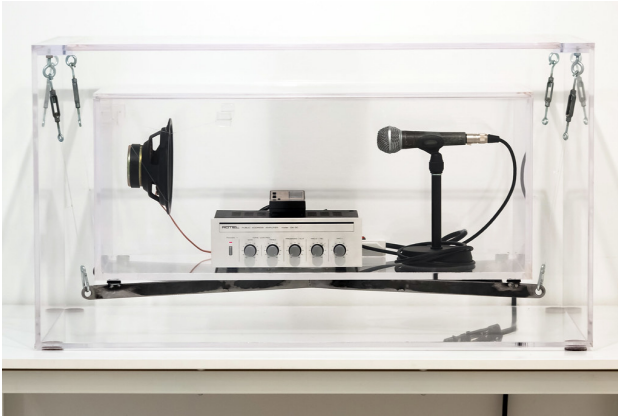


(*Plugs (the most important thing is)*. 2016. Photo by Adam Basanta.)

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24. To amplify is to modify the political dynamics of listening.
25. Instruments of amplification give power to whom that is amplified: a power to be heard by a large group, to overpower and drown out other voices, to reach beyond the temporal and geographic barriers of the individual.
26. To amplify is to give a platform, to lend credibility. What is amplified becomes important. Amplification is a practice that predates electricity by millennia. Content which is amplified is both sanctioned and sanctified.
27. To take a commercial sound reproduction system and to turn it against itself — to point a microphone directly at a speaker, to

create feedback — is to nullify its potential to transmit communication.



(*The loudest sound in the room experienced very quietly.* 2015. Photo by Emily Gan.)

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28. We are told that amplification empowers the individual. We purchase the ability to bridge distances, to be heard. The budding singer songwriter can amplify their unique individuality and send it out in to the world.
29. It should not surprise that more often, power begets power. The personal public address systems is overmatched by its institutional counterpart.
30. Commercial sound reproduction relies on the notion of sound as object. The objectification of sound using technology - from the score to the mp3 - is a necessary precondition for the economy value of sonic matter.
31. A song, a work, a drum sample. It's easier to sell an object of sonic content which can be placed in and transferred between "containers": a concert, a home stereo, a digital audio workstation. It's harder to sell an interdependent process resulting from the collaboration of vibrating objects, acoustic spaces, and the changing psychodynamics of listening.



(*Invisible Lines.* 2014. Collaboration with Julian Stein. Photo by Emily Gan.)

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32. Feedback is the making audible or spatial, electronic, and acoustic relations between components of a system. A realization of the network which relations which produced it.
33. To create feedback is to listen to the sound of empty space: a space empty of content, a space in which the political dynamics of amplification are neutralized.
34. In the absence of content, agency is given to that which is labeled a passive background on to which we foreground content: the materiality of tools and bandwidth, the making audible of spatial relations between components.
35. To listen to feedback is to listen to the thin plastic of a microphone diaphragm undulate in sync with a speaker cone, the voltage running through conductive cable. It is the resistance of proprietary connector tips. The propagation and dissipation through isolated pockets of air.
36. If we take the previous statement and replace the word feedback with the word sound, it will still hold true.



(An image of the sound of empty space. 2015.
Photo by Klara du Plessis.)

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37. If feedback is the recursive folding over of output into input, to contemplate feedback is to fold over our own listening: to output differently in response to input, to discover listening anew, recursively.
38. Making this conceptual choice — to listen to ourselves think about feedback, to listen to the sound of empty space — uncloaks the false individuation between perceiver, object and environment, the basic conditions for our economic model.
39. Now, sound and listening are revealed not as an object, but as a mutable product of interdependent networks of physical, cultural, and economic relations.
40. Sound is a process.