

Language of the Listening Body

By Michelle Nagai



Photo by Ian W. Douglas

other members of the group during our post-walk discussions. My notes and recollections correspond to several different soundwalks. On most of these walks I was joined by members of the project along with my then three-month old son Uta.

Pulaski Bridge to Gantry Plaza State Park, Long Island City, Queens, Private Soundwalk on 8/11/06:

Under the drawbridge, LIC side. Quiet without cars. A boat passes under, then the bridge lowers, warning signals and the barricades go up, then cars again. There is a great resonance under here. Sounds echo off a neighboring building. The car traffic hum and blur quickly blends into the overall soundscape.

The water on the creek is very gentle, delicate. Pigeon wings click occasionally, tapping randomly. Good open space for movement.

I like the idea that our movement gets more active as the walk progresses, starts slow and lets the ear warm up along with the body. I like the idea of us walking in a line.

Homeless guys, shelter dwellers, hanging out in the park. I hear a cicada! Still the hum of the traffic. I cross the “strip” on Vernon, to 50th Avenue. Down 50th still more businesses and homes. Then I’m nestled between large buildings, tall architecture. Drones, drones, drones. The sense of a canyon, of walking into a canyon.

At the end of 50th Avenue, I continue straight into the fisherman’s pier. The street just becomes the pier. Keep going and I’d be swimming. Then there is the rest of the park to explore...

Thinking about my own ecology. I am proud of the ecosystem into which my life fits in this moment, sitting on a bench, in a park, overlooking the East River. It’s an ecosystem that accommodates a new mother and her small child moving through it. An ecosystem that makes space for the living and being, where we can shape things and move and survive with the simplest tools. Just me, and baby, pen making notes on paper. Moving in the soundscape, participating in the momentary and ongoing ecosystems of this space. Thinking about inclusive listening. Listening that has physical, temporal, spiritual and emotional dimensions.

The Language of the Listening Body is an ongoing research project I created in partnership with choreographer Hope Mohr. In September 2006, a small group of dancers joined Hope and I for an intensive two-week workshop that marked the start of the project. Meeting daily, we conducted listening and movement research and a number of soundwalks at various points in midtown Manhattan; along the far west side of Manhattan; beside the Hudson river; and along the East river in Long Island City, Queens.

Nine dancers joined us on that first exploration, along with special guests composer Pauline Oliveros, NYC noise activist Arline Bronzaft, and choreographer Barbara Dilley. The Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art, Nature and Dance (iLAND), an organization that places collaboration between artists, scientists and the environment at the center of its mission, provided the initial jump start for the project and funded our September workshop.

The following text is culled from soundwalk journal entries I made during the first phase of my work with The Language of the Listening Body. I have also incorporated some comments made by



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9/17/06 Thoughts Re: Bryant Park to Grand Central Station Public Soundwalk on 9/16/06:

There is a disconnect that happens for me between my sensation as a listener/mover on a soundwalk and me as the facilitator of this project, as a “researcher.” I miss the feeling of expansiveness that I sensed in the planning stages, or on the day when I walked the Long Island City route and sat in the park with Uta. At that time I had a feeling like the process of the project itself, not only its content but its form, was an expression of my own urban artist ecology. But something seems to have shut this down. It’s like somebody threw a dark sweater over our heads. Openness and inclusiveness was replaced with restriction, limit, hurry and exhaustion, culminating in this last frustrating and difficult walk through midtown.

I wonder if part of the problem, or at least one source of what I experienced as a negative, was the location – midtown Manhattan. Intense noise, far from home, no respite, even our park space taken over by fashion week. Nowhere safe for us to pause, to catch our breath or just be still. No quiet!

In the plaza just south of Grand Central on Park Ave. there was an odd sensation of being on the spot, watched and surveyed, mainly by concerned security guards. It was a non-welcoming, begrudgingly public space. At that point, we all became small, constricted in our listening. The security guards did crank up the fountains for us though, adding layers of white noise to the stream of traffic below and the grinding of air compressors against the façade of a building overhead. But it was hard being there.

There was one brief moment of respite inside the great hall of Grand Central Station. We gathered into a small cluster, dancers and public participants. Slowly, slips of paper were passed from person to person. “Listen at the limit of your hearing”, pause, “Listen to the

resonance of the hall”, pause, “Listen to the sound of the person next to you” and so on.

Bodies standing close, soft focus listening, looking up towards the ceiling/sky, soft focus eyes dart from one spot to another: Something dreamy, resonant, echoing and of unidentified origin.

Our group cluster created a nice sense of reconnecting after having dispersed quite a bit along the walk. Good thing, because moments later, as we emerged from Grand Central, we stepped right into major road construction, with multiple jackhammers and heavy equipment, at VERY close range. A few minutes later, just steps before the end of the walk, we passed a tiny fountain in front of a restaurant and everyone noticed the calming effect this had on our listening and our nerves.

9/18/06 More Discussion Re: Bryant Park to Grand Central Station Public Soundwalk on 9/16/06:

The group agrees: This was a big leap – asking the public to make dance in response to sound. Letting go of the soundwalk structure is important. Learn how to distinguish “soundwalk time” from “dance time”. Allow people to do what they want during the walk.

Somebody comments: What’s the relationship between an activist stance (teaching listening, fighting noise) and creative expression and performance (live dance improvisation, public performance on the street)?

I ask the group: How does this work feed our creative process? Can we use our research as creative resource? And, how does it contribute to an ecological relationship to the urban environment?

Someone else comments: Dance’s vocabulary is not relevant—listening is a very different process from dancing.

Walking or waaalkinnnnng. Can anyone tell that you are walking in time with some unidentified rhythmical drone? Does it count if no one can hear it but you? Can you hear a sound better when you move to it?

Pulaski Bridge to Gantry Plaza State Park, Long Island City, Queens, Private Soundwalk on 9/19/06:

Walking, performing, listening (not sure what we’re calling it) along the route in advance of Saturday’s public soundwalk. Fatigue has set in. I am without my baby today. I am lulled by the breeze and the gentle water lapping at the rocks on the shore, moving things in its wake. I hear metal and wood sounds, the piers rattling and squeaking gently in the sway. We’ve been walking for almost two hours.

Am I aware of my community? Am I listening?

Overhead a helicopter is hovering. A gull pierces the air, his mouth is full. George Bush is just across the river at the United Nations building. The water is buzzing with patrol boats, the sky full of helicopters and surveillance of all sorts.

My own private language of listening and meaning is emerging. A gesture language, part visceral response, part intellect. Emotional and also instinctive:

- Hands interacting, slapping or holding each other: Human voices, interactions, conversations.
- Small fluttering in dropped hands and fingers: Something tiny, natural world, vulnerable, children.
- Slow, heavy shifting of weight, slow walk: Deep, low throbbing, like a train engine.
- Solid, open hands, full contact, all energy passing through: Heavy, deep, low, powerful sounds, like unidentifiable drones.

Pulaski Bridge to Gantry Plaza State Park, Long Island City, Queens, Public Soundwalk on 9/23/06:

Something beautiful about this walk, something I really loved, was watching people explore and take risks. Watching members of the general public move beyond just walking and actually dance. Watching people play with sound from within their bodies.

I also enjoyed noticing the “look” of the listening body, as Hope likes to refer to it. People listening have a very distinctive appearance. Our bodies record the actions of our ears in subtle and not so subtle gestures and postural shifts. We orient ourselves through our listening, and we move in response to the sound field, even if unintentionally. And then we communicate this experience. This is the language of the listening body.

Listening: Slouchy, tense, slow, dense, aware, present, on the edge, ready, alert, soft, hard, clustered, alone, deep, maybe, extended, open.

Comments from other participants in the series of workshops and walks:

JENNIFER MONSON: Action or reaction balances out the ecology of the moment. Activates the subject as a part of the ecological sound system. Creates a sense of balance, changes a power dynamic, empowers? An example was given from the day before when the group had danced past a garage full of men who were calling out to the dancers. Alejandra mentioned that she felt so present, so grounded and in her context that she wasn't pulled out of herself into a self conscious or reactive mode but could keep in her animal sense of security and sharp awareness of her surroundings habitat. Like an animal—quiet, grounded.

ALEJANDRA MARTORELL: Even though the first sound-walk was, for many of us, difficult, I loved it. I loved the difficulty of it, the rawness with which we tackled it, being almost not ready for it. I love it in comparison to the second one. The one made the other one in many ways. To have both is to know more about what we were doing, even if it's still hard to know exactly what that might have been. . . . One assumption about audience participation is that is a step down from the pure, performative qualities of the artist's focus. In the sound-walk, I had the opportunity to examine my feelings about this. I was aware of opening up to my partner's company—his responses, initiatives, observations, proposals, etc.—while keeping my presence of mind with my own way of navigating the moment, including listening and following my physical movement. It became lighter somehow, less intense, more ample in focus, more playful and, in a way, more real, because by being an openly shared experience, it became part of normal living and everyday moment, even though we would never find ourselves moving and looking and feeling the way we were.

BIBA BELL: Bringing myself to meet the music of the city I focused my dancing, listening body on the cross-town traffic, the children in the park, the smattering of bird sounds invisible in havens of trees, the sound of my own breath and footsteps next to me, the geometric valleys and peaks of midtown, the oasis of the orchid store on 42nd and Park, and the sky expanse of helicopters on the waterfront. To dance with this sound is truly a way to open up the little ears that inhabit each and every cell. The sounding of the city in my body makes it move.

How much sound can go through these limbs?

As I move through sound I give my ears a rest—like Hope was saying, moving can be a rest. I am able to participate with the soundscape for greater duration, I reach into the soundspace more, I am supported by this soundspace. The potential harshness of urbanity is toned, movement is this tonic. . . Sound can be a command,

a perlocution. I respond with movement, and involve myself—it is a dialogue.

LAURA HYMERS: Listening or looking directly, softly, peripherally, in between. . . This is a wonderful game-like experiment that I find myself using in rehearsal and in simply walking on the street. Not changing the way things (cars, people, dancers, etc.) are, but having the choice to change my relationship thru eyes and ears.

LISA BRENNER: What happens in a playground when a group of 12 adults say to themselves “it is ok if I end up rolling on the ground” What happens in a paranoid country when 30 adults stand silently, single file, on a bridge over one of the major tunnel entrances to Manhattan, standing, no less, over a huge flashing sign: REPORT ALL SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY.

Who knew there was a symphony of birds waiting behind the parking lots on that particular half block of 50th Ave. in LIC? Maessian (however you spell his name) would have been enthralled. . .

So there was this mixture of high art/present moment/concept/walking along the dirty pavement wondering just how bizarre DID all this appear to the non-listening New Yorkers just trying to get things done, as I stood there, listening.

More writing on The Language of the Listening Body, including the full posts from which the above comments are excerpted, are available at the Critical Correspondence website: <http://movementresearch.org/publishing/?q=node/119>

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Photo by Ian W. Douglas