

# Listening Together

Collective Engagement in Sonic Acts' Listening Room at Zone2Source and Online Radio

Hannah Pezzack

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In February 2024, Sonic Acts launched *The Listening Room* at the arts venue Zone Source in Amsterdam, and the online radio ↪ [radio.sonicacts.com](https://radio.sonicacts.com) to showcase multichannel sound works. Both projects were initiated as part of the Sonic Acts Biennial 2024: *The Spell of the Sensuous* – an intensive art, theory, and technology gathering motivated by changes in the ecological, political, technological, and social landscape. Both the online radio channel and the physical listening room were an experiment in attentive listening, and presented an embodied, ecological approach to sound.

In this article Hannah Pezzack links these projects to the history of listening situations, referring amongst others Pauline Oliveros' deep listening, and reflects on the outcomes of the audience research that was conducted amongst the audience of the Listening Room and ↪ [radio.sonicacts.com](https://radio.sonicacts.com). She argues that audiences resonated with the embodied, ecological approach to sound, and that attentive listening is not only highly valued by listeners, but seen as essential to mental well-being.







On 2 February 2024, the Listening Room – an 8.2-channel sound exhibition designed for attentive contemplation – opened at Zone2Source. Located in Amstelpark, Amsterdam, the arts venue is constructed out of floor-to-ceiling, glass-panelled windows which look out onto the surrounding gardens. Cushions were laid on the floor and visitors were invited to sit, stand, or walk through the room while the pieces were played. Without performers present, the focal point became the act of listening itself; deep, sensory submersion, conducted as part of an assembled group. In tandem with the Listening Room, radio.sonicacts.com was launched online. The portal streamed live concerts alongside broadcasting archival and new multi-channel pieces, some of which had been commissioned within the framework of Re-imagine Europe, utilising built-in spatial sound technology.

These projects were initiated as part of the Sonic Acts Biennial 2024: The Spell of the Sensuous – an intensive art, theory, and technology gathering motivated by changes in the ecological, political, technological, and social landscape. Founded in 1994, Sonic Acts is an interdisciplinary arts organisation based in Amsterdam. Its activities encompass research, projects, and producing new artworks, often working together with cultural incubators, universities, and kindred festivals.

Recently, Sonic Acts launched The Spatial Sound Platform (SSP), an initiative investigating the perception and conservation of spatial sound works through innovative and experimental formats. For over three decades, the organisation has been exploring spatial sound, delving into the latest technical developments, immersive experiences, and acoustic architectures. The SSP operates as an archive and seeks to transform the material through performances, research materials, workshops, masterclasses, new releases and more. Both the Listening Room and the Radio represent extensions of the SSP, with further plans currently being discussed by the curatorial team.

For this case study, Hannah Pezzack analyses surveys and interviews administered by research intern Alice Dimastrogiovanni about the dual, immersive environments.<sup>1</sup> The feedback provided by visitors repeatedly referenced their physical sense of self; one person even mentioned doing a breathing exercise with a friend at Zone2Source, emphasising the significance of bodily awareness. Others mentioned tactile sensations, a comment that was prominent in relation to the radio.

Referring to Pauline Oliveros' practice of Deep Listening, this case study argues that audiences resonated with an embodied, ecological approach to sound, where the body, the sonic environment, and fellow listeners were integral. It seeks to question dominant conceptions of the autonomous subject, advocating for holistic and collective listening spaces. Furthermore, in the context of the attention economy – or the rapid, relentless exposure to information – attentive listening enacted slowly, over long durations, is highly valued and is essential to mental well-being.

The listening room is not new – in the early 1920s, radio stations often created dedicated spaces for audiences to gather and tune into broadcasts together. This concept evolved over the decades, with designated rooms appearing in libraries and cultural centres. In recent years, the Japanese-style listening bars – or HiFi bars as they are called in the U.S. – have become popular worldwide. A 'subset of the kissaten, the small and idiosyncratic coffeehouses dotting the side streets in Tokyo', these venues stem back to the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The original idea is simple: talk less, listen more. Sound is given priority, with the acoustics of the space designed so one can fully appreciate the music.

Meanwhile, online radio follows a contemporary history of web platforms that emerged in the late 1990s. Frequently DIY affairs, pirate stations in particular revolutionised how broadcast media was consumed. Sonic Acts has taken up

<sup>1</sup> The feedback took the shape of 44 paper surveys, collected by Sonic Acts team members during the Biennial, and a further 27 online surveys. This case study focuses especially on the 10 in-person interviews hosted by Alice Dimastrogiovanni as these conversations allowed respondents to speak in-depth about their experiences.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Ratliff, 'Learning to Listen in a Los Angeles Cafe Built for Vinyl', *The New York Times*, 3 June 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/06/03/dining/vinyl-records-listening-bar-kissaten.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/dining/vinyl-records-listening-bar-kissaten.html).



these two formats to investigate novel ways of showcasing sound works, including historical pieces – live recordings of concerts and commissioned compositions – that have been sitting in the organisation’s vast vault. This case study does not name titles or artists (although full crediting can be found via the 2024 Biennial website) but instead follows the answers of the respondents who spoke subjectively about their emotions, mental states, and interactions.<sup>3</sup>

Re-imagining and adding new facets, Sonic Acts has incorporated spatialisation, which made the physicality of the sound all the more pronounced and rethought the traditionally darkened, often windowless listening bar into a porous glasshouse. These additions, as this case study illustrates, were instrumental to the overall positive, impactful reception.

### Listening with Intent

In 1988, the pioneering sound artist, composer, accordionist, and educator Pauline Oliveros coined the term ‘Deep Listening’. The all-encompassing phrase, which Oliveros applied to various pedagogical, philosophical, and activist situations, explores ‘the difference between the involuntary nature of hearing and the conscious nature of listening’.<sup>4</sup> While we might be unconsciously ‘hearing’ all the time, listening is a deliberate, purposeful action that cultivates a heightened apprehension of the external and internal sonic environment.

This approach is irrevocably tied to the practitioner’s acknowledgement of the social nature of sound. In her 1971 book, *Sonic Meditations*, Oliveros composed exercises for group participation that centred on community and the deconstruction of hierarchy. Within her work, sound is reimagined as a participatory activity: not a one-sided relationship between the performer and audience, but as an ever-expanding project of awareness.

Notably, many visitors alluded to the alert and observant qualities of Deep Listening in their feedback. An individual remarked that they felt ‘focused’ because ‘this act of listening attentively is really grounding and pulls you into the present’. Another stated that they enjoyed a ‘meditative’ engagement with the pieces.

Respondent P. continually used plural pronouns in their answers: ‘There was real attention and real stillness. Some people were lying, others were sitting, and we all had a collective experience.’ Here, the focus is on the sonic encounter as shared and connective, aligning with Oliveros’ vision of sound as inherently relational. Crucially, a central reason visitors came to the Listening Room was to, as one solo attendee put it, ‘listen with other people’, even strangers. The communal aspect was of major appeal.

### Embodied Listening

In Western societies, aural processes (along with the non-visual senses such as smell and taste) have tended to be considered subordinate to rational knowledge. Within this framework, listening is also regarded as essentially disembodied. Traditional ‘computational models’ depict noises entering the ears before swirling around the brain, absorbed solely through the mental sphere. However, in recent years, the emergence of an embodied perspective in music studies has allowed listening to be rethought in relation to corporeality. Pauline Oliveros was a key, early proponent of this embodied approach.<sup>5</sup> Following one of her sonic meditations, for example, practitioners are encouraged to imagine that ‘the bottoms of your feet become ears’.<sup>6</sup> This playful exercise underscores the idea that the whole body enacts listening, a concept supported by both philosophers and neuroscientists.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Spatial Sound Platform: The Listening Room, 24 February 2024, [2024.sonicacts.com/programme/the-listening-room](https://2024.sonicacts.com/programme/the-listening-room).

<sup>4</sup> About Deep Listening, The Center For Deep Listening, 11 August 2020, [deeplistening.rpi.edu/deep-listening](https://deeplistening.rpi.edu/deep-listening).

<sup>5</sup> Oliveros conceives of a ‘field of listening’ – ‘a dance of reflection in the space between... This is listening to listening – layers of processing in the brain and body. The skin listens too. In fact the whole body listens in this heightened state of awareness unless attention narrows.’ Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening* (London: Ignota Books, 2022), p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Oliveros, ‘Native’, in *Sonic Meditations* (Baltimore, MD, Smith Publications, 1974), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s, the discovery of mirror neurons, which activate when an individual either performs a specific motor gesture or observes someone else enacting the same or a similar gesture, led to a radical reanalysis of how



Artist and researcher Andrea Giomi has highlighted the sensorial nature of sound, pointing to its physical quality; the tactile sensation of vibrations against muscles and skin, and how we might dance, tap, or sway along to music. Drawing on the work of theorists and scientists, he proposes an ‘ecological’ understanding of sound, where the act of listening is implicated in a network of factors such as the space in which it occurs, biochemical responses in one’s own body as well as the bodies of fellow audience members and performers.<sup>8</sup> According to this perspective, the previously separate categories of ‘the mind’ and ‘the body’ are integrated into a holistic vision that unites cognitive functions (thinking), bodily movements, and multi-sensory activity. This interpretation, which challenges the idea of the autonomous subject, applies well to the Listening Room, described by respondent K. as a ‘sharing space’; a place to ‘get more in my body [...] where things were happening [...] not being in a little isolated pod by yourself... but [with] a group.’

Moreover, the fact that Zone2Source was well-lit by sunlight and that trees and birds could be seen through the glass windows, seemed to deepen multi-sensorial interaction.<sup>9</sup> A dark, sealed-off venue would have prevented visitors from engaging with their surroundings and recognising one another, thereby limiting the sensory encounter. In the words of music journalist Anton Spice:

Listening spaces are often enclosed, self-consciously sealed from the bleed of the outside world, but at Zone2Source, you are reminded more of just how porous these boundaries are. What makes listening a fluid way of apprehending the world is not pure and focused attention to one discrete thing, but the possibility for overlap, for relations emerging between objects and processes.<sup>10</sup>

As Spice acknowledges, listening in this context is not simply a one-dimensional ‘ears-plus-noise’ equation, but a defuse latticework of stimuli that encompasses

the architecture of Zone2Source and events going on outside the building. In Oliveros’ understanding, this constitutes an ‘openness’ to the world, allowing one to become receptive in an integrated manner.

Additionally, the setting was considered to be comfortable – or, as respondent G. articulated, ‘homey’ – with cushions and blankets available. The laid-back atmosphere undoubtedly led to a sense of emotional security and well-being, which was notable in descriptors such as ‘soothing’ and ‘relaxing’. In essence, a defining aspect of Zone2Source was the curators’ consideration of the listener as embodied, from the configuration of the speakers to just above head height to the warmth and comfort of attendees. Indeed, in future iterations of this project, attention should be paid to replicating these features, which put people at ease, enabling them to more meaningfully connect with themselves, others, the space and sound works.

### Tactile Technology

It is interesting to note that feedback about Sonic Acts Radio also focused on palpable, multi-sensory engagement. This is despite the perceived immateriality and disembodied nature of broadcast mediums which, according to Carolyn Birdsall in her book *Radiophilia*, has only become more entrenched in the age of internet radio.<sup>11</sup> However, as she argues, such assumptions obfuscate factors such as material waste, servers that store digital information, urban space, intimacy, and embodiment. Radio has distinctive, tangible components, from the twiddling of knobs to reading programmes or, in the case of [radio.sonicacts.com](http://radio.sonicacts.com), a haptic, mediating interface that mapped and mirrored the listener’s head movements. This function is linked to the spatialised, ‘3D’ nature of the audio – the camera follows the listener’s position, re-adjusting and panning the music accordingly. Respondent I. commented on this, saying that they found

we perceive reality. Instead of being a purely mental action, cognition is now defined as an enactive, non-dualist phenomenon, linked to the body – of which the brain is a part – and situated in an environment.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Giomi, ‘The Case for an Embodied Approach to Listening: Bodies, Technologies and Perception’, *Hybrid*, 6 (2019), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Respondent W.: ‘I was looking outside, I saw the trees, I saw the birds going over, and then suddenly it was peaceful.’

<sup>10</sup> Anton Spice, ‘Reflections on Sonic Acts Festival 2024’, *Through Sounds*, 21 March 2024, [antonspice.substack.com/p/reflections-on-sonic-acts-festival-d47](http://antonspice.substack.com/p/reflections-on-sonic-acts-festival-d47).

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Birdsall, *Radiophilia* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), p. 39.



the ‘very nice spatiality and articulation of the frequencies, which kind of resonate in the head’, to be ‘recharging’.

Others spoke about the pieces in textured terms, using words such as ‘bubbly’ or ‘harsh’. Remarkably, even when the audio was industrial, unnerving, or jarring, individuals still considered it positive and pleasant. This suggests that it was not so much the emotional tone of the track, but more the novelty of sound that is distinctively physical and interactive, moving in dialogue with the specific dimensions of their bodies.

Both Carolyn Birdsall and Andrea Giomi are optimistic about the potential of future technologies, including ‘experiments in 3D virtual representations and augmented reality.’<sup>12</sup> For Giomi, new musical interfaces are fundamental to recognising how the body figures in relation to auditory processes, an area he has explored in *Feedback Loop Driver* (2017–2019), a biophysical music performance which uses motion capture technologies.

In the cases of the Listening Room and radio.sonicacts.com, spatialisation through 8.2 channels and digital mapping created an ‘immersive experience’, underscoring that audiences resonate with a somatic mode of listening.<sup>13</sup> Even in the ‘ephemeral’ online radio, the pan-effect kept users grounded, with multi-dimensional, oscillating music generating what respondent U. called ‘neuropleasure’.

### Retreats, Rituals, and a Crisis of Attention

Scholars Graham Burnett and Justin E. H. Smith, in the introduction to the book *Scenes of Attention: Essays on Mind, Time, and the Senses*, describe

the ‘attention economy’ as ‘the intensive “fracking” of human persons for the vaporous monetary value of their eyeballs and earholes’.<sup>14</sup> Some remedies for dealing with the information overload, such as the rising popularity of sensory deprivation tanks or mindfulness techniques, might relieve bombardment and burnout, but do so on an individual basis.<sup>15</sup> This case study instead points to the redemptive capacities of practising Deep Listening collectively, in an exhibition setting.

In juxtaposition to the rapid, fractured, alienation of the attention economy, the practice of Deep Listening is instead orientated towards slow and sustained engagement. According to Jenny Odell, author of *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, it operates as a ‘reversal of our usual cultural training, which teaches us to quickly analyse and judge more than to simply observe.’<sup>16</sup> Odell calls this a powerful ‘interruption’ of hegemonic rhythms, ‘Even if brief or momentary, these places and moments are retreats.’<sup>17</sup>

In the context of a ‘crisis of attention’ that we all feel, to varying degrees, in the age of hypermediated multitaskery, finding time for deep, mediative listening may prove difficult – as respondent S. stated, ‘I don’t really sit down a lot and take the time to listen’. In this sense, venues such as the Listening Room and radio.sonicacts.com carve out a vital space – a place to pause to become enveloped and attuned, both with oneself and others. These platforms provided, at least fleetingly, a pleasurable reprieve from the saturation of everyday life.

The notion of ‘departing’ or ‘retreating’ was further emphasised by the fact that visitors had to travel away from the noise and bustle of the city centre to a large park in a quiet suburb, a place many found to be ‘peaceful’. Respondent K. said, ‘I do really appreciate [that the] listening room became more of [...] a

12 Ibid, p. 184.

13 Respondent P.: ‘The spatial sound effect, I mean, they were really moving the sound around and it was very impressive [...] I tended to really concentrate just there [because of] the presence or immersion.’

14 Graham Burnett & Justin E. H. Smith, *Scenes of attention: Essays on Mind, Time, and the Senses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 7.

15 For example, criticism of mindfulness from social scientists centres on how it can reproduce ‘neoliberal and individualised technology of the self’. Elgen Sauerborn, Nina Sökefeld & Sighard Neckel, ‘Paradoxes of mindfulness: The specious promises of a contemporary practice’, *The Sociological Review*, 70.5 (2022), p. 1044.

16 Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019), p. 57.

17 Ibid, p. 62.



ritual. And that adds a lot to it for me.’ Meanwhile, respondent P. mentioned that they became absorbed into the longer pieces which played with the ‘elasticity of time perception.’ These observations speak to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han’s conception of rituals as ‘exercises in attention’ that allow people to ‘linger’ and be mindfully present in the moment.<sup>18</sup> In a fast-paced, atomised world, Han emphasises the healing necessity of slowing down and becoming utterly absorbed in a shared activity. As an example, he refers to the Hungarian writer Péter Nádas, who describes a village with an ancient pear tree at its centre, where villagers gather and contemplate silently. Such places ‘creates a community without communication’.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, at Zone2Source, where talking was gently discouraged, it was noticeable that a ritualised sense of commonality flourished, despite the lack of verbal exchange.

## Conclusion

After long being neglected, the body and the physicality of sound are finally being recognised as essential tenets of listening. Of course, this realisation might seem obvious, especially to those who love to dance or enjoy music on a large sound system.<sup>20</sup> Yet, within more cerebral approaches and ‘ocularcentric’ cultures bias towards visual media, mental cognition has been paramount. As evidenced by this study’s findings, this model is lacking – a comprehensive understanding of listening as embodied and ecological is both necessary and desired.

For its 2024 Biennial programme, which turned for inspiration to, and took its name from, David Abram’s 1996 book *The Spell of Sensuous*, Sonic Acts delved into the role of the senses. The curatorial framework sought to repair the epistemological rift between ‘the mind’ and ‘the body’ and put us back in touch – with art, each other, and the environment – in the face of

alienation and devastating ecological crisis. Research conducted as part of the Biennial undoubtedly set the stage for the findings here regarding sensorial, sonic engagement.

In various other fields, notably psychotherapy, there has been a shift towards the somatic with psychiatrists such as Bessel van der Kolk and Gabor Maté advocating for all-encompassing healthcare that connects our bodies and minds. This has dovetailed with the popular appeal of ambient music and collective listening activities – such as sound baths – as well as renewed interest in artists like Éliane Radigue whose steadily unfolding, drone-led works mirror the workings of the nervous system.

The interconnectedness of the mind, body, and environment will undoubtedly continue to be a fascinating realm of study in relation to multi-channel sound art, especially as new technologies emerge and open up fresh possibilities for their dissemination. When it comes to audiences, it appears there is a longing to reconcile our individuated, distracted, and overwhelmed selves, and to find shared places of attunement. Listening, as a ritualised, tactile, multi-sensorial and relational activity, seems distinctively poised to bridge the gap, whether it takes place in the physical or digital sphere.

<sup>18</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, translated by Daniel Steuer (Oxford, England: Polity Press, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Personally, my penchant for black metal and dubstep, genres characterised by deep, penetrating bass that reverberates forcibly in the throat and chest, has shaped my appreciation of how music can resonate not just emotionally, but viscerally. This conceptualisation of sonic engagement is furthermore indebted to Martina Raponi, aka noiserr, whose interest in noise originates from her father’s deafness. As a child, he would lay his head against her back, asking her to speak out loud so he could ‘learn’ her voice through the vibrations of her rib cage. This vibratory and tactile quality of noise as an aesthetic relational object is fundamental to Raponi’s research and artistic practice.









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# CONTEXT

This text is one of the pilot studies of *Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action*. In these contributions we explore and reflect on artistic practices and experimental approaches in the cultural field that can engage and activate audiences and communities to address ecological, social, and political challenges. The pilot studies provide an overview of practices of cultural organisations that can serve as models, recipes, or tools for transformation for current and future generations of cultural workers and artists.

*Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action (2023–2027)* is a four-year transnational co-creation and circulation project of fourteen interdisciplinary art organisations across Europe. The project aims to equip and empower young Europeans through artistic practices to better withstand societal challenges triggered by rapid climate change.

The Re-Imagine Europe partnership is a collaboration of: Paradiso<sup>(NL)</sup>, Sonic Acts<sup>(NL)</sup>, Elevate Festival<sup>(AT)</sup>, INA grm<sup>(FR)</sup>, A4<sup>(SK)</sup>, Borealis<sup>(NO)</sup>, KONTEJNER<sup>(HR)</sup>, BEK<sup>(NO)</sup>, RUPERT<sup>(LT)</sup>, Disruption Network Lab<sup>(DE)</sup>, Semibreve<sup>(PT)</sup>, Parco Arte Vivente<sup>(IT)</sup>, Kontrapunkt<sup>(MK)</sup> and Radio Web MACBA<sup>(ES)</sup>.



# BIOGRAPHIES

Interested in the interconnectedness of language and sound, **Hannah Pezzack** is a journalist, editor, and curator, specialising in storytelling through interviews, essays, discursive events, and radio. Her work delves into intimacy, dreams, and folklore, exploring the intersection of nature, culture, and imagination. As the managing editor of *Extra Extra*, she edited the words of notable figures like Lauren Berlant, Graham Harman, McKenzie Wark, and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. Currently an assistant curator at Sonic Acts, she edits *Ecoes*, a bi-annual magazine about 'art in the age of pollution', published by Sonic Acts Press. Her music journalism can be found in magazines such as *The Wire*, where she is a regular contributor. Hannah also composes liner notes for record labels and is a freelance communications writer for various cultural institutions and festivals, including Dekmantel. DJing under her own name, she co-hosts 'Scrying the Landscape' on Mutant Radio with Elina Tapio, a mix series focusing on Deep Listening and mysticism.

**Sonic Acts** is an interdisciplinary arts organisation based in Amsterdam. Founded in 1994 to present new developments in electronic and digital art forms, Sonic Acts has gained prominence with its biennial international festival — an intensive art, theory and technology gathering motivated by changes in the ecological, political, technological and social landscape.

Beyond its annual events, Sonic Acts is a leading platform for international projects, research and the commissioning and co-production of new artworks, as well as a hub for a global network of artists, curators, and critical thinkers. With a focus on talent development, it facilitates artist residencies, publications, and year-round activities.



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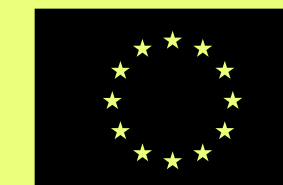
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