

AN EAR TO THE EDGE OF SOMETHING

An Ear to the Edge of
Something

An Ear to the Edge of Sound

What does it mean to deeply listen? I've been asking this question for some time now. While listening has a direct correlation to sound, sound does not need to be present for acts of deep listening. I am learning to listen to myself and to navigate the boundaries that I need to put up to ensure I am harmonising with my surroundings, needs and limits. It is a constant learning exercise. We have the ability to be purposefully selective with our hearing. I have been forming to the sounds of another, while working out how to retain my own frequencies. I am constantly led back to the words of François J. Bonnet: **depending on the vicissitudes of such a listening, the ear is disquieted, is reassured, weaves intimate relations with the unknown, or forges knowledge through language. The ear is a delicate thing. It is under the influence.**

Synchronization refers to two or more events happening at the same time and is one of the most common phenomena in nature. To meet in time, harmonising temporally, two entities must listen to one another. On February 22 1665, Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens wrote to René-François de Sluse, referring to this phenomenon as **the sympathy of two clocks**. We cannot remain in time consistently. We are relational beings and the ear is deeply connected to many an organ and many a feeling. Our bodies have harmonies that we move in and out of and we are constantly in flux. Things can be working smoothly and then we physically meet disjunctures that throw us off course. One is lucky if things are working correctly. As life shifts and the conditions around how an artist can work changes, new methods for making are realised. In the midst of a time when families and relational communities had to find new forms of harmonisation, Katie Stackhouse created **Syncopation II**— a heavy bronze-form cast with care, that has been suspended from the ceiling of MILK. There is also a **Syncopation I**— a similar sculptural device. Prior to this exhibition the two sculptures had been hung together: a pair of pendulums, suspended and moving in unison. For this iteration, Stackhouse presents just one. The work cites the phenomenon that pendulums moving together in a different timing will harmonise their rhythm through sound pulses. The human body becomes the second pendulum for this iteration, initiated when the artist activates the work through performance and the viewer navigates the gallery space around the sculpture. The viewer must be mindful to not touch the sculpture, which gently moves with gravitational energy. The human body has many different kinds of oscillating rhythms. A syncopated rhythm is generally considered as a disruptive rhythm. Seeking synaesthetic experience, Stackhouse has created a work that uses the challenge of off-beat syncopation as a way to find rhythm and form—the sculpture leads the movement of the body. Much of listening is prediction and movement often comes as a result of muscle memory. Our brains often instigate responses before questions have been asked. Listening to Stackhouse recount the process of bringing the sculpture to life, it is clear that the making process has the power to bring the artist into a sense of harmony with their surroundings and reality. Perhaps making is the deepest form of listening? The presence of the Birrarung aside the artists home was influential in the making of the work. The wax used to cast the form felt like the surface of the river and the Ballee (Cherry Ballart) tree, native to the river's banks, provided dye for the rope that holds the form—collected by hand with Stackhouse's child in tow. Concerns of familial rhythms and interaction with the timing of nature and elemental forces feed into the sculptural atmosphere in the space surrounding the work. There are deep and complex modes of relationality to the artist's processes and the ways one encounters sound. There is also a type of symbolic pendulum that hangs between curator and artist. A good curator will predict incoming harmonies, movements and sounds. They will forecast what is needed. Listening can be a supportive device when coupled with appropriate intent and an attempt to lean towards one another's needs: **the sympathy of two clocks**.

In Tina Stefanou's **Miming for Mines: You Can't Hear Faith**, Julie a 68 year-old retired deaf nurse from the regional town of Morwell, stands in front of the Loy Yang power station and inside a suburban home, miming songs of faith for the camera. Like most sites of mining, Morwell has a long and dark history of colonial extraction and industrial dislocation. It powers 70% of Victoria's energy with one of the highest concentrations of power stations in the country. It is also home to a lot of religious working-class populations who have lost their jobs due to power stations being closed down. It's a place full of complexity and misunderstandings.

Hearing, akin to mining, can be seen as an extraction of sorts. Hearing can be just as powerful and dangerous an action. We can be selective with what we hear, what we extract and what we retain. We can exploit through acts of hearing, being selective in what we later espouse, reconfiguring meaning from the moment of hearing to communication. Julie can control the density of what she hears through a blue tooth connected cochlea implant. Her phone is connected to this device and when she plays songs or has a conversation she can block out all the background noise. We too, can block out background noise – the responsibility and power lies within the ear of the listener. At the same time, hearing can be a balm; a connection; a way to heal and extend and engage with others. The ear can be likened to the heart—we can listen without sound. The power lies within the listener.

Julie mimes a religious song that only she can hear – a miming routine that she hasn't performed for ten years, choreographed for her local church. She stands in front of open cut mines and run-down power stations, performing acts of bodily listening. Listening is reconstituted into an act of faith. When faced with obstacles one often has to attune to new frequencies.

Reflecting on the work, Tina notes **that the mime in-front of the mine poised for the camera stands on the edge of what is possible. The mime jumps the small wire fence so we can get just a little closer to the view. Ten minutes into set up three security guards drive towards us. We imagine that they have come from the castle infirmary of the Loy Yang power station, a site like pyramids. Whilst Julie our mime stands on**

the side of private land, I talk to the female security guard who has a gentle smile. I admit straight away that I know that we have done something cheeky, but I assure her that it is for the sake of art not protest (is there a difference?). I ask whether we could just stand a meter into the private area, and she says a stern no.

It is through a more sonic form of listening that Grace Ferguson has created **Morpheme**, alongside Julian Tuna. Speaking of the work, Graces states that **Morpheme is a bodily soundscape examining the alchemy of our disposition in any given moment and the delicate increments of change that motion in us. How is it that a small thing can alter us so completely? Everything is in the way of something; the worshipping of every gesture, utterance, tone, every micro-tone. Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words; a bound morpheme is a morpheme that can appear only as part of a larger expression; a free morpheme is one that can stand alone. A fish wire of sorts, divides these two forces in humans internally, dependance vs independence. The word butterfly is made up of two free morphemes but contains three in total, like a third eye or third ear. Amusingly this word happens to be "utter".**

We must attempt to listen to every utterance, attuning to all sounds and deciding what we do not need to hear. I am learning to block out onerous noise from those that are not serving me.

My mind has often connected the sounds of Claude Debussy to waterfalls. Debussy's music always cascades – running water, flowing unison – there is a fullness to his sounds, an infinity. Many connected parts make up an ocean and my ears become vessels full of sea water when I listen. There is an alchemy and I am reminded that everything is connected. I have this same feeling when I hear Grace Ferguson play the piano. Prior to this exhibition I sent Grace the following quote from the famed theremin player Clara Rockmore: **you cannot play air with hammers, you have to play with butterfly wings.** Whilst researching to create the sound score for **Morpheme**, Grace discovered that Debussy carried similar sentiments, noted in Susan Tomes' **The Piano** (2021):

one should forget that the piano has hammers [...] the hands are not meant to hover in the air above the piano, but should enter it.

When listening to Debussy, many of his friends observed that **when he played he seemed to have soft hands, keeping his fingers close to the keys and appearing to 'mould' the sound as if it were located in the keys themselves; they spoke of his 'brushing', 'caressing', 'floating over', 'sinking into' the keys. Of course there are passages which require attack, crispness, staccato, even hammering and glittering, but these are matched to particular moments in the music and are never to be taken as the basic sound.' Now and again he does create a piece which is deliberately virtuosic, but most of the time his rapid figuration is used to create 'atmosphere', to conjure up water, wind, mist or [...] weightlessness...**

It is this sense of entering, of being consumed in music and sound, that cascades from the soundtrack of **Morpheme**. Accompanied with visuals from Director Julian Tuna, Grace's sounds meet a lone figure at a nightclub. They are swept up in music, dancing to begin. As the tone shifts and distant vocals break in, a sense of un-groundedness arises. They lose their wig, anxiously check their phone and break away from the crowd. A brief moment meeting a friend leads them back to being alone. They re-enter the dancefloor, move their body in unison with the music, and after a few moments are left in the expansive space alone—the crowd has dispersed. A sense of loneliness resonates throughout the work. At it's core, listening will always be an isolated activity, an experience that we have alone. We will never hear sound in the exact same way as another.

Debussy, like Grace, listened with his hands. The word **morpheme** connotes **any of the minimal grammatical units of a language, each constituting a word or meaningful part of a word.** It is this interconnectedness that rings out from the music, sitting in contrast to a sense of disconnectedness resonating from the film.

There is no greater form of connectedness than that which comes from collaborative modes of making. Lucreccia Quintanilla and AM Kanngieser have brought their practices together, listening to one another in the process, to create **We hear them in their laughter**— a work that consists of one of Quintanilla's black clay conch shell sculptural forms, resting on the floor of the space. The form holds an iphone from which AM and Lucreccia's soundscore plays. The score consists of field recordings and echoing tones. It intermingles and gets found and lost within the surrounding noise of the gallery space, as Ferguson's score and the noises of traffic outside flood the space—a reminder that we can never listen in a vacuum. Even if we block out all eternal sounds, our bodies are sonic devices.

A quick google search asking **what does it mean to listen deeply?** provides the following suggestion: **It requires the temporary suspension of judgment, and a willingness to receive new information.** Acts of deep listening can come in many guises and I am still learning how best to listen. It is through acts of thoughtful collaboration and engagement with considered and rigorous artistic practice, that I am slowly refining how best to become **the ear of the listener.**

— Josephine Mead, 2022

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Artists |
Lucreccia Quintanilla
AM Kanngieser
Grace Ferguson
Julian Tuna
Katie Stackhouse
Tina Stefanou

Curator |
Josephine Mead

For An Ear to the Edge of Sound six artists have been invited to think through sound and listening in an expanded sense.

August 11 – 25, 2022

MILK Gallery
1/222 Johnston St, Wurundjeri woi-wurrung
Country (Collingwood) VIC 3066

milk-site.art

PUBLIC PROGRAMS:

Performance by Abby Sundborn, Grace Ferguson & Sophie Weston, Saturday August 13, 6pm

Syncopation performance by Katie Stackhouse, Wednesday August 17, 6pm

SPLIT Milk– a night of conversation, Thursday August 25, 6pm

Public programs are free — All welcome!

This exhibition has been made possible through generous support from City of Melbourne, Bodriggy Brewing Co, Yarra City Arts through City of Yarra and Minimum.

MILK acknowledges & pays respect to the Traditional Owners of the lands upon which our gallery is situated, the Wurundjeri woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nations. We acknowledge and extend our respect to the Traditional Owners of all lands on which our work is viewed, and to all Elders, past, present and emerging.