



Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clío Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 69–80

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Resounding Difficult Histories

CITE AS:

Juliana Hodkinson, 'Resounding Difficult Histories', in *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clío Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 69–80 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-21_08>

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ABSTRACT: *Prompt, Immediate, Now / Very Restrained and Cautious* (2013), *Defending Territory in a Networked World* (2013) and *Afgang 04.00* (2017) are three sound pieces that lean on events of historical proportions. They involve addressing the artistic challenge of letting difficult historical narratives resonate in the present. The artistic process for all three works involved finding fitting modes of reenactment and providing a present-day position on why and how these materials may be incorporated in artworks today, as well as contributing to historical revision and political resistance.

KEYWORDS: History; resonance; sonic reenactment

Resounding Difficult Histories

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In our imaginaries of historical events such as the Holocaust, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War, what sounds come to mind, what voices, and what words?

Recordings of voices implicated in historical events are normally heard linked to visual footage. But we do not only live in a pictorial world. Through the growth of phenomena such as data sonification and sound archives, we are becoming more and more conversant in audio representations of our world.

Since the early days of recording technologies, it has been possible to introduce non-musical sounds seamlessly into artistic listening, and the scope for doing so was explored in every way possible during the twentieth century. Two developments in the mid-twentieth century — acousmatic composition and audio spatialization — began to take into account the consequences of the new situation for the listener, in which sounds' sources may appear literally and physically unconnected to their source. This separation could be obscured further through experimental editing and filtering. The contribution of technology to the disembodiment of sound led to new strategies in the abstract handling of voices and words. Nevertheless, a scepticism towards the compatibility of language and voice with highly abstract approaches to compositional technique and aesthetics meant that the use of voices and intelligible words remained largely the job of radio.

Consequently, the initiative for orchestrating the real world against aural fictions or reenactments, and the increasing use of aural technologies to bring audiences out of art buildings and into other listening contexts have often come from within the visual arts and theatre,¹ as well as from genres of sonic art distant from institutionalized music. Sound artist Brandon LaBelle has emphasized the physical attributes of sound, as relying for its existence on time and space, to underline the inescapably social properties of speech as something that is always moving through space and between bodies, making itself public.²

Three recent works in my artistic practice as a composer involve the mobilization and sonic framing of recordings of speaking voices to bring to mind moments of historical consequence. All three works involve, in differing ways, finding perspectives on historical and present political events and contexts in relation to one another. This involved taking up a position on why and how recorded audio, as historical artefacts or reenactments, may be incorporated into artworks today, as well as hopefully nudging to historical revision and political resistance through these reenactments.

SOUND AND DIPLOMACY

In 2012, I was invited to participate in a group exhibition on sound and diplomacy, ‘Embassy Reconstructed’, initiated by Åsa Stjerna. ‘Embassy Reconstructed’ was an arts-based exploration of the embassy as a phenomenon, inquiring how diplomacy can be interpreted and presented in sonic form, how the act of conflict management between nations could be interpreted through the arts, and what the sonic characteristics of the embassy might be. Operating within an expanded field — the special territory of the embassies as projection of nation —

1 Juliana Hodkinson, ‘Creating Headspace: Digital Listening Spaces and Evolving Subjectivities’, *Musicology Research*, 3 (Autumn 2017), special issue *Music on Screen: From Cinema Screens to Touchscreens, Part II*, ed. by Sarah Hall and James B. Williams, pp. 163–77 <<https://www.musicologyresearch.co.uk/publications/julianahodkinson-creatingheadspace>> [accessed 31 March 2018].

2 See Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London: Continuum, 2006).

the exhibition explored the embassy site partly as an ideal construction and partly as the source of a vocabulary serving as artistic material.

This strong and particular combination of contexts was the springboard for new pieces by Liv Strand, Susanne Skog, Brandon LaBelle, Jacob Kirkegaard, Åsa Stjerna, and myself, as well as a new adaptation of Alvin Lucier's *Memory Space*. For the exhibition, I created two pieces: a live electro-acoustic concert piece for four instrumentalists with quadrophonic playback of audio samples, and an eight-channel looped sound installation piece, installed in a large, semi-public open stairwell and running during the course of the building's daytime opening hours.

These two pieces — *Prompt, Immediate, Now / Very Vestrained and Cautious* (2013), and *Defending Territory in a Networked World* (2013) — draw on audio material freely available online. The audio sources ranged from radio and dictaphone archives to various publicly available communications, such as media broadcasts, press conferences, and interviews available mainly on YouTube, with the voices of presidents, foreign ministers, and foreign policy advisors of several countries, both past and present: Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, William Hague, Dag Hammarskjöld, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Nixon, Condoleeza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, Sushma Swaraj, Margaret Thatcher, and an unnamed German radio journalist broadcasting in the early 1940s. The speeches were mainly chosen for the ways in which they use language and vocal tenor in relation to the task of diplomacy and international relations; the selection ranged from formal restraint and extreme vagueness through public regret to national supremacy and open threat.

One opportunity offered by working with online sources is the possibility of transferring clearly recognizable voices, for example, to entirely different and obscure contexts. In *Prompt*, I brought the smoothness of these professional articulations alongside the controlled manoeuvres of instrumental chamber music, and in *Defending*, I bundled the voices alongside one another, confusing the individual clarity with which each was originally spoken.

Sound as a medium with a capacity to embrace time, space, and materiality — specifically, recorded sound as an opportunity to repeat words voiced in very particular contexts — generates ways of enacting

these aspects so as to negotiate complex entities, such as, in this case, abstract territorial and performative notions of the embassy and of diplomacy.³ In this way, artistic sonic material may be poised between the abstraction of the art form's matter and the potential for sonic artworks to represent the world and worldly (political) content.

PROMPT, IMMEDIATE, NOW / VERY RESTRAINED AND CAUTIOUS

Prompt, Immediate, Now / Very Restrained and Cautious was written for the opening of the group exhibition and first performed by Ensemble KNM on 27 January 2013, in the Danish building at the Nordic Embassies in Berlin.⁴ In *Prompt, Immediate, Now / Very Restrained and Cautious*, all the documentation came from situations in which the words were originally spoken in publicly mediatized situations (i.e., radio broadcasts, press conferences, and fiction film). The Nixon dictaphone tapes are a breach of this categorization in the choice of audio samples. I opted to use excerpts from a telephone conversation between Nixon and the prominent evangelical Southern Baptist minister, Billy Graham. Like Roosevelt and other US presidents, Nixon installed telephone taps and concealed microphones to record his White House conversations. As such, the audio collected in this way stems from public office but breaches privacy in that Graham would presumably have been unaware that he was being recorded. Nevertheless, in the excerpts I chose, Graham's voice is only heard distantly giving short affirmations, while Nixon's voice carries all the political content and rhetorical drive.

Sourcing audio from the Internet — whether from online sound libraries or YouTube — entails a certain set of considerations related to intellectual property in the context of mass communication. Much easier and quicker than visiting archives, the kind of artistic material research that can be done online is increasing for all artists and ex-

3 The involvement of the sonic imaginary in embassy-centred international dramas has become particularly salient since 'Embassy Reconstructed', particularly considering the role of audio recordings in the gathering and exchange of intelligence on the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

4 See Juliana Hodkinson, *Prompt, Immediate, Now / Very Restrained and Cautious* (Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 2013).

panding the use of downloadable sonic vocabularies and experimental techniques for reworking them.

Many of the speeches used in this piece were topical and recent at the time of composition, such as the voice of Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit in 2011, pleading against the unhelpfulness of US pressure to legalize the Muslim Brotherhood: ‘because when you speak about “prompt, immediate, now” — as if you are imposing on a great country like Egypt, a great friend that has always maintained the best of relationship with the United States, you are imposing your will on him.’⁵ However, some are archival, such as the moderate voice of Dag Hammarskjöld talking of the need to be ‘very restrained and cautious’ in diplomatic relations.⁶

Against the background of a classical recorded music industry, which has reduced itself largely to reenactments of historical work (proliferating recordings of a canonic repertoire), I ask myself how contemporary instrumental art music can create relations between, on the one hand, sonic and listening practices which have grown up around historical instruments and, on the other hand, an artistic form of social currency that deserves the title ‘contemporary’.

The instrumental music I constructed to surround these recorded voices aimed to parallel the diplomatic bind, full of nuances of intonation, small innuendos, and the attempt to remain benign and undramatic while also precise, with only occasional, strategically-chosen moments of rhetorical drama. The sonic relationship between the acoustic instrumental music and the speeches — in their varying recording qualities — shifts throughout the piece, with the instrumental writing initially ‘following’ the unmeasured rhetorical style of the voices, modelling instrumental sounds on the texture and rhythms of the speech. Later, the instrumental writing establishes itself as more autonomous, as a structure within which the voice samples are organized and manipulated according to musically rhythmic and timbral principles. Finally, percussive noise from a snare drum laden with

5 ‘Egyptian Foreign Minister Tells U.S. Not to Impose Its Will’, PBS NewsHour, February 2011, Youtube <https://youtu.be/TBXVHf_cIEM> [accessed 20 November 2020].

6 ‘Dag Hammarskjöld about “Quiet Diplomacy” (1955)’, Dag Hammarskjöld Project, Youtube <<https://youtu.be/2T4YrDCe5Yc>> [accessed 20 November 2020].

metal objects alternates with intakes of breath amplified naturally through the clarinet and abrasive bowing in the viola and cello. This construction provides a quasi-military accompaniment to a noise-based filtering of William Hague's 2010 speech on the erosion of British post-imperial influence in the face of globalization and the rise of other growing economies, which also expressed the adjacent need for new diplomatic strategies in defence of British interests and territories.

DEFENDING TERRITORY IN A NETWORKED WORLD

In *Defending*, bundles of various meaningful diplomatic iterations on this topic are edited so that they appear in a way to be muttered simultaneously by a gentle and persuasive cacophony of (mainly polite and articulate) voices, cascading through space more or less out of the blue, before breaking off for several minutes of silence before the next bundle of iterations. While in *Prompt*, voices were framed by chamber music and presented one by one in order to be (initially, at least) clearly intelligible, in *Defending*, there is no musicalization at play, other than the pleasure of listening to the voices' natural musicality. As the piece was installed in the atrium of the Nordic embassies' public area — a non-art and non-work space — spectators (people crossing the atrium) experience the piece in an 'non-art-listening' mode; they are on their way up, down, or across, to lunch, to informal or formal meetings or tasks. Having only the political voices as sonic material and bringing them so closely into polylogue with one another might point more directly to diplomatic rhetoric as an overarching geopolitical tool. Particularly in Europe, the building and consolidation of nations and the formation of national identities has usually been tied to the unification of language throughout a territory. The use of audio reenactment, in this case, serves to point instead to structural modes in the operations of diplomacy, keeping in mind the fact that diplomacy often works through interventions of, alternately, silence (the unspoken) and gentle iterations of dynamic situations.

THE TRAIN DEPARTING AT 4AM

Afgang 04.00 (The Train Departing at 4am) (2017) is a vocal sound-theatre piece with text and concept by director Petra Berg Holbek, reflecting on events of the night of 12 October 1943 at Elsinore Station, Denmark, when 175 Jews were held captive in a waiting room overnight before being put on a train to Theresienstadt. *Afgang 04.00* draws on testimonies by victims and witnesses — both written reports from 1943 and spoken interviews filmed many decades later — reframing the words of these accounts through the actors' voices. The piece was staged in 2017 on-site at Elsinore Station, with the audience wearing headphones and being immersed not only in the station environment but also interventional sounds from external loudspeakers and set designer Igor Vasiljev's video projections of palpitating colours. Holbek wrote text for the voice-actor recordings based on the archival reports and interviews uncovered during her research. During the development of the piece, it became clear, through Holbek's contact with the families of this group of people, that staging very personal accounts in the exact site of the historical events, in the town where many of these families still lived, might leave some individuals open to a kind of identification that could be problematic for them, even seven decades after the original events. These demands of sensitivity in the use of documentary material led Holbek to considerations of anonymity, with the text becoming increasingly fictionalized and abstracted from the original quotes as our work with the piece progressed. My task as composer was to create a relatively abstract sonic counterpart to the actors' voices. The composition was made up of vocal and instrumental music — for four singers and an accordion — and field recordings.

Not only does *Afgang 04.00* deal with a particular historical moment but the impetus for its sonic reenactment also came at a critical humanitarian moment in current affairs. Making the piece was, on all levels, an exploration of the challenge of letting difficult histories resonate in the present: more specifically, finding fitting modes of reenactment of the negotiations with sensitivity and anonymity as discussed above, as well as providing a present-day position on why and how these experiences might be incorporated in artworks today. During 2015, the year when the sudden rise in numbers of refugees

and migrants heading for Europe came to the forefront of political and media attention, Holbek held an archive residency at the Danish Institute for International Studies, researching material related to the Holocaust in Denmark. This gave added relevancy, and even urgency, to the project of imagining experiences of flight lived through by others. Yet the historical accounts from 1943 were inescapably entwined with the fate of vulnerable subjects, some of whom only related their traumatic experiences toward the very ends of their lives, after having remained silent for several decades about their childhood experiences. There was no original sonic documentation to draw on whatsoever, and the spoken words were either originally documented in paraphrased, written form or related from memory at a distance of seven decades from their original iteration. Moreover, they were originally spoken in an enclosed private sphere of captivity in which basic human rights had been infringed upon, in advance of even worse to come.

How, then, to reenact this situation? Despite graphic witness reports, there remains so much silence surrounding that night that what could not be re-heard had to be invented. Holbek's choice of how to reconstruct and represent these voices — by writing a fictional script and recording it with actors in radio-play style — gave space for my task of constructing a non-verbal sonic framework within which the recorded actors' voices could be embedded. The production was created by a larger team of artists and sound engineers from Scandinavia, Germany, and Croatia.⁷ This not only meant that a range of ethical and artistic positions coexisted in the development process with respect to the portrayal of this highly sensitive historical moment, but also that the communication between these positions, together with technical, practical, and budgetary factors, needed to be negotiated over considerable geographical and temporal distances, with translation between several languages providing further linguistic filters on the work.

7 Igor Vasiljev, set design and video; Petra Berg Holbek, text and directing; Amelia Kraigher, dramaturg; Juliana Hodkinson, composition; Andreas Borregaard and Phønix16, musicians; Kristian Hverring and Peter Weinsheimer, audio engineering, with binaural expertise from Technische Universität Berlin and Universität der Künste Berlin.

A phenomenological approach to the listening experience became an important complement to the director's work on reenactment of historical figures. In *Afgang 04.00*, the listeners' interaction with the space in its present-day form is eliminated as much as possible, with only the train platform being activated as a direct reference (the sight and sound of a real train departing marks the end of the performance). One question we had for ourselves was to what extent different physical modes of audio playback would influence what was actually communicated to listeners. *Afgang 04.00* makes use of binaural recording techniques to evoke a heightened sense of the auditive presence of absent voices within a particular space, bringing imaginary and real spaces of the listening experience into play with one another. At the same time, techniques of sonic distancing or alienation are used, such as the diffusion of the singers' voices partly through megaphones in the recording studio, as well as the use of contemporary music idioms and vocal techniques. We worked primarily within a binaural headphone paradigm, but with added surround sound in external loudspeakers for a few key effects. This hybrid construction gave us a contrast between interior and exterior that aimed to fulfill the director's desire to explore psychological states of people held under the pressure of confinement. The underlying topic of discomfort transferred in many places to influence the playback levels of the external speakers. This is one very simple method of taking sound's visceral nature to various extremes in the service of referencing historical events through techniques of aural reenactment.

THE REPETITION OF CRIMES

As Pio Abad has pointed out regarding repeated crimes committed within an ongoing paradigm, historical revision is often impeded by the grouping of a huge number of individual criminal acts under singular terms.⁸ The Holocaust is one such term. Even though the number of six million is readily attached to it, this figure counts 'only' the victims, which risks limiting the number of perpetrators and perpetrations to

8 Pio Abad, 'The Collection of Jane Ryan & William Saunders: Reconstruction as "Democratic Gesture"', in [this volume](#).

a handful of powerful individuals or orders given within a system that was designed to repeat the consequences of the orders, without blame newly attaching to those who carried them out each time.

In 1940, Denmark was more or less peacefully occupied by German forces, following an invasion that had lasted just two hours — after which the Danish government surrendered, judging that resistance was useless and hoping to work out an advantageous settlement. This Danish government stayed nominally in power, in a relationship of collaboration with the occupying forces. As the Second World War progressed, and the relationship between occupying forces, collaborationist government, and the general population hardened, one of the few courses of action that remained available to the Germans was a crackdown on Jews — both those of Danish nationality and those who had fled north as refugees from eastern Europe and the Baltic states. The plan to round up Jews was leaked a few days ahead of its implementation, and Danish history books are full of tales of civil courage on the part of ordinary Danish citizens who hid Jews, offered them refuge, or helped them to escape. On the night of the raid in October 1943, the Germans found only a few hundred Jews in Denmark, out of an estimated population of eight thousand. The main escape route was the sea to Sweden, with large and small fishing boats, rowing boats, canoes, and the regular ferry service being employed by both organizations and individuals to take Jews with and without payment across the ten-mile stretch of sea.

Because so many managed to escape, Denmark is rarely described, much less does it see itself, as a scene of Holocaust crimes. Nevertheless, five hundred people considered to be Jews were deported in four main deportations, by ship and by train, to concentration camps in Theresienstadt, Ravensbrück, and Sachsenhausen. If one defines scenes of Holocaust crimes as all the places in which crimes against humanity were committed against Jews, individually or systematically, thereby facilitating the Holocaust — such as restrictions on their freedom of movement within the country and violence directed towards them with the objective of injuring and terrorizing them — there are many places in Denmark that may be described as scenes of Holocaust crimes. Although the Gestapo bears the responsibility for initiating and executing this systematic plan, the round-up would

never have been possible without the complicity of thousands of individual Danes. These people actively facilitated the transportations by betraying neighbours and hiding places, providing vehicles, turning a blind eye to terror and violence, and carrying out orders of the Gestapo without question, all the while imagining themselves to be passive bystanders. This is the reason that it is important not only for the victims but also the witnesses to hold up the experience of one large group of people against the national narrative.

Afgang 04.00 ultimately worked with a high level of fictionalization in the reconstruction of the events of the night in question, searching for the artistic mode in which lived experience from the past could be brought to the attention of present-day listeners. The creative process explored the gap between the past that can be accessed through archives and reports and the past as it has been popularly recounted in narratives that may be resistant to some events and experiences. The licence of fiction and psychological dramatization in *Afgang 04.00* opened up a space in which the pursuit of knowledge about a specific moment in the past was permitted to slip from the chains of sanctioned historical truths and explore deep insecurities, traumas, and secrets that lie beneath all of the past's constructions.

Afgang 04.00 is a case of bringing historical events out of the past and toward the present. *Prompt* and *Defending* were cases of drawing out, through the abstraction of working compositionally with the sound of familiar voices, the historical dimension of current and recent events. All three works addressed aspects of the cultural and social reverberation of sounding art and its sounding archaeologies.

PROMPTING, DEFENDING, AND DEPARTING

The pieces discussed above explore the challenge of letting difficult histories — whether recent or far in the past — resonate in the present, and of finding fitting modes of sonic reenactment and performance. All of them involve the listener in meeting articulations of private and public memory through the medium of sounding art. Each of them posed questions of how to introduce into an artistic listening situation the words spoken by people who shaped, witnessed, or were victims of crises of humanity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This involved taking an ethically informed artistic position on the use of documentation involving people's spoken words. The positions turned out to be very different for each of the three works, but each of them appropriates others' verbal expressions — and, at times, their silences — in order to create or dismantle identification, affiliation, and influence through artistic reiteration.

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