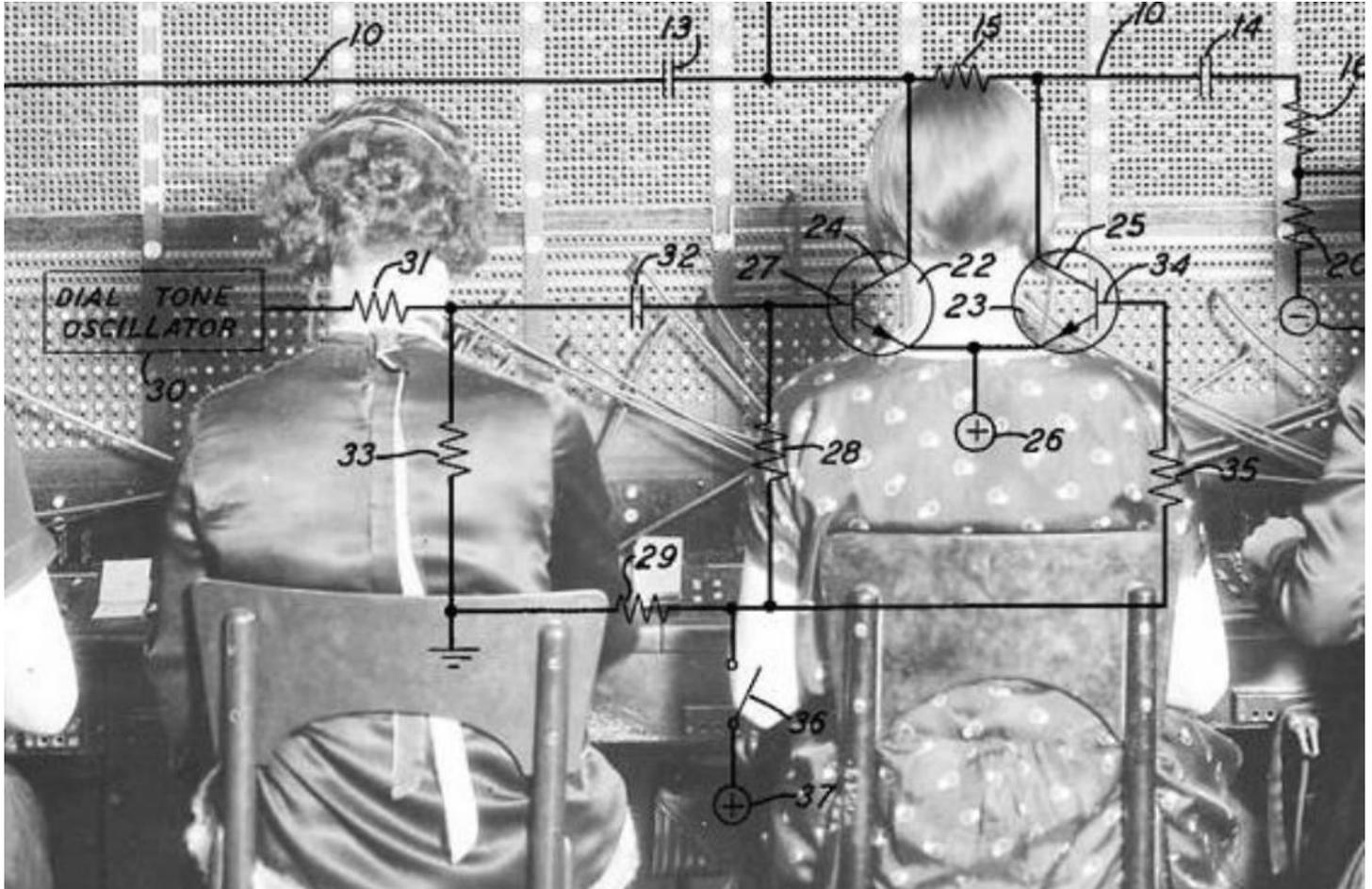


Inside the Dial Tone-Inspired Sound Art Exhibits of Aura Satz

Kevin Holmes — Dec 10 2014



The dial tone, that curious electronic sound of latent communication, is the subject of two ongoing telephonic sound art pieces by Aura Satz. The first piece is currently showing at the Hayward Gallery's Mirrorcity exhibition, which features work by London-based artists who are influenced by sci-fi, new speculative philosophies, and the internet age.

Satz's installation is called Dial Tone Operator (listen to an excerpt here) and explores the dial tone as "spatialized binaural music" while referencing the time back in the 1950s when female telephone operators were replaced by this expectant signal. "I was fascinated by women telephone operators, and in particular their role as 'speech weavers,' connecting voices and serving as a conduit for telecommunication," explains Satz. To compose the piece Satz, requested samples from Evan Doorbell, a "phone phreak," whose recordings of hours of phone noises—known as his "phone tapes"—between 1970 and 1987 document the rich telephony of the era.

Satz then weaved these sounds together with 1930s instructional films (The Coming of the Dial is one) and the voices of vocalists Elaine Mitchener and Jennifer Walshe. "There are sections where the voice seems to lose itself in the tone, and other points in which the ping-pong qualities of the layered busy tones are echoing the conversational elements of the two voices," says Satz. "The binaural piece is structured around principles of signal and interference, communication and disruption, a clear line of connection and a dense network of chaotic pluralities."



*Dial Tone Operator, Hayward
Gallery*

Visitors to the exhibition experience the piece through headphones. Satz says the installation, which features vintage telephone operator paraphernalia, evokes, "A curious interface between body and machine. These dismantled relics of telecommunication become sculptural elements which echo aspects of the spoken word."

For most of us, the dial tone itself is becoming a relic of a time when smartphones weren't ubiquitous and home and public telephones were our primary means of communication. In the 1950s the advent of the dial tone heralded the future, a machine taking over human work and a precursor to the digital age where our lives are much more integrated with computers and algorithms.

For Satz the dial tone has parallels with minimalist music—when its restructured and overlaid various patterns begin to emerge. But it's also a voice. "I wanted to suggest that there are potential voices everywhere, hiding in the electronic hum of the atmosphere, all connected in an invisible network. The continuous dial tone suggests an uninterrupted line. It's almost as if tuning into it, listening to it or singing along, you start to become part of the circuit and merge with the signal."



The second piece, a companion to *Dial Tone Operator*, is called *Dial Tone Drone*, and sits outside the Royal Academy's Burlington House entranceway in London as part of the *Telephone* exhibition there. Heard through a phone inside the "isolating wood and glass red bubble" of an iconic wooden K2 telephone kiosk (above) designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in 1924, the piece is both a conversation and a musical composition featuring experimental electronic music pioneers Pauline Oliveros and Laurie Spiegel discussing drone music in relation to the dial tone, telecommunications, and reflect on the meditative experience of listening to sustained notes.

Both composers have storied connections to the telephone: Oliveros has often performed using telephony, while Spiegel was artist in residence at Bell Labs in the 1970s. "It's a 14-minute composition which features two excerpts of music, ranging from reed instruments to voice to electronica. Laurie and Pauline's voices punctuate the music, and vice-versa, the music seems to accentuate some of the content, creating elusive crescendos and decrescendos."

The excerpts are from Oliveros' "Horse Sings From Cloud" (1975), an accordion score, and Spiegel's "Expanding Universe," composed between 1974-76 using a computer. "They each provided fascinating insights into what it means to listen to and

compose with these kinds of meditative sounds that are seemingly still but constantly evolving, and what philosophical implications this practice might have," notes Satz.

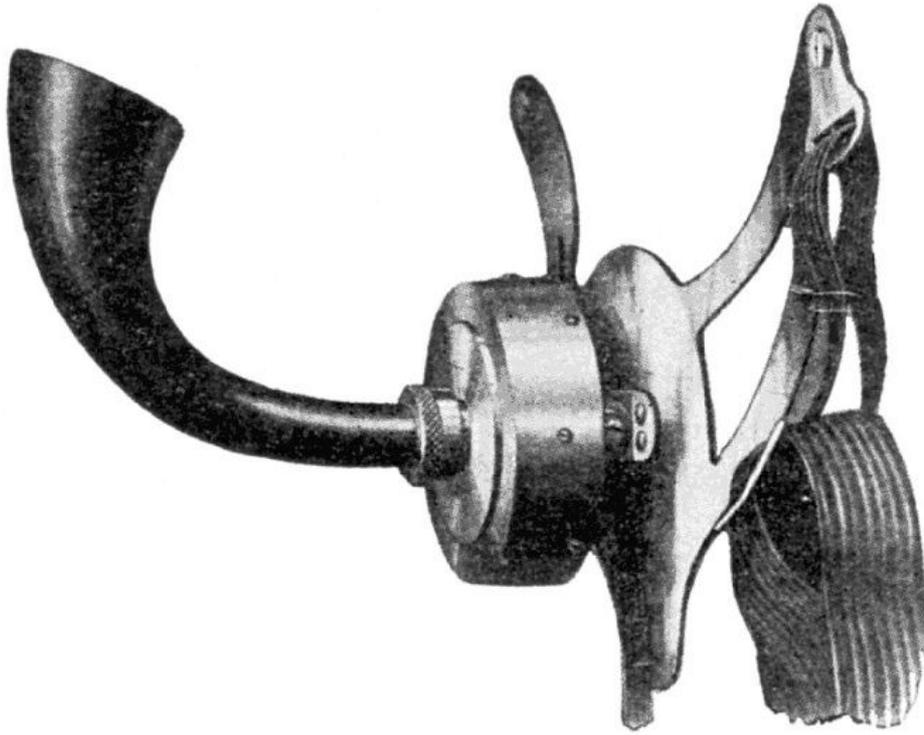


Fig. 47. Switchboard Transmitter

Both of Satz's pieces explore a sound that, in its monotony, becomes almost invisible to us, but in which the artist found a rich source of material for musical composition. "The various dial tones were very interesting to me as music." Satz says. "It's all about what we choose to listen to, where we turn our attention. Usually the dial tone is an insignificant empty sound that tells us the line is operational, we can connect two distant voices. But if it is actually listened to, it becomes a sound that signifies potential, openness, a vast humming network, and I find it becomes poetic."

Visit [Mirrorcity at the Hayward Gallery, Southbank, London](#) on now until 5th January 2015. Visit [Telephone](#) on now until 9th January 2015 at Royal Academy, London.

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