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## Listening to Éliane

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### ABSTRACT

Aura Satz describes the process of working on a series of works connected to Éliane Radigue's music and compositional relationships, including a transcript of an experimental audio documentary 'Tone Transmission', recorded during lockdown in the summer of 2020.

### KEYWORDS

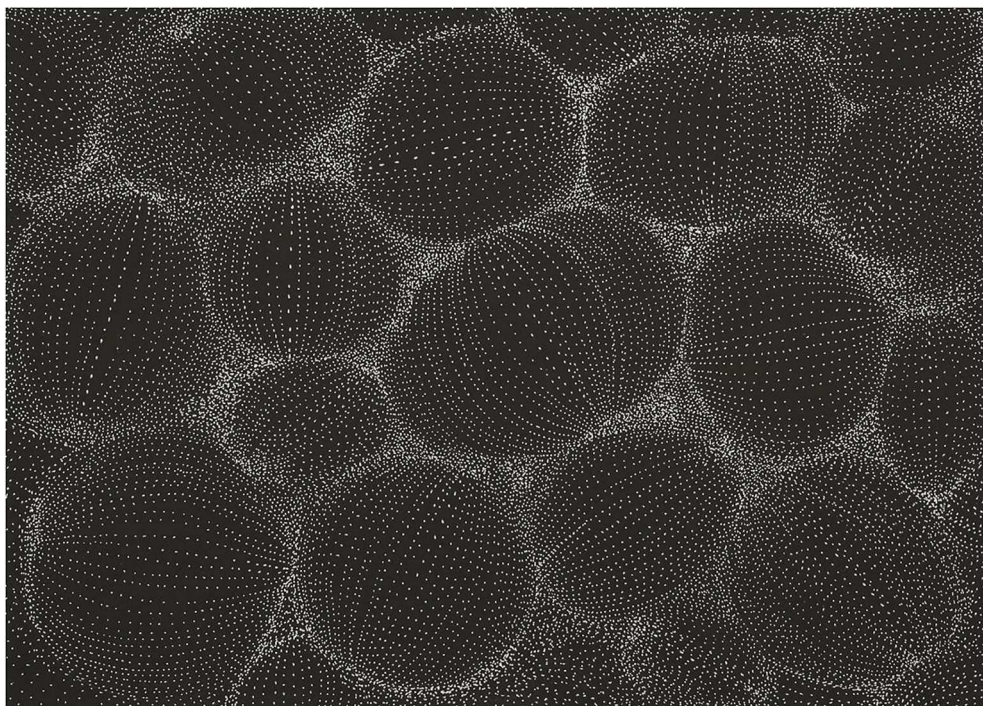
listening; transmission; recalibrate; gesture; composition; telephone; communication

Listening to Éliane Radigue's music I feel I am inside the threshold, in the space between sound appearing and disappearing, lost in the everchanging trace of a shoreline. The sound comes and recedes, filigree changes invite the listener to flow into the sound, become part of its circuit, and lose oneself in it.

I listened continuously to two albums, *Feedback Works 1969–1970*, and *Kyema, Intermediate States*, while I drew hands, in particular Éliane's hand on the dial of her ARP 2500 modular synthesiser, as well as other women composers working with electronic or electroacoustic music, such as Laurie Spiegel, Pauline Oliveros, Beatriz Ferreyra, Delia Derbyshire, Daphne Oram, Maryanne Amacher, Suzanne Ciani, Wendy Carlos, and more. This was a series of drawings entitled *She Recalibrates* (2018), and I read the hand on the frequency dial of an electronic synth as a gesture of a feedback loop between listening and recalibrating, an ear seeking out unexpected textures, modulating electricity, inventing new soundscapes, and, in turn, opening up to new ways of listening. The dial for me became an indicator of the micro-perceptual act of exploratory fine-tuned listening. My drawing hand attempted to listen through their gestures, to reveal something of that mode of sensitive touch, where infinitesimal changes profoundly transform the sound quality. The drawings rely on archival photographs, primarily from the 1960s to 1980s, where the composer is shown in a state of acute concentration, hand on the dial or control button, changing the parameter ever so slightly, fine-tuning the sound in a listening feedback loop. I see these modular synthesisers as an unstable musical instrument full of modulation and interference patterns, one that can be harnessed by a slow, intense and profound act of attunement. My drawings, framed within lenticular lenses (a technology mostly used for 3D displays or to generate the illusion of movement when viewed from different angles), create optical reflections much like those found on a CD or vinyl record, interfering with the image whilst appearing to generate a rotating beam of light from the centre that adjusts to the movement of the viewer. I wanted the drawings to shimmer into visibility and then vanish, much like

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'Tone Transmission' by Aura Satz (A4, Ink on Black Paper, 2020)

the sounds in Éliane's *Feedback Works 1969–1970*, which were made by taming a sound loop between an audio input and an audio output. There is a precarious threshold where if the microphone is too far from the speaker there is no sound, and if it is too close it is shrill and loud. Éliane managed already in these early works to oscillate within this sensitive threshold between sound and silence, which is in itself entangled with the environment beyond the microphone and the loudspeaker, inevitably informed by the distance between them as well as the acoustics of the room. Although these works don't employ a dial as such (as far as I'm aware), they do play on this fragile pulsing intertidal space that I am repeatedly drawn to in her work. The sounds sometimes expand upwards like an indistinct colony of seagulls soaring high above, other times rumble and throb, like the deep hum of a power plant, being in the vicinity of the rim of a bell after it has been rung, or inside a bolt of thunder before it breaks into sound. There is a sense of fragility and tenacity, overlaid in an intricate, infinitesimal detailed weave. Seamless flows are suddenly transformed in such a way that it is almost hard to tell whether the sound comes from the music or is being interpolated by the outside world, a passing siren or aeroplane, or one's own bodily and perceptual interference—my own internal humming, mouth closed, or the ringing stimulated in my ears. The exquisite oscillations in her music are equally invoked in the mode of reception, the way listening to it, which is dense with focal currents modulated by points of interference.

I approached Éliane to make a sound piece, what I call a 'composed conversation', during the pandemic, bringing together long-term conversations and compositional relationships with harpist Rhodri Davies and violist Julia Eckhardt. It was commissioned

by the AHRC-funded ‘Crossed Lines’ project, and hosted as a sound piece on the Science Museum’s website,<sup>1</sup> with the idea that in the future it might exist as a sound work for telephone, much like my previous piece *Dial Tone Drone* (2014), featuring Pauline Oliveros and Laurie Spiegel. I used wave transmission as a prompt to have multiple conversations about circuits of communication, drones and a compositional approach to sustained notes, interference patterns, tuning and deep listening. These were then woven together to the backdrop of excerpts of her music, as an experimental audio documentary of sorts. In these projects, I seek to get inside the ear, so to speak, to create a portrait of a certain mode of listening, and how listening plays out in composition. Recorded during lockdown via telephone and Skype calls, the piece addressed Radigue’s shift from electronic music to the recent acoustic works she has devised since 2000, and the transmission of music via conversation, mental images, living scores: non-notational sound images. Structured as a dialogic composition, the piece both documents and enacts a conversation about transmission and the circuitry of musical communication. It echoes many of the thoughts I had around the shoreline and the shimmering evanescence of traces left by water.<sup>2</sup>

Below is a transcript of the sound piece featuring the voices of Éliane Radigue, Julia Eckhardt and Rhodri Davies, with excerpts from Radigue’s electronic work *Kyema (Intermediate States)*, and acoustic works performed by Davies and Eckhart *OCCAM I* and *OCCAM IV*.

To listen to the audio version of the sound piece, scan this QR code:



Sound mix M.J. Harding. Éliane Radigue recorded with the assistance of Sam Fakouhi. Commissioned by AHRC-funded project ‘Crossed Wires’, for the Science Museum, London.

**Éliane** [00:00:00] The first thing is to be conscious of this whole vibratory field of the whole universe. Just a kind of very, very light vibration of the space, which is not already sounds that the ear can hear but which is there and that we can feel.

[00:00:45] When I make music, I am in a state of deep concentration, bound to a different kind of listening, with a great respect for the special quality of the sounds and their resonance over body, mind and spirit.

**Julia** [00:01:27] It’s very different with Éliane’s music, because I do not think of specific things that I have to keep in mind. What I’m concentrating on is the body—to be ready for what will somehow unfold by itself. I remember two things that she said often—*il faut être disponible*—she says like to be available is to be available for the musical event. The transitions are very, like the most difficult and the most beautiful, just like in life.

**Rhodri** [00:02:18] A lot of Éliane’s music has to do with crossfade, so one sound will come in and imperceptibly another sound will appear, without you realising it. All of a sudden you’re in a very different state—while the other one drops out slowly, another one might come in. So there’s always something happening imperceptibly,

and all of a sudden you're in a completely different space to where you were like five minutes earlier.

**Éliane** [00:02:59] I am mainly concerned by the articulation between the different parts of the piece, like some kind of ambiguous intermodulation, without any silence, interruption. Slowly, continuously changing, as a plant growing.

**Rhodri** [00:03:32] Éliane showed me right at the very beginning, she showed me this picture of the Hokusai wave. When rehearsing a piece, going back to that image helped really sort of focus the mind to an area of sound, I suppose. Early on, as well as the Hokusai wave, she showed me a sort of spectrum of waves, starting with, like, the resonance of the world, moving through electromagnetic micro pulsation, seismic exploration and then going through ultraviolet x ray, gamma ray.

**Julia** [00:04:14] So there's this general image of all the waves of the world of which she saw this scheme in the Museum of Natural History.

**Éliane** [00:04:26] On the largest wall above there was a long stripe showing the wavelengths from the hertz to the sun and going to the mini mini subatomic, and more than that, so. And I realised that I had a kind of vertigo in front of that. This came up into my mind like a kind of deep truth of the way the world was wavering all the time, that we were constituted of waves.

**Julia** [00:05:23] She gave me, let's say, my image, which also matched some of my memories. She said, to sort of embody this idea of all the waves of the world, I am giving you an image of a real water, the lake of Geneva.

**Rhodri** [00:05:54] So she would say, you know, there's a glacier and then you imagine the water going down the mountain and she'll explain the sort of colour and the depth and the qualities of the water, the temperature.

**Éliane** [00:06:18] The ocean with a large wave of the tide and the small little shivering on a beach, this was what I would call the main spirit for all this series of work called *OCCAM Ocean*. It is clear that a piece related to a little source coming out of bubbles of water, going to a river to the sea, will not be expressed the same way as all the torrent of waves of the ocean.

**Julia** [00:07:19] She has been comparing all music as a cut out of all the waves. Everything is made from waves, this table is made from waves, my voice is made from waves. This telephone conversation travels via electromagnetic waves, light is made from waves. And when I play, then this is somehow, I sort of, it's like a little frame where I can make visible or audible what happens anyway.

**Éliane** [00:08:17] The transition between electronic music and acoustical works, it didn't change that much because I was looking for a way of getting *into* the deep nature of the sounds.

**Julia** [00:08:51] Éliane says that the music she's making now with the musicians couldn't have been made without her working with electronic sounds.

**Éliane** [00:09:14] Transmission has always been a goal with music since the first chanting of monks to the sophistication of European notation.

**Rhodri** [00:09:28] Éliane transmits her pieces to us and these pieces emerge between us. Much of it comes from being in the room with her and through conversation and, of course, since Éliane doesn't travel anymore, through telephone calls.

**Julia** [00:10:07] It's not as if she's not giving us instructions, but they are just really different instructions than traditionally we are given as musicians.

**Rhodri** [00:10:28] In a way, we're taking these sound waves and converting them somehow into these pieces and performing them in, you know, many different parts of the world which she is unable to attend anymore.

**Julia** [00:10:51] Éliane's music is a lot about communicability, about being together, about osmosis, about exchange.

**Éliane** [00:11:14] With the electronical sounds, I have been very much alone. But with the musicians, it's a very intense and profound sharing of what we decide together.

**Rhodri** [00:11:41] It's a focus on a shared listening, if you're playing an ensemble piece, but even if I'm playing the solo pieces, it's a shared listening, in that there's a room full of people and also you're responding to the actual room. Sometimes I might tune the harp because it might resonate more specifically in one room.

**Éliane** [00:12:09] When the structure is made, we can absolutely forget about the image, just like a score, we don't need a score to listen to any music.

**Julia** [00:12:33] The score is in me now, in myself. It's not something I'm going to quickly forget ... and I think that Éliane doesn't know the score anymore. She has really completely passed it on to me, but also because it's one score out of many possible scores, so it's not really important that she remembers precisely this score, because anyway, these possible scores are inscribed in the waves of the world.

**Rhodri** [00:13:26] All of these pieces interconnect and piece together in a fascinating way, a sort of modular combinational balancing of tuning whilst you're playing, and part of that is the piece, in a way, the interplay of getting these tiny little fluctuations of sound and rhythm and beating and harmonics and overtones to dance, I suppose. There is a family of us who are sharing these experiences and yes, we're transmitting Éliane's music. We're also kind of transmitting our knowledge, which is shared with Éliane. But also I think it's one big continuum. It's embodied in us all, I suppose.

**Éliane** [00:14:27] Clouds coming from the ocean going after to rain and then to sources, and sources to river, river to go back to the ocean and all that—it's very large and

generous, all the subject matter. We are bathing in this vibratory field ... and we don't know the listener, being involved in saying 'So where we are now, are we at the source, or are we at this part, or are we floating in this ocean of sounds?' Ocean in the sense of the vibration that they create.

**Julia** [00:15:47] The pieces in the beginning are not so long, you know, you try out things and so, but the more you go into them, the more you give them time. They also get really longer and longer and they develop their own time somehow by themselves. It's not even necessary to say it should be longer or so, but it's growing, simply, very naturally.

**Rhodri** [00:16:26] Very quickly, working with Éliane, we came to this parallel movement, so bowing the harp, which is a sort of an unorthodox technique for the harp, I suppose—because normally I usually pluck, pluck the strings—so that the bows are moving in the same direction and back together at the same time and produce this really rich overtone. A lot of the other work was working on the detail then of kind of mapping the instrument, so you're sort of moving up the harp logically—so one sound leads to another, sound leads to another sound, quite organically, as an osmosis.

**Éliane** [00:17:28] Drone has never been an end by itself or my main purpose, it's just the means against others to change slowly the proportions of these constituents creating a slow endless changing of this initial state of the sound to another one, but almost unnoticeable on the way.

**Julia** [00:18:13] My score is very simple, it's just this path I'm going on the string. I know where I go, I know a little bit what will happen, but I'm not completely in control. My instrument is the viola. I have tuned the instrument in this case in such a way that the lowest string is even much lower. And I start the piece really practically on the bridge where there is a chance that there's sort of no sound, only noise. And so from this point, I very very slowly come on the part where the string sounds and I move the bow very slowly to the end.

**Rhodri** [00:19:18] This strong connection that we have, you know, I'm often, if the time zones permit, we often, we phone Éliane before a concert. It kind of helps reinvigorate or refresh sometimes the, you know, the pieces, just hearing Éliane's voice.

**Julia** [00:19:57] It's very fascinating to observe slow changes. It reminded me of when I, as a child, would try to seize the moment or be aware of the moment, I would fall asleep. The next morning I always thought, oh, I missed it again. And this is a bit like this music is also. That when you want to somehow be aware of when it happens, and then it has already happened.

**Éliane** [00:20:43] Concerning the beginning and the end, in fact, it's very simple: fading in and fading out, considering the beginning, silence, slowly moved by light vibration becoming sounds, and at the end, going back to silence.

**Julia** [00:21:15] I somehow never have the feeling that before my piece, there's nothing. And also after the piece, it's not as if music stops or something, it's just that this little frame is then over.

## Notes

1. <https://crossedlines.co.uk/tone-transmissions/>.
2. Since then Éliane, Rhodri, Julia and I have been developing a new project which builds on the exchanges in this initial piece. It will not be a film 'about' but rather a film that is 'with', or inside, the music, set to a score which we are each given. As such it continues the *OCCAM Ocean* series but expands to become a film that operates within the logic of score transmissions.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

*Aura Satz's* work encompasses film, sound, performance and sculpture. She has performed, exhibited and screened her work internationally, including Tate Modern, Tate Britain, Hayward Gallery, Sydney Biennale 2016, NTT InterCommunication Center, Tokyo; High Line Art, MoMA, New York; Kadist, San Francisco; and Sharjah Art Foundation. She has presented solo exhibitions at the Wellcome Collection, London; the Hayward Gallery project space, London; John Hansard Gallery, Southampton; Dallas Contemporary, Texas; George Eastman Museum, Rochester; ARTIUM, Basque Museum of Contemporary Art. Satz has worked collaboratively with a wide range of composers, vocalists and musicians.

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