

on sound carpet / insecurities / shifting attention / connecting through silence / what is silence

with **Marlene Aigner**

09 may 2021 [h]

an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Marlene Aigner, Matteo Zoccolo – 09 may 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html

MA: Maybe I can explain a bit what we did on Friday, on our last hörraum session. It was only the second time I joined, there was also Julia, Lynn and you. We did that exercise already once in an improvisation class, where everyone is lying on the floor producing a ‘sound carpet’ using the voice and sounds that you can create through breathing. It was interesting for me to do it with a small group, I knew it could work since I already did it with my students. Yeah, when I was leading the exercise, I felt some pressure or tension. I didn’t feel as free to explore it as I did other times when I did it with other groups. I don’t know whether it was because I didn’t know the other two so well, or because of the dynamics in between us. After this experience, I understand that exposing my voice is something very intimate for me, and it’s something that can make me feel anxious at times.

MZ: Um...

MA: And this is also related to what we were speaking about traces. We recorded the experience, and then listened to it right after. And when I was listening to it, I could enjoy it much more, the whole experience suddenly felt better, because I couldn’t hear my anxiousness in the recording. And before that, I did feel a lot of insecurity. But it also became better after a while, and now I’m only speaking about how it felt for me. Afterwards it was interesting to hear what the other said, and how it was a good and interesting experience for them. At the time, my insecurity kind of shaped the whole experience into something different, less enjoyable.

MZ: Do you mean less enjoyable for you or for the others?

MA: I was worried that it would also be less enjoyable for the others. And I don’t know, but from what they said afterwards, it didn’t seem like it was less enjoyable for them. I think you also told me that you didn’t notice that.

MZ: I definitely didn’t notice that you were nervous about it.

MA: This is crazy for me. At that moment it was so present, I almost couldn’t think about anything else.

MZ: You were hiding it very well, I think! And I definitely enjoyed doing it more than listening to it.

MA: OK.

MZ: For me, the recording was even diminishing the value of the experience.

MA: I think for me, it made a big difference because when it was over, I didn’t feel this anxiety anymore. And then I was able to actually listen, because while doing it, especially at the beginning, it was hard to listen.

MZ: Um, it's true. I was definitely more concentrated on my own voice than on the mix of our voices. I tried to listen to it but knowing that there was a microphone that was recording, my focus shifted to myself and what I could do with my mouth, which sounds to produce, so that in the recording it sounds good. I mean, probably it was not conscious. Now I think about it and reflect on it. There was definitely a pressure for me, and this pressure didn't allow me to properly listen to what the others were doing.

MA: But maybe, it would actually be good to repeat this exercise several times. I think you get more comfortable each time you do it, and you might gain new things if you manage to really listen, rather than focusing on what you're doing.

MZ: That's a good idea.

MA: But this is also something I felt when we did the silence thing, back in April in a hörraum session I joined. There were quite a lot of people inside your living room, all in silence. I felt like many of us were very within ourselves, of course listening to what is happening around, but also listening inside ourselves. I was also observing a lot. It felt like we were doing it together, but everyone was doing it on their own, somehow.

MZ: Maybe next time we can do it holding hands.

MA: Yes... That time we were really spread out in the room, everyone chose a spot where they felt comfortable, it was almost staged. And I was also wondering regarding this experience, what would happen if you do this out of a normal situation during a hörraum session? What happens when suddenly someone gives a sign and then there's silence? Maybe the relations between each other are more present, you know?

MZ: Hm. Silence as interruption...

MA: Yeah. I was just thinking about a way to stay connected, the same way we are connected in our conversation, but just in silence.

MZ: Yes, I don't think that silence necessarily brings a lack of communication.

MA: Yeah, but I think that how we did it, spreading out in the space, it did break it.

MZ: Exactly. Maybe we could try keeping the structure of the circle, so that we are equally looking at each other, facing everyone who sits in the circle. Then I think it will radically change.

MA: Yes, I think this could be very interesting.

MZ: Actually, that's what we did in the first try out. We were sitting in a circle, staying 15 min in silence. You could really grasp the connections between couples who were non verbally communicating, looking or staring at each other, laughing, changing their facial expression and posture. And afterwards we were discussing a lot about it, everybody noticed this communication on a silent level. And the question came naturally: what is silence?

MA: I think there are different kinds of silence...

MZ: Like this one?

MA: I mean, you could also argue that silence doesn't exist, but then again, we still use that word to describe a certain absence of something. I don't know, for example, I'm just sitting here alone hearing birds, and I would not say that there is silence. But if I was here with someone having a conversation, if we'd stop talking, I could say that was silence.

MZ: Cool example. It's amazing how the perception of silence changes together with the context.

MA: Yeah.

MZ: I was also experiencing a sort of unbearable silence, before the exercise started. It felt like 10 min.

MA: Yeah, I remember.

MZ: And I didn't know what to expect, I was waiting for you to lead the exercise.

MA: I know, it was also unbearable for me because I knew that people expected me to do something, but I couldn't find the right moment or the right way. I really felt that the sound that was supposed to come out was somehow stuck in my throat. I felt very stuck at that moment.

MZ: Oh...

MA: And then I said that it was hard to start without preparation, also because we haven't used our voices in front of each other before. It felt scary. But actually, in the beginning I could also enjoy that silence, it was actually not silence. I could hear our bodies making sounds. First of all, you hear the breathing of others, someone's swallowing something, then you hear somebody's digestion...

MZ: Yes, that was me!

MA: But I was wondering, how would this experiment work, if we would do it in a different setting, for example, looking at each other?

MZ: Yeah, we can try.

MA: I mean, on one hand, it's a nice thing to be able to feel the floor, and that you can just send the sounds into the room above you, and not towards each other. This is actually the thing, to create the sound above us. And if you would be standing in a circle, we would send the sounds towards each other. Which is different.

MZ: And what happens if the people are in a row, sending the sound all in the same direction?

MA: This could also be. It's maybe similar to the sound carpet.

MZ: I still think that next time we should do it without the microphone.

MA: Yeah, I think so. Even though it was nice to listen to it afterwards. But maybe yes, we could be more in the moment and focus on it. Maybe we didn't feel like we had to focus so much on the overall sound that was going on, because we knew that we would be able to listen to it afterwards.

MZ: Let's try that when you come back.