HARK Listening Research: Brief Background Note.

I work as a sensory anthropologist in the area of sound/music, vision in nature and the built environment. I began this work about 15 years ago in a study of ‘silence’ as the ground of practices of listening, particularly in religious settings. This ethnographic evocation of silent practices can be found in my doctoral thesis “The Place that Words Come from…” I then broadened out my exploratory research to encompass listening practices in a number of domains in particular in the natural world and the built, acoustic environment. I also began to explore the relationships between listening and seeing – sounds/music and images. I wrote a multi-disciplinary literature review called ‘Ways of Listening”. The HARK Listening Research project is located in the Center for Cosmopolitan Studies in the Dept. of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews.

Background texts, reports on project work and a Three Year Progress Report can can be accessed on my website [HARK.org.uk](http://hark.org.uk/). The website is being refurbished and will be back on-line soon. There are briefly, three drivers for the work:

First our belief that imaginative engagement with the natural world, and the world we have made, as an aesthetic experience, directly contributes to our ethical engagement of stewardship of that world. We believe that an art-works such as the events and pieces we have created can complement and deepen didactic learning about our being-in-the-world and more topically concerning climate change and new green futures. There is increasing empirical evidence that this is the case.

Second that because the art-work invites a perceptual gaze, listening, (in)attention/reverie which precedes a cognitive interpretation of images and sounds we activate our *senses* in the rich process of *sense-making* as we move from perception (noticing along the way, reflexively, how we apply our frames of interpretation) to create meaning. Our (green) ethical action is rooted thereby in the body, its senses and a sense of belonging – this world is my world, and our world our home. This aesthetic process of engaging fully with an art-work of this kind exemplifies this mode of knowing, deepening our being-in–the world by simply ‘beholding’, and thereby sustaining our energies as we seek to create better futures. We can appreciate the glory of the world and face the challenges we have created in what we have made with it in tis way. This taps the source of our groundedness in nature to engender an empowering narrative.

Third, these modes of knowing are ludic, they are not like play they are play – creative serious play. The spaces that the art-work creates are therefore also participatory, an invitation to play, so people are encouraged to bring sounds, voices, instruments to the spaces we create and take part. They may also formally use the basic structures (video and soundtrack) to create their own artwork on these themes with other elements such as narrative, poetry and discussion.

Icome from the phenomenological tradition of Merleau-Ponty and the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. A full bibliography of my sources and influences can be found on the website. I am exploring the perceptual and cognitive aspects of embodied resonance with sound/music/images in certain acoustic environments. This entails both making sound/music and being immersed in it. This bodily resonance and the various ways in which we listen I theorise as interpretive play. These sensory modes of knowing are aesthetic and ludic. I therefore design events which enable us to explore these features.

I have found that the ways of listening that auditors employ have a range and repertoire, and give rise to creative responses which can be expressed and shared in groups and critically re-presented in different media. This process of one art-work giving rise to another is called ekphrasis.

So HARK explores the ways in which when we make or listen to sounds/music we experience ‘perceptual transfigurations’ in our interpretations of our sensory experience (mood, feeling, bodily resonance etc) and the way this opens up ways in which our experiences and our sense of creativity can arise. I have designed a number of HARK Projects and Events:

1. We created an **Ethnography of Listening** with 5 groups (total 60 people) who all listened and talked about a piece of music (Photography, a 4 movement piece for 12 strings by Errollyn Wallen). We then worked with the listeners to examine their discussions which had been recorded.  We discovered convergent clusters of metaphors, images and symbols generated by the listeners and worked with them, dialogically, to write their ‘poem’ of the music. As the ethnographer I then wrote the ‘poem’ as a spoken libretto into the time-signature of the music and superimposed it on the music using the live speaking voices of two opera singers. We then performed the music with the composer as a triptych: as music then with the poem/libretto and then again as music. It was a remarkable creative expression of listening, music transformed into words and returned to engage with the music in performance. This project was written up in an article and presented at conferences and is available on the website. This project established the nature of ekphrasitic practice that is how engagement with art-works (aesthetic experience) can engender further art-works (creativity).

2. We have explored the sounds and resonances of the natural/material world in a **Soundings (Sondage**) event. Here I mined a wide range of the geological series of rocks in Scotland with the help of my colleagues in geological sciences. The rock series went back 400million years. The thesis was that we see the light of stars may millions of light years after its origin and we wanted to sound and resound the stones to see how their sonic disclosures could be expressed as creative art. So I built a Lithophone where I hung the stones. Then I experimented by hitting them with various metals. I then created a group of 60 people in a spiral shape with 15 speakers around them. I asked a percussionist from Basel (Alex Waber) to work with the stones for one hour of introduction. Then I introduced him to my digital acoustic composer who would in real time respond to what he played. I gave then1 hour to get to know each other and then we conducted the listening event. I introduced a sound meditation and then the two musicians had an improvised sound conversation. The sounds are enormously evocative of the story of these stones and fragments of our earth. We hear the birth of the landscape in sound and its cracking and folding. So again we show the creative transfiguration in listening between the material world of stone through the engagement by two artists, and the earth discloses itself to us.

3. I constantly seek acoustic spaces that allow for new experiences of sound/music. One such is a large empty and disused Silo which I have permission to use as my sound laboratory. It is enormous - I can get 100 people around its base inside!. It has a 13 second resonance/echo which makes it an extraordinary space for exploring aspects of presence, breathing, sounds of all kinds, co-presence and ways of making sounds. We, my HARK Jazz Collective (Saxes, cello, guitar, voices and singing bowl) are making various recording in experimenting with the space. We will run and event this winter by inviting other players to come and join us in improvising. It is not necessary to be musically able, people bring any sounds they like, the idea is to ‘play at finding ones voice’. I will send you several of the recordings. In the 3 seconds that your sound will ‘live’ you can place onto it or side it many other sounds. Time is slowed down enormously. A conversation in sound can take forever or be built up into a vertical harmonic structure into or across which all kinds of sound objects can be dragged or placed. Here we can experiment by exploring how it feels (the sensory aspects) of performing and also the way in which we articulated that experience. The Silo is a remarkable sonic space to occupy. The sound recording s of these sessions are available from me on request.

4. In working with both sound/music and images I began by making what I call **Soundscape Haiku.** These are short videos typically about 4 minutes long.

They are intended to frame a natural scene, and to maintain attention to the unfolding nature of what can be seen. They are shot always in one shot with no edits. They are intended to portray the attention of a bird or small animal. They usually focus on a static scene which has its potential for movement and change. The viewer is invited to rest with the image, to become absorbed and to begin to be (im)patient and find their (in)attention moving in the frame as matters of depth become figural. An awareness of our need for narrative drive and certain expectations of denoument may become available. I add sounds to these videos which is acousmatic, that is ‘in’ the pictured event, and also sounds that are generated by me from other sources. I work with a video editor (Aasta Eik-ness) and also with a digital/acoustic composer (Nick Virgo) on the sound tracks. Currently I am beginning a new raft of these Soundscape Haiku for use on social media (Instagram and Vimeo).

5.The large project that I am working on at present is: **Extinction: Six Atmospheres.** This is a 1½ hour multi-media piece exploring aspects of exile and migration. It is structured in 6 audio visual Atmospheres: Exile; Wayfaring; Water Language I; Sacrifice; Water Language II; and Hiraeth . I am working with a number of artists:: Roberto Versluys, and Evan Dim guitarists from Chile and Canada from the Royal Scottish Conservatoire; with Aasta Eik-ness from EikCaffery Creative; with a digital acoustic composer Dr. Nick Virgo on the sound layers; with the HARK Jazz Collectice; and with Gabrielle Weis-Buch, dancer and Elie Ossipovich, Viola de Gamba. The video work has been completed from footage that I have filmed over the last 5 years. I have also gathered the sounds and am editing them with the video. I have written 6 guitar pieces which will be played live on top of the audio-visual material. Some of this live music will be used for improvisiaion by the HARK Collective using motifs from my pieces. I hope to have the first performance at the Royal Scottish Conservatoire in February 2020 and three of the Atmospheres will be preformed at the HARK Event at the Silo in April 2020. By the above performers. Here again I am working with different media, and seeking relationships between them and adding the live element of creative improvisation.

6. The **HARK Silo Week** will take place in the Cupar Silo in March/April 2020. This will include **Acoustic Adventures** when pupils and students may join the HARK Collective to explore improvisation in ensemble in the amazingSilo acoustic space. There will be a ‘work in progress’ performance of Extinction on the Saturday evening and Eik-Caffery Creative will be filming the event to include in a documentary of the work of HARK.

**If you are interested in this work and would like to know more please contact:**

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