

The Politics of the Musical Situation: A Response to Marina Rosenfeld

Julie Beth Napolin, Marina Rosenfeld

On March 4, 2016, at the Graduate Institute of Design, Ethnography and Social Thought (GIDEST) at the New School, a group of scholars and artists gathered with Marina Rosenfeld for a seminar titled "Surface Species: Playback and the Object," to discuss her work and thought. Rosenfeld presented a series of recent works and discussed them. She also shared excerpts from a then-forthcoming *Bomb* magazine interview ("Marina Rosenfeld by Tristan Shepherd," Fall 2016). This text is a compilation of Napolin's responses to Rosenfeld's articulations as she presented them in the GIDEST seminar, an ongoing bi-monthly public meeting that focuses on long-standing social questions that drive new design forms. While dialogic in form, the essay is not a transcript, but rather gives a sense of the issues discussed in the seminar.

I've always thought about music as a kind of living practice, but also as an archaic one. Its mathematics and ritual objects migrate from context to context—and have always done so—and it's always in danger of being instrumentalized for various ends—commercial, disciplinary, what have you. Whenever I'm conceiving a new work, or simply approaching the stage, I do it with an absolute freedom that musicians know all too well, and I'm interested in beginning from the moment right before instrumentalization, the moment when the musical situation itself is revealed as having a politics and a contour of exclusion, but also a sense of possibility—of aspiration, grounds for dissent, new configurations of bodies, or the reification of existing ones. I see my practice in broad terms as investigating this moment: Okay, music is going to be made here. How are we going to do it? We are enacting the idea of music before we ever make any. It seems fair to ask, whose pleasure is at stake at that moment? Who is it for? Is anyone listening? Even in recording, for me there is the problem—one that I like—of how to connect this strange object—let's call it a "sample"—to its use value as a tool and a material. How do I make it an instrument of memory and mediation? The dub plates that I've used all these years, for instance, operate for me as a kind of model of this problem. I appreciate how dumb they are and their failure to preserve what is inscribed upon them. I see this as

a kind of resistance. — Marina Rosenfeld^[1]

Julie Beth Napolin:

In a fundamental way, your practice is an engagement with politics. We usually understand politics as having a certain message or platform. But part of the politics of your aesthetic engagement, as you define it here, has to do with the nature of beginning, but also the sense of pause that you prioritize in your artistic practice. You isolate the moment just before instrumentalization where the musical situation itself is revealed qua situation. There, bodies are configured, contoured, excluded, included, and share aspirations for other ways of being. I'm reminded of Hannah Arendt's critique of the emphasis on mortality in modern philosophies of being. Instead, she privileges what she calls "natality," a sense that we arrive in the world as newcomers. Something of this new-coming is re-dramatized each time we appear before each other and start something new. We share a space of appearance. Your notion of the musical situation being revealed as politics is powerfully related to this space of appearance, which by necessity, has contours, limits, "exclusions" and "aspirations." In that way, aesthetics and politics share this most fundamental ground. If we are enacting music before music is made, then in a basic sense, you are inviting us to think through the political enactments upon which the sonorous event is premised, i.e. the orientation of the body to space and to a real or imagined listening other. In the way you think through samples, but also resonant spaces, there seems to be a productive tension between natality and mortality, or newness and memory as mediation.

Marina Rosenfeld (describing her material practices):

...I'm thinking of Hito Steyerl here, the idea of the degraded, duplicated images she theorizes in "[In Defense of the Poor Image](#)." I have to think more about how the 'poorness' of my materials and the emphasis I place on their circulation, which frames them in terms of a cultural-economic afterlife. I

identify with the idea she proposes that their condition signals the real, the real conditions in which they propagate.

...Some DJs in the old scene used to talk about shamanism—enacting a sort of sacred communication between all these deceased musics, making their ghosts communicate. For me it was more like looking for form or borrowing form from the daily experience of my own sensibility. If I looked closely enough at it, I could hear it—something like that! I always had very little bracketing around my musical mind. An awareness about music, both internal and outside, was omnipresent for me. It was important to ground my practice there at some level, but also to produce a bracket, some kind of limit, I later developed more specific strategies to put sound into a particular kind of inscribed space that had the level of complexity, delicacy or subtlety that I needed.

...In recent works like *Free Exercise*, which in its initial production was a work for an orchestra--actually, a naval military band--distributed through the linked galleries of the Bergen Kunsthall in 2014, I'm using live musicians, real players, instead of records. I think placing the majority of them at a remove of one, two or three rooms from where the audience was seated did in fact sometimes produce an impression of recorded music, even though you could see them playing live through a chain of doorways. This emphasized its sample-like aspect. It certainly mediated the sound, which became blurred as it approached from afar, with all the disturbance the building and the scenario itself could muster. Earlier works for live players, going all the way back to my early all-girl guitar orchestras, also tried to do things like locate amps along a vector so that the audience would feel compelled to move around, or to feel dissatisfied, perhaps, that they couldn't take it all in. There was no sweet spot.

...I feel like, in all the blur and the remove and the reflection and distortion and the different acoustic phenomena that reveal themselves when you really deal with the ways a room or site distorts the music as it is happening, you are listening to an ontological problem, a problem of memory and presence. You are aware of yourself, where you

are. You can try to harness this phenomenon. Here, I am thinking about some of my works for choirs, such as *Teenage Lontano* (2008), where the sort of brutal stasis of the staging of the teenagers (lined up under a row of brilliant lights and a column of downward facing loudspeakers) was contradicted by the almost magic-seeming complexity of how the sound interacted with the resonance and vastness of the site [of the Park Avenue Armory], bouncing back at the audience from all sides, even though they could clearly see the sound source located in front of them. I think this instance, and other stagings of this work in similarly immense sites was a moment I can point to where the ear finally had an equal footing to the eye—to mix a metaphor— because you could see where the music was coming from, but your body, your ear, told you otherwise. Your full complement of senses was required to make sense of the situation.



[Link to Video: Marina Rosenfeld - Teenage Lontano - 2008 Whitney Biennial](#)

(Marina Rosenfeld - *Teenage Lontano* - 2008 Whitney Biennial)

Marina Rosenfeld:

...In some ways my idea is also the opposite of the historical idea of the acousmatic, where listening is construed in a binary relation to sight and knowledge. My relationship to sound is [such] that it is always already simultaneously discursive and abstract; that's a given for me. It is productively compromised. So I'm composing or compiling sounds and situations in tandem.

...Music requires you to perceive form over time instead of at once. This is one of the key registers of composition for me, as well as in improvisation: how listening to the room you are in, the sound you are making and layering is perceived chordally. In sound you don't necessarily get a new, third color if you mix two colors, you get simultaneity and still perceive difference. You can move around inside it. Listening is not actually frontal, or declarative. Where you go with your ear is in part voluntary, and it has a cost. Things can be heard, and also not heard; sounds are subject to erasure and loss. There is a politics and a grammar.

Julie Beth Napolin:

I could not agree more with the emphasize on politics insofar as it is inherent to the act of listening, an idea that my work is currently revolving around.^[2] I share a frustration with the emphasis on the idea of the acousmatic, in part because its history in experimental music--the sound object--has meant suspending or "bracketing" (in phenomenological terms) problems of the politics of listening, particularly along raced and gendered lines. The boundaries of experimental music are constantly policed along these lines. One of your collaborators, George Lewis, for example, has called attention to the fact that jazz was never really admitted into the experimental tradition, the distinction between improvisation and experimentation being a raced one. I'm also thinking of your work as a composer in the live performance installation of Ralph Lemon's *Scaffold Room* (2014), which is so much about the musical layeredness of racial and sexual space and time.



[Link to Video: Okwui Okpokwasili from Ralph Lemon's Scaffold Room at The Kitchen \(November 3, 2015\)](#)

(Okwui Okpokwasili from Ralph Lemon's Scaffold Room at The Kitchen. November 3, 2015.)

Julie Beth Napolin:

Lemon's piece moves through the embodied, yet technologically mediated, history and future of Transatlantic and Black Atlantic sound space, particularly its coordinates in women's bodies. In the corner of the scaffold room on the stage, a record player sits; later, a woman's voice endlessly screams and cries from a small, tinny speaker on the ground; the two performers (April Mathis and Okwui Okpokwasili) act as channels or mediums, as if their bodies are host to the vibratory residue of history itself. In that performance, the acousmatic was activated towards a totally different end than we usually conceive, not to purify the sound object of its discursive and contextual entanglements, but to interrogate the audible and visible limits of the sexed and raced body-- that limit was performatively enacted and tested. The screaming voice in the speaker was Mathis' own, as she writhed next to it. The pre-recorded voice was a matter of performative necessity--she could not physically scream night after night. But that simple gesture of putting a hysteric voice in a small box next to a woman's body (let's call it an alongside-of-voice), its ostensible "original" source now disowned or displaced, was powerful. (Later in discussion, the point was raised by a seminar participant that we lack a vocabulary to discuss "sound itself"; my point here is the exact opposite. There is a very rich vocabulary that descends from experimental music. What we lack is a vocabulary

for the relation of listening and politics, and Rosenfeld's work helps me to articulate it. As a category, "sound itself" is politically neutral^[3]).

In reflecting on the emphasis on the musical situation just before the moment of animation, but also the sense of listening to the space and asking what it gives, I also want to highlight what I take to be a feminist element in your praxis. While feminist manifestoes have played an important role in your work, I'm thinking here of someone like Pauline Oliveros who has explicitly defined her work and the space it supports as "female."^[4] I don't make this link this because both of you are women, but because of a shared attention to space and its embodied possibilities. In particular, "[Sonic Meditations](#)" emphasize what I might call the interstices of praxis. These interstices represent the same contours you describe in the power of beginning-- finding in the musical situation a site to prolong, draw out, and inhabit over and against the notions of activity and production. You speak of listening to the room. I'm reminded of how Oliveros invites the listeners/performers to try to hum one note in unison; she doesn't indicate who should begin or who should end, and the music as process is seeking together the contours of beginning and ending, but also seeking unison, not as a form to be determined in advance and then maintained, but as a shape, an embodied search in real time. In another mediation (also recently performed at the Armory), each person makes a tone, but also listens to the tones made by others in effort to meet or imitate it. You send a tone out, and it comes back to you in the voice of an other. Parts of the room will become silent for a time, while others get activated, and the making of sound composes the fluctuating contours of the group, which is no longer ontologically grounded in inclusion and exclusion. The group, rather than a boundary, has a shape.

This material and fluctuating shape makes me think of your orchestral works, but also, and perhaps more unexpectedly, the role of the playback object itself. This object has a surface and thus an implied limit. It is what you call "dumbly declarative." As a dumb object it is supposed to be merely intermediary, just as space is supposed to be the mere intermediary between music and its

listener. But you also locate in the surface a model of the problem of memory and mediation. I think it's also a model for investigating musical and political enactments that are both prior to and between moments of music itself. I say this because you hold on to this thing that is supposed to be thrown away, that hosts and is nonessential. You also describe a love of decay and destroyed objects and the "poorness" of your materials; decay and delicacy are not terms that often come up in these seminars on design. Here we might also locate a feminist aesthetics and politics, particularly in light of what you describe as the material or "real conditions" in which sounds propagate. The dumbly declarative object, like space itself, is also porous; it can't distinguish between what is proper to itself and what is outside itself. Propagation in this sense must be radically opposed to transmission as an authoritative and phallic model. The surface object picks up and absorbs the material conditions of enunciation rather than preserving the fidelity and ideality of the message. I think it's not an accident that we speak of sexual fidelity but also audio fidelity. Each playback alters potential and, more profoundly, distorts what is proper to the object to the extent that it sheds its ontological primacy. In this way, I locate also a queerness or androgyny to the sexual politics of playback. The sexual politics of playback refuse to discard the intermediary. (Here, the director of GIDEST, Hugh Raffles, clarified my comment in the following terms, that the sounds of Marina's work are themselves sexed. That is absolutely my point. We can think about this idea along several lines, sexual practices and forces, as well as sexual difference, and the host of questions these terms introduce in their tension and relation).

You refuse to privilege the more fully developed and permanent object playback is supposed to enable and erect. In other words, there is a latent connection here between the new configurations heralded by the musical situation itself (in its "contours" of exclusion, dissent, and aspiration) and the potentiality qua potentiality of the playback object. In other words, potentiality is valued above actuality.

I want to fasten on the power of surface in your practice, not only in the dub plates, but also in a

piece like Sheer Frost Orchestra (1996), the all-girl guitar orchestra you mentioned where the players never touch the surface of the guitar except through the intermediary of a nail polish bottle. We usually think of format as containing another object (the plate "contains" the music), which is itself a gendered ascription. In contrast, your work implicitly relinquishes the distinction between inside and outside. In this same gesture, we can recall the notion of a musical situation, how the contours of space must suddenly begin to take shape before we even make music. I take the porousness of playback to be a crucial implication to your point that you are "compiling sounds and situations in tandem." That is a beautiful notion. My sense is that this act (or mechanism) of compiling can be archived for you, while also being temporary and in the performative moment.

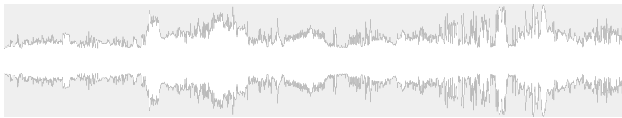
Marina Rosenfeld (describing her work in "Aftersound" 2015^[5]):

...This was the first time I ever showed the dub plates as objects in a gallery. I wanted to play, literally, with the aestheticization that was the inevitable result of displaying them this way, inert and in silence. I must say they were pretty impressive occupying a 30-foot wall. There were more than I realized! And they didn't all make it into the exhibition, I ran out of space. The piece used the 81 days of the exhibition as a duration, a kind of extended, very diffuse recording session. Each day several records were taken off the wall and "used", that is, played back by gallery assistants according to this score. There were maybe 4 or 5 plays a day, as well as a recording of the ambient room during each playback. This recording went on, no matter how degraded the record was or whatever repetition it was on or who was talking or walking around in the gallery, over the duration of the exhibition. It all went into a custom software created with the artist and programmer Caroline Record, as a kind of temporary audio-visual archive. You could go back in and listen to these digital recordings, expertly represented by Caroline as an infinite-seeming stack of black spiral lines on a white field, but the gallery would remain mostly silent. Without my presence, and without being "played" by me (which is very unusual, really unprecedented, in the history of these objects), the

plates “performed” on their own, essentially—with the assistance of many gallery attendants over the course of the show, of course. They were really diligent about following this lengthy score and initiating each playback so that it could take up its residence in the archive. If the groove was destroyed enough to physically eject the needle—and this happened numerous times—that recording would be however many seconds long until the mechanics of the process made it stop. Actually at the end of this exhibition, I decided I would end the practice of making new dub plates and let this set be it.

Julie Beth Napolin:

This description and process is interesting to me as it contrasts the recording of an untitled solo performance in Vancouver (2015) where you are still present as “agent” to some degree.



"Untitled live solo performance by Marina Rosenfeld - at Vancouver New Music - 2015" by Marina Rosenfeld on Soundcloud

Nonetheless, I sense a strong attraction to equality. That equality is wrought in part by the electro-acoustic situation itself where timbre is reduced, equalized, and controlled by the single playback system. Nothing is naturally vibrating. But even in the rises and falls of pitch and dynamics, but also their sudden shifts, there is a pronounced commitment to surface and with it, equality. This equality is achieved through a devotion to surface permutations. Here, I’m reminded of serialism in music, but perhaps more appropriately, the common example of the Rubik’s cube where each turn arranges and permutes the surface as already existing integers within seemingly infinite mathematical limits. Composition here works, above all, through substitution. You permute the available surfaces in relation to each other. That is part of what I mean here when I

suggest that the playback practice yields an equality of means. This equality is over and against the Cagean notion of “all sound,” which you critique;^[6] it’s a critique that I agree with, particularly as it regards our shared investment in the discursive. Perhaps the musical situation itself, as situatedness, is a threshold where the discursive and the sonorous meet, coequal.

[1] Marina Rosenfeld, “Marina Rosenfeld by Tristan Shepherd,” *Bomb*: fall 2016, 55-62 (57).

[2] For example, see a dialogue with sound artists Mendi + Keith Obadike forthcoming in *Current Musicology* (fall 2016), a special issue on race, sound, and technology. Our dialogue focuses on questions opened up by their sound installation, “Blues Speaker [for James Baldwin],” presented in collaboration with the Vera List Center for Art and Politics event series, “What Now? The Politics of Listening,” April 2015.

[3] I detail this claim in a forthcoming essay, “Elliptical Sound: Audibility and Blackness in the Space of Reading” *Sounding Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Penelope Hone, and Helen Groth, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2017.

[4] In a 1971 unpublished pamphlet on the \square Ensemble, Oliveros writes, “The group is purposely all female in order to maintain a common, stable vibration within itself and to explore the potentials of concentrated female activity, something which has never been fully explored or realized. The group sonic meditations provide a path for constant rediscovery of each person’s potentials in herself and in her instrument” (qtd. in Martha Mockus, *Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 45).

[5] The exhibition *AFTERSOUND: FREQUENCY, ATTACK, RETURN* Curated by Melissa Ragona + Margaret Cox.
See: <http://millergallery.cfa.cmu.edu/exhibitions/aftersound/>.

[6] See the forthcoming interview with Marina Rosenfeld by Tristan Shepherd, pp. 58-60.