

EXPERIENCING CORONA THROUGH SOUND: Listening Through the Virus from Below

Sound collage, 19.09 min., 2020

Choose language: EN/TR/GE

“Move and be still

Recognise positionality and reciprocity

Find feedback as a gesture of touch

Listening for everything

Everything is valid

Tune into which you cannot hear

Ask a question of what you hear

Let sound become a language (without grammar)

Let listening become a conduit (without words)

Stay

Care

Converse”

(A Manifesto for Care-ful Listening (listening for everything)”, Listening Across Disciplines)

Prologue

Silence is what comes to mind for most people when thinking about the sound of the pandemic. Clearly, the pandemic and the lockdown have influenced the public soundscape, in what can and cannot be heard. However, if we listen closely, we notice that there has always been sound both in public and private space. The way we perceive our (acoustic) environment is very much shaped by the cultural context we grow up and live in. Sounds and information through sound are (if at all) only perceived as a background or an accompanying element.

The domination of the visual can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment when seeing was characterized as a ‘higher’ sense in contrast to the other ‘primitive’ senses. This notion still has a big influence on the perception of our environment. Who and what is heard, listened to and represented is very selective and shaped by power relations. Likewise, we are ignoring many aspects of our acoustic environment.

Therefore, we created an alternative soundscape of Corona times. Sounds and voices that had already received little attention before the start of the pandemic are heard even less now. As a fragment of information and (unheard) voices, the sound collage is an invitation to listen to different experiences made during the pandemic and to reflect on our habits of (not) listening; a starting point for a change.

link: "Presentation of Protagonists" (We recommend listening to the sound collage first and try to make sense before reading about the background of the protagonists.)

audio document (We recommend listening to the sound collage with headphones. In the following you find the contributions in written form and translated to English.)

Transcription: Sounds and Voices

Sound of birds

Metro sounds

Katleen: It was like just like, it was coming back to another world. Just you know: Shut down, toilet paper. Uh you know, the whole number, not being able to believe that this is really, really happening.

Street music

Önder: Okay, I can't say I became very productive during corona, but I shot videos for some months. I went out at four in the morning, at sunrise, until eight or nine catching the golden light. With that motivation I did a lot of things.

Market sounds

Mehmet: The market closed, of course. Only those who sell food and beverages have been able to keep their business going, it stopped for people like me, so my income has dropped to zero. Luckily, I had put some money aside, and when you stay home all day, you don't spend a lot. That's how I could manage.

Sounds of metro

Johanna: There was a form of state support, of course like for all self-employed. But, of course, only those who are living in Germany, who are registered here, who have a tax number et cetera could receive it. In our sector, however, we have an incredibly high number of people, who are excluded from the social system. Now, these people do not get any support from anywhere; they have to continue working illegally.

Sounds of traffic and ambulance

Johanna: We have a professional association, and I'm very, very active there. And we have set up an emergency fund from our association, exactly for these people. We have already distributed almost € 150,000. We could distribute about 500,000€, but we don't have it.

Market sounds

Katleen: Of course I couldn't teach anymore. I've lost the job I had. I worked at a children circus. I was working there for 23 years teaching dance. That's gone. Then I was working in a school in Lichtenrade.

That's gone. Because I am, I mean I'm 71 and I can't put myself in I can't, I can't put myself in that, in that situation unfortunately.

Sounds of birds

Özge: Yeah, I think what concerned me the most was the financial situation. And that everything is online. It's like that for me, I value less, and at the same time, more personal encounters rather than always, always online ones. And I find that pretty exhausting. So that's why this loneliness, this isolation - always being at home - is really noticeable. Well, I feel a little restricted. But I don't worry too much about it anymore, because that's the way it is. Well, acceptance has already spread.

Collective singing in front of a retirement home

Mehmet: I was in prison for three months. And I was in a meditation camp twice each for ten days, it is called Vipassana, I don't know if you heard about it before? It has totally different rhythm. For a moment I thought I was face to face with something like that. In prison, you can't get out, can't socialize, can't talk etc. Therefore, I felt like I was taking out an old gun.

Önder: In Turkey and in general before Corona, I was always enjoying being at home alone. But knowing you have the chance to go out and spend time with friends is something very nice. It is surely a shitty situation, not being able to do that. Inside of our four walls, we do the same things every day. And after a while... darkness, coldness, and a shitty winter.

Christmas church bells and steps

Johanna: The second lockdown, which we are in now is also much worse than the first one. Everything is dark and the numbers are climbing infinitely high. The whole world is in a pandemic, everything sucks and oh god, where is this going? And uh, I see now how many people in my close circle of friends or colleagues are prone to depression. That wasn't so clear to me before. In this sense Corona is also a burning mirror.

Supermarket sounds

Özge: But I couldn't reach anyone either. Some stopped doing it during Corona, some stopped it in general. With the waiting for each appointment, these weeks simply went by. It's just an irrational fear that you develop: What if it's too late then? Fact is that you don't have forever for the medication abortion. It is possible until the ninth week, and for some doctors even less. There was a deadline, so to speak.

Tramway sounds

Özge: It is super exhausting anyways, and because of isolation, feelings of loneliness, no routine, all of this, well it has an extremely negative influence on depression. And for me, the pregnancy and the abortion triggered my depression a lot. So much that I was in a depressive phase afterwards.

Sounds of tramway

Katleen: I'm just, of course concerned about them because of the situation in the US. Fortunately none of them have become ill and I just pray that they don't become ill. But it's just you know, two are in California and California is going to so many problems, because of the fires and everything. It's just, it's a fucking nightmare that is going on in US, and especially in California. But of course it, it hurts me and I am worried about them... And uh thank you for asking me that, because I don't think people can imagine what it's like to be so far away, not be able to do anything and just to see this kind of thing just deteriorating in front of me, and uh yeah, I just hope, pray that they are protected.

Mehmet: I have a feeling that I will get over it somehow, but if they catch it... My mother had heart surgery a few years ago. I'm worried about them the most, of course. Other than that, I'm worried about all the people in risk groups. But mainly I am concerned about my family.

Bird sounds; Rain and ambulance

Önder: Last spring, my mom was planning to come here. It has not been a long time since I left Turkey but I still miss them. My mom couldn't come. And now, I don't know how she will be able to come and what will happen...

Sounds at the canal

Mehmet: Well, in such a difficult period, I think, people's feeling of solidarity is also developing. I started to talk, and share worries much more frequently and longer with my old friends, my old friends in Turkey. And this also strengthened our connection. Actually, I didn't really miss home since I came here. But during Corona I became incredibly emotional: I miss speaking Turkish, I miss my old friends a lot. Well, with old friends you feel like home...

Sounds at the canal

Önder: During Corona, they started playing Age of Empires. And these are friends with whom I went to internet cafes, when I was at high school. Now, everyone is living at different places: one is living in Canada, one in the UK, some in Turkey, and I am here. At nights we play games. There wasn't such a thing before Corona. Yeah, I became more unsocial actually, but at the same time a different form of socializing also evolved. Socializing, well we can also call it differently, but I'm considering it to be a different form of socializing.

Sounds of birds; Sounds of protest: Reading from abortion restriction law

Özge: Well, these psychological consequences, also caused by Corona, are neither heard nor seen, and if so, then only in connection with these 'life protectors', who then somehow take the psychological consequences after abortions as a justification for criminalizing abortion. And is just total nonsense. But it is also important to see, simply to see that people with, um, with previous stresses who have depression, and I mean, during Corona everyone has fewer opportunities to deal with stress, we have to learn anew how to deal with that kind of stress. So therefore, it is even more important, to have the opportunity to get help or to be able to talk about it somehow. It is just this intersection between all

of that, abortion already a tabooed subject and then Corona. And the medical situation, for both, abortions and psychological help. So, it's just an incredibly difficult situation, all of this together.

Sounds of protest: in solidarity with abortion rights in Poland

Johanna: In our sector of course, we also work online. And there are also some colleagues who have implemented it very well and who have realized that they enjoy it. And there are also customers who accept it and enjoy it. But there are many like me who don't really get used to this kind of working. And uh, I have a problem here, at home, too. I live in a shared apartment. Many colleagues also have families. So, it is very, very different kind of work, offering online session, because we are a sector, which is also very much about physical closeness. And in general, we consciously chose this physical closeness as a profession. And I realize that I totally miss it. If I should do something with someone online somehow, I don't even get into it. And let's put it realistically, you just don't earn the money you need for living.

Katleen: And so, I set up this exhibition with thirty-eight photos and I had a great, great vernissage. Of course, it was a lot of stress because of corona, you can imagine. But I did it and I made- and I was very happy because I did. Because some people, you know, some people went on little vacations, but that was my vacation making this exhibition. And I was able to give a performance and I read some, some thoughts that I had written in US. And then finissage was supposed to be on election day the 3rd of November, but they cancelled it because 3rd of November was the beginning of the second lockdown, semi lockdown, what we are having now. I was very angry about this especially because they allowed in Leipzig to have this twenty-thousand people demonstration and I don't think that's fair.

Sounds of protest: against conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism

Önder: This is a completely different country, a difficult country. The culture is completely different, and everything is hard for foreigners anyways. You can go crazy easily, but with corona this is like multiplied by ten.

Sounds of Christmas church bells

Johanna: I am politically very, very active. And about the association, that has to be said positively: we have an incredible number of new members. We are now networking very, very strongly politically. In other words, we gained a lot, a lot, that we couldn't do under normal circumstances. We will take all of this with us into the year 2021. We will take all of this with us into our future work when, hopefully, normality will have returned.

Music in subway station

Katleen (poem):

Always the same thing

Is this just a bad dream?

Masked men are everywhere

Not the time to get scared

Gotta keep those hands clean

No, this ain't no bad dream
This is called reality
I don't think it's fit to me
Where is the rainbow I can ride
To get me on the other side

Sounds of protest: organized by Migrantifa, six months after the racist assassination in Hanau

Protagonists

Johanna has worked as a sex worker for 25 years and is politically active. Johanna is her artist name. Because of the ongoing stigmatization of the occupation, most of her colleagues use an artist name. Johanna is 52 years old.

Katleen is a 71-year-old artist who came to Berlin more than 20 years ago. She is a belly dancer, photographer, and performer.

Mehmet has lived in Berlin for about three years. He had a clothing store which closed shortly before the start of the pandemic. Currently he sells different products at the market.

Önder is a photographer. Because of his work he had to leave Turkey. He lives in exile in Germany.

Özge has lived in Berlin for one and a half years. She is 28 years old and is currently continuing her Master studies. She works as a part time German teacher.

Epilogue

We invited you to a different practice of listening: to a journey of deep listening, of encountering moments in which we create sense, maybe some of not understanding, different emotions and reflections. Telling experiences through spoken language opens a shared acoustic space, where ideas, thoughts and feelings are accompanied by the tone of voice, hearing yourself and each other. In interviews we asked some open questions to create a space for people to share their experiences as the narrators of their own stories. The spaces in which we interviewed were private, public and virtual spaces.

You may have heard some of these voices you just listened to before, but with the pandemic they gained other meaning. As a person that migrated to another country, distance from family changes its meaning. Through the fear that you might never see your older family members again, being far away from your family becomes (more) painful. Abortion which is already restricted in Germany (as in many other countries) has become even more difficult. Limited access and support influence physical and mental health and sexual autonomy. The social system does not reach everyone. A high number of sex workers whose work is still highly stigmatized could not get any state support. Other occupations like selling on the market are impossible online. For sex workers or artists, the change to working online means a significant

decrease in income and the direct contact with people is missing. While digitalization can help to overcome long distances, it lacks intimacy and proximity and can have strong effects on people's social lives and mental stability. Also, activism has partly moved online. But even though the public space has become more restricted, numerous protests have taken part on the streets.

We also recorded sounds and voices from the streets, from protests, as well as from daily life. Some sounds like the ones in the metro or supermarket are usually perceived as 'background sounds.' However, for many of us they are a common, often daily experience. And these are spaces where people from various backgrounds come together without encountering. Spaces shaped by a hierarchy of what should be seen and heard.

The pandemic has created different emotions and visions. Anxiety, fear, loneliness, uncertainty, longing, depression, as well as hope, resistance, and solidarity. The general situation, individual living conditions and people's personality have produced shared and different experiences.

With the sound collage, we tried to make some of the unheard voices more heard without talking about 'them'. We wanted to let people be the protagonists of their stories. The fragmented character is an invitation for reflections: about our listening habits as well as the limits of the (re)presentation, the different stories as well as the selection. Of course, it is impossible to include all stories in one presentation, but our aim is to encourage a different practice of listening in daily life, that overcomes ignorance and creates understanding, that is against charity, but for equality and solidarity.

References

"A Manifesto for Care-ful Listening (listening for everything)". Listening Across Disciplines, 2020.

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