

**Artspeak Postscript 68:  
Alternative Laboratory**

**ALICE WANG**

**on "Noise gives the listener duration as an artifact"**

**GABI DAO**

**STEVE HUBERT**

**DB BOYKO**

**“Concurrent scientific claims, in order to form a database beneficial to humanity, should transcend the laws of thought and logic; they have to unfold within a game of emotions, which bridges the mind and the heart, to acquire a prominent place in our collective memory.”<sup>1</sup> (Christian Hadjiminias, “Science Without Art? A Necessary Osmosis”)**

**What struck me the most at the 2017 Venice Biennale was George Drivas’s *Laboratory of Dilemmas* at the Greek pavilion. The central narrative was a fictional group of scientists trying to decide whether they should destroy or protect a novel cell population that has emerged in their cell culture. To destroy it would allow them to continue with their original experiment; to keep it might lead to a bigger discovery. Divided on which path to take, the Professor urges his team to collectively reflect on the purpose of science and its servitude to mankind. While the *Laboratory of Dilemmas* questions, on the one hand, the morality of science, it also extrapolates into a greater discussion on the inclusivity and exclusivity of human culture. What drew me to the work was not only its reference to a molecular laboratory (where I used to work), but also its appropriation of the laboratory space as a site for experimentation of both empirical concerns and ethical ideals. Gallery spaces can be seen to function in a similar way to a laboratory. Each work can be viewed as a single data point, a given before an argument is made.<sup>2</sup> Like Drivas’s laboratory, each artist—Gabi Dao; D. B. Boyko; and Steve Hubert—in *Noise gives the listener duration as an artifact* explores the materiality of sound both “inwardly,” towards a scientific idea, and “outwardly,” towards a greater, public preoccupation, grounding empirical knowledge within a matrix of social concerns.**

**Gabi Dao’s *Voices Tuned (Like a Native Speaker Speaking, 1988)* is an audio work occupying the pirated air space of 88.9FM. Broadcasting from two identical radios, the soundtrack captures Dao’s mother repeating everyday English sentences alongside an ESL recording. The work engages with both the reception and the production of sound. On the one hand, it is about “listening,” listening with the intend to be in tune with the voices in one’s surrounding. On the other, it is about “tuning” one’s own production of sound, forcibly**

removing a cultural difference through the mechanical adaptation of a biological system. The necessity for an internal adaption to facilitate external assimilation stems from the recognition of language as a token for integration.

A pair of sculptures by Dao—a conch and a cochlea—remain in dialogue with D. B. Boyko’s concert and workshop session at the exhibition. In *Polished like a Shell*, Dao creates an imitation conch that is situated at ankle-height, adjacent to *Voices Tuned*. Its position on the gallery floor invites listeners to bend down, assuming a physically humbling act prior to receiving the message. The conch calls to mind William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, where the shell becomes the symbol of improvised self-governance. Whoever held the conch had the right to speak; whoever assumes the power of speech assumes the ability to influence. Dao’s pairing of the conch with *Voices Tuned* acknowledges that with the acquisition of language comes its associative power.

This power, however, can be undermined. During the exhibition when the gallery was filled with visitors, the bodies and chatter distorted the radio signal and *Voices Tuned* became muffled. That an unfettered space is often a prerequisite for criticality was also observed in Boyko’s concert. The performative trio HUBBUB (of which Boyko is a part) deconstructs language into sounds with the accompaniment of a theremin, wine glasses, and cello. The artists sing in turn and in unison. At climactic moments when multiple voices overlap, the thrashing of conflicting, cacophonous words leads to a deformation of language. Lexicons are reduced to sound forms; and forms, eventually, become formless. By dismantling language, HUBBUB challenges both the integrity of linguistic forms and the legitimacy of language as an object of reverence.

Both Gabi Dao’s *Curled Up In a Spiral* and D. B. Boyko’s workshop session *The Empty Vessel Makes the Loudest Sound* turn the focus inward, towards a physiological process of sounding. In the former, Dao creates a cochlea, a structure of the inner ear that captures vibration in the air and translates it into chemical signals. During the workshop session Boyko invites participants to differentiate between hearing and attentive listening whilst inhabiting the bodily experience of sounding. The “empty vessel” in the title of Boyko’s workshop is a metaphor for the body as an instrument. The lungs, as the site for inhalation and exhalation, can never be structurally emptied. The most forceful expulsion would collapse the organ before all air is expelled. The entrapped air forms the anatomic “dead space” of the lung, an internal void taken to the grave. Focusing on the reception and production of sound, Dao and Boyko’s works engage with how the human body is conceptualized as a vessel for the transference of air .

Steve Hubert’s *The Rich Interior Life II (2015-17)* offers a visual representation of the neuronal process underlying human learning and artificial intelligence. The alternating opacity in the sculptural collage echoes the grey and white matter of the brain. The work compresses variegated shapes and mediums into a unit, weaving together disparate parts into an integrated whole. Integration is the all-encompassing explanation for most inexplicable aspects of behavior: we do not know how the specificity of all the social, cognitive, and biological factors are encoded at the cellular level; we can only intuit that somehow they are registered in the chemistry of the being. Artificial intelligence is similarly abstract in its internal networks. When a computer learns, it takes into account its past mistakes and self-adjusts its algorithm.<sup>3</sup> Over time, how a computer “thinks” is no longer accessible to us. The abstract, interweaving

appendages in Hubert's sculpture is akin to the multifaceted neuronal and computational networks whose presence and effect we feel, but whose logic and narrative elude us.

The title of the exhibition, *Noise gives the listener duration as an artifact*, is a quote by Lisa Robertson whose sound walks explore the relationship between sound and place.<sup>4</sup> As a resonating form of memory, the noise of a place constitutes a form of its archival history. Reflecting on the acoustical artifacts of a site conjures an external awareness that reciprocally heightens one's own presence. The *active* part of listening has become very salient to me through my current work in a clinical psychology lab. To examine how aware people are during an interpersonal interaction, we examine the extent to which they understand what *the other party wants* and the extent to which they *adjust themselves* accordingly. The taking of oneself out of one's mind, and to *feel* and *think* from an alternative perspective, is listening activated. Predicated on active listening is active participation which seeks to establish personal and situational factors optimal for the transmission of speech. The power of words lies in allowing the most immaterial matter effect the greatest material change. As an alternative laboratory, *Noise gives the listener duration as an artifact* engages biological systems with a constellation of external forces that act to stymie or amplify their endowed functions. The intersection between art and science lies in contextualizing empirical findings within a social matrix, allowing for the confluence of knowledge to heighten humanistic self-awareness.

## NOTES

1 Christian Hadjiminias, "Science Without Art? A Necessary Osmosis," in *George Drivas: Laboratory of Dilemmas*, ed. George Drivas and Orestis Andreadakis (Athens: Cube Art Editions, 2017), 114.

2 Daniel Rosenberg, "Data before the Fact," in "*Raw Data*" is an Oxymoron, ed. Lisa Gitelman. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 32-33.

3 Siddhartha Mukherjee, "The Algorithm Will See You Now," *New Yorker*, April 3, 2017, 48-51.

4 Lisa Robertson, *Nilling: Prose*, (Toronto: BookThug, 2012).