

List(en)ing Post

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Lecture

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Abstract

Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *Listening Post* is at once a post (site) for 'listening to the web', an installation comprised of 21 columnar posts (suspended chain-circuit displays), and an algorithmically manipulated series of chat posts (messages). It is postmodern, post-linear, post-print, and post-literate. With regard to the post-literate, this paper will ask what *Listening Post* has to tell us about new forms of electronic English. The conjunction of colloquial speech and processing languages in this installation brings into sharp contrast the relations between textual ambiguity and the singularity of programming commands, which cannot function with multiple significations. In sum, my reading will address the project's post-ness; listening in the sense of both conversation and sound art; and the aesthetics of listing.

What would 100,000 people chatting on the internet sound and look like? This is the question posed by statistician Mark Hansen and sound artist Ben Rubin at the outset of their collaborative research into the sonification of Internet data. Their initial forays into information sonification led to "Ear to the ground," an aural project to represent Internet traffic. With a basic system architecture for managing multiple content streams in place, they turned toward developing "*Listening Post*" (2001-), a multimedia installation that is both a sonification and a visualization of messages posted to more than 5,000 online forums (including chat settings and bulletin boards). It is not then a realistic or filmic vision of 100,000 people chatting; rather it is an algorithmic filtering and re-presentation of their chat messages, an organization of data that discovers and presents different patterns: there are seven sets of display algorithms that structure the seven moments/scenes of the piece. Throughout "*Listening Post*" maintains a tension between viewing and reading, the singular message or voice on the one hand and multiplicity on the other, and this dialectic is never permanently resolved. As they explain, they were able

simultaneously to convey "both scale (the impression of multiple voices talking at once) and content (by isolating a single voice, we can hear one person's contribution to the stream of thousands)." ¹

What I draw out in this paper are two intersecting aspects of "Listening Post": the aesthetics of listing and community, virtual communities in a literal sense of users gathered together for conversation and community as that name given to the abstract collective, the people, the mob, the multitude, the crowd.

There are at least two meanings or registers of the list: the first is that of collection and archiving, its province that of the personal and the cultural. The second is that of aggregation and complexity, each item not additive but transformative. "Listening Post" makes the relentless sequentiality of the list aesthetic, hypnotic, mesmerizing (here we must certainly think of John Cage). It also participates in a long-term tradition of literary lists and using lists to produce aesthetic effects, notably encompassing *Ulysses'* "Ithaca" chapter and Queneau's "Cent milles milliards de poèmes" (1961), and in our current moment we might note Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and his recent *Only Revolutions*, with its user-generated lists of important events in the 20C. But "Listening Post" also works with the second register of the list in that each word, each phrase, is transformative of the whole. "Listening Post" brings disparate posts into some form of intersection and synthesis. In that intersection, something else is created that exceeds those discrete posts. The intersection of discrete posts forms a strange kind of community, one that is mobile, fluid, dynamic.

Hansen and Rubin speak specifically about community in their commentary on "Listening Post." It is a representation of user activities online and there is a certain emphasis on the viewer/listener experience of the data, but more broadly "a byproduct of [their] Web traffic sonification is the creation of a kind of community from the informal gathering of thousands of visitors to a given Web site." ² But what kind of community is this exactly?

Many media artists have sought to break the closed-circuit networks of IRC and SMS communication by inviting visitors to contribute text, to make private speech public. Their performance spaces are exterior to the gallery, mobile and unframed. SMS projects in particular tend to be "designed for crowded public spaces" but "Listening Post" /is the crowd, or least a representation of the crowd, the public, the mass. The grid display in this respect functions as a visual metaphor for large-scale community and collectivity. Here we can think literally of the relay clicks, which make the searching of tens of thousands of messages materially audible; the use of positional sound; and the aural cacophony of many of the movements of the piece: they overwhelm the sensorium and produce a sense of being crowded. CGI has situated the crowd as the predominant visual figure of our moment and we can learn something from its cultural representations. Think of *300* or *Ratatouille*: the

animated crowd is at once a singular entity and locally defined and detailed. In other words, this crowd is not the same as the fascist crowd, which thinks in common and becomes a mob. A shared social context inevitably leads to patterns, thematic threads, topic clusters - celebrity, sex, food, war, politics - but the crowd of "Listening Post" does not act, perform or present as a unified whole. We might also be accustomed to thinking of the crowd as a violation of the sanctity of the individual and of individuation - such is the threat of the *Matrix* and of films such as *I, Robot*. But this is a crowd marked not by its unity but by its internal differentiation and mutability. Its mutability and dynamism is partly a consequence of the use of real-time data but we might also venture further to say that what we see on display is unpredictability, non-programmed thinking.

With "Listening Post," we have not just one audience but many, not just one community but many. From Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri we have a thorough articulation of the multitude that is both singular and multiple, not based on self-same identity but instead heterogeneous. To understand the community presented in and constituted by "Listening Post" we need rather to think in terms of the crowd in order to convey the sense of presentation, monitoring, surveillance. The multitude is that which one feels a part of; the crowd is that which one surveys, represents, assesses. Our connections and affinities with it are fleeting and temporary, but no less powerful and productive for being such. "Listening Post" makes significant contributions to the fields of sound and new media art but it does not offer us an abstract and abstracted aesthetic experience; instead it quite distinctly offers us an 'ear to the ground,' a window looking out on to the crowd through which we can see, hear, and encounter the foreign and the familiar.

Notes

1. Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, "Listening Post: Giving Voice to Online Communication," ICAD 2002, p. 1.
2. Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, "Babble online: Applying statistics and design to sonify the Internet," ICAD 2001, p. 3. Available from <http://stat.bell-labs.com/who/cocteau/papers/pdf/rubin2.pdf>.