

## ***What Did You Hear?*** **Another Ten Theses on Militant Sound Investigation.<sup>1</sup>**

Written by Dont Rhine and Robert Sember.

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*Mise-en-scene: An auditorium. There is seating for participants and a podium for the presenters. A laptop computer connected to reference monitors is placed on the podium. A flipchart pad on an easel is positioned so that it is clearly visible from all seats in the auditorium. A wall is cleared so that the flipchart sheets filled after each section of the presentation may be hung on display. These flipchart sheets should also be easily viewed by everyone in the auditorium.*

This is how we want to organize our time together. We have prepared ten sound recordings, or "sound objects," of around one-minute each. After playing each recording we will ask the question, what did you hear? Then we will allow for a minute during which time we invite you to call out your responses and we will write them on the flipchart. This will be followed by the reading of the next section of the text we have prepared, the playing of another sound recording, and a further minute of responses to the question, what did you hear? This portion of the presentation will take approximately 45 minutes, leaving time for reflections and dialogue. One final note: there is no intended relation between the sound recordings and the portions of text, other than the fact that both the sound recordings and the text are derived from twenty years of Ultra-red's practice of militant sound investigation.

1. Louis Althusser begins his text, *The Philosophy of the Encounter* with a reference to Epicurus's vision of the origin of matter. In the beginning of time the universe was a rain of atoms cascading through space. At one moment, one atom swerved and came into contact with another atom. For materiality to come from that encounter, one of those atoms would have had to then come into contact with a second atom. For Althusser, the question of politics and revolutionary organizing is the question of organizing the conditions for this second encounter. We take this question to have direct relation to political practices as well as cultural practices. What is the relationship between

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<sup>1</sup> This text is based on a series of lectures given by Ultra-red members Robert Sember and Dont Rhine first at Frise Künstlerhaus in Hamburg on 20 May 2010, organized by Jens Röhm and Kathrin Wildner and then four years later at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston on 10 February 2014, organized Seth Kim-Cohen. The title refers to Ultra-red's pamphlet, "Ten Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation" (Printed Matter, 2008), an earlier exposition of terms to guide collective listening rooted in struggle and accountable to constituency. This earlier text may be found at: [http://asounder.org/resources/ultrared\\_10theses.pdf](http://asounder.org/resources/ultrared_10theses.pdf)

activism and organizing? Activism, we would argue is concerned with contributing to the conditions of the first encounter. Organizing, conversely, is concerned with the conditions of *the second encounter*—the encounter that occurs subsequently to a prior moment of contact whose effect is realized in its repetition and accumulation.

Sound object 1: Ultra-red, "Airport Metrolink Station, Burbank, California (15 June 1999)," running time 1:00, from *Articles of Incorporation*. Public Record, 2004. MP3.

What did you hear?

2. Most of the twelve members of Ultra-red have long engagements with specific social movements; from the struggles of migration in Germany, anti-racism in Britain, HIV/AIDS activism and gender and sexual rights in New York City, to housing justice in Los Angeles. A long-term accountability to those collective struggles defines what we mean by militancy. Formed in 1994, Ultra-red grew out of the AIDS activist movement, ACT UP: the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, a self-described "non-partisan group of diverse individuals united in anger to end the AIDS crisis through direct action." Like all social movements, ACT UP had an analysis and a practice of culture. A central claim of that analysis was that the AIDS epidemic was not "natural." Rather, for a virus to become an epidemic, the AIDS crisis was the result of structural inequality and the ideologies of heteronormativity, racism, and poverty. Those ideologies existed in the very representations of the AIDS crisis each time the State, the bio-medical establishment, institutions of religion, the media, and so forth asked the question, "Is the general public at risk of AIDS?" Such a question presumes that the term *public* excludes always already those who are affected by HIV. Thus, the public is defined in exclusion of queers, people of color, migrants, and the poor. This exclusion had and continues to have very real consequences on who has access to education, prevention tools, research, and life-saving treatment. Thus, it was the very representation of *the public* that was producing the AIDS crisis. For AIDS activists, the public is always ideological. The public is always problematic.

Sound object 2: Ultra-red, "4 minutes 33 seconds, Bienestar, East Los Angeles, 15 March 2005 (Edit)," running time 1:00, from *An Archive Of Silence*. Public Record, 2006. MP3.

What did you hear?

3. In his earliest writings, the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire analyzed the culture of silence as both the theft of the voice of the poor as well as the poor's complicity in their oppression; the interpellation of the poor into the subjectivity of domination. Silence, therefore, and its culture was the thing that had to be broken for liberation to be realized. Much later in his life, Freire introduced a different conception of silence into his writings. Thinking about the role of the teacher as one who facilitates the articulation and transformation of the desires of others, Freire referred to teaching as adopting a discipline of silence. Silence, therefore, is not just the culture that must be broken in order for liberation to occur. Silence is also the very condition for

listening. This analysis demands that we ask: Who's silence must be broken, who's silence must be disciplined, and what is made of the listening that silence conditions? This notion of the teacher as one who listens informed the organizing work of the early civil rights movement. For example, in accounts of the SNCC campaigns in the south we are told repeatedly that Ella Baker taught the organizers how to listen. In his recounting of this process, John Lewis writes: "We were meeting people on their own terms, not ours . . . Before we ever got around to saying what we had to say, we listened. And in the process we built up both their trust in us, and their confidence in themselves."

**4.** Listening is never "natural." It requires and generates literacy. Since it puts subjects into relation with each other and with the world, listening has the potential to contribute significantly to the constitution of collectivity. Yet the constitutive process far exceeds any listening procedure in and of itself. Organized listening procedures and their protocols can, however, affect transitional moments in political organizing. Over the years Ultra-red have found four moments where listening procedures can make such a contribution:

**a.** First, a listening procedure can assist a group of people in the early stages of organizing themselves, helping them to identify themes or contradictions that will be the focus of collective inquiry.

**b.** Second, after completing an initial collective action, a group of people can use a listening procedure to assess what they have learned and to identify the next phases of inquiry.

**c.** Third, after being active for many years, a group can use an organized listening process to reflect on the historical terms of the struggle and test those terms against the current reality of lived experience.

**d.** Fourth, a listening procedure can help facilitate an encounter between two or more groups of people exploring the potential for collaboration.

Sound object 4: Ultra-red, "Mayor of Maywood, California (17 November 2011)," running time 1:30, unreleased.

What did you hear?

**5.** To better understand the shift from the priority of organizing sounds to organizing listening, we return to the research of the modernist sound theorist, Pierre Schaeffer. Central to his listening experiments is the "sound object," which Schaeffer defines as the result of an encounter between an "acoustic action" (i.e. a sounding) and a specific practice of listening. He delineates four such

practices of listening:

- a. Identifying the real-world acoustic event(s) that cause a sound. (We can take an example from the unpublished memoirs of the artist Faith Wilding wherein she recalls listening to the sound of an evening steam-whistle in the Bruderhof commune in Paraguay where she spent her childhood.)
- b. Attending to the concrete-subjective qualities of a sound as it "strikes the ear." (In our example, Wilding describes the sound as having a particular pitch and a single sustained call that echoed across the fields in which the commune members worked.)
- c. The next mode involves analyzing specific sound qualities. This is a move into abstraction. For us, this is where listening pulls in recollections and associations, the resonances of lived experience and memory. (Again, returning to our example, Wilding writes how the whistle reminded her pacifist father of the air raid whistles he heard as a young man during the War in Britain.)
- d. In Schaeffer's program for musical research, the fourth mode is a move into music theory and composition. Alternatively, Ultra-red reads the fourth listening practice as comprehending a sound's social meaning. (For Wilding and her father a single whistle signaled a call for the workers in the commune to return from the fields and gather for the evening meal, a social practice markedly different from gathering in a shelter during an air raid.)

In his commitment to music theory, Schaeffer represses the intersubjective dimension of listening. Political philosopher Susan Bickford on the other hand insists that political listening involves active engagement, intersubjectivity as much as subjectivity, and silence as much as dialog. The object is less defined by medium than the event of its reception. Or, to put it in terms interrogative of Schaeffer's, the object is not merely caused by a sounding but cause of the desire to listen.

Sound object 5: Ultra-red, "Romsås Lake, Oslo, Norway (21 June 2010)," running time 2:00, unreleased.

What did you hear?

6. These four modes inform how Ultra-red attempt to organize listening within the context of militant sound research. How does the investigation begin? Having determined the terms of the invitation (see section 4 above), a group of people comes together around a common experience. That experience may have been a demonstration, a community crisis, or something as casual as a sound walk through the neighborhood. After listening together in the wake of that common experience, the question is asked, what did you hear? All responses are written on paper. After

exhausting the reflections, the facilitator asks the group to arrange and analyze what has been written. This analysis leads to a question. This question is not one Ultra-red author as facilitators of militant sound investigation sessions. The historical record is rife with such listening-based investigations. For example, listening across the archive of what he called, the “sorrow songs,” more commonly referred to today as “spirituals,” W.E.B. Du Bois heard harmonic and dissonant layers of recollection and experience that informed his inquiry into the sound of the color line.

Sound object 6: Ultra-red with Prototypes Pomona, "Sound object 5 for Listening Session, Claremont, California (16 August 2011): What is the sound of alternatives to prison?," running time 1:00, unreleased.

What did you hear?

7. What kind of question guides the militant sound investigation? What makes for a generative question? Who asks the question and by what procedure are its terms articulated? To whom is the question directed or does it have a different function? Over the years, Ultra-red and our collaborators has arrived at the question in multiple ways. Sometimes the question names a point of convergence for those participating in the investigation. But this is not always the case. Sometimes the question names a point of divergence, a contradiction—what Freire calls, a “limit-situation”; a limit beyond which awaits greater understanding to inform future collective action. Analyzing the responses to the sound recording, the group may find markedly different, even contradictory responses, or, as Grace Lee Boggs writes, “listening closely to the grass roots for new questions that require new paradigms.” The drive to reach consensus may be so great that the group quickly begins arguing to bring the contradiction to resolution. The degree of passion generated in the argument demonstrates the amount of energy and the depth of investment in the contradiction itself. This contradiction may become the question that serves as the object for the investigation. The militant sound investigation places the question within the formulation: What is the sound of . . . ?

Sound object 7: Ultra-red, "*Sheik Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani: A Leader's Legacy 1913-1949*, an exhibition at the Qatar Museum Authority Gallery, Katara Village, Doha, Qatar (21 January 2014)," running time 1:56, unreleased.

What did you hear?

8. Sometimes the procedure described thus far involves a small group of people, such as a group of activists who wish to reflect on the terms of analysis that have to this point determined the terms of their interventions. Sometimes the procedure involves a much larger group of people that can be arranged into smaller groups. This is the investigative team or teams of the sound investigation. Having arrived at a preliminary question, the team(s) ask: what is the sound of that problematic (e.g. what is the sound of anti-racism? or, for our investigations into gentrification,

what is the sound of the city that you no longer hear?). With that question in hand, the team asks, where and when will they go to hear that sound? They then make recordings at that place at the appointed time. In the beginning, we invite the participants to use any recording device with which they are comfortable; e.g. a cell-phone, a small dictation recorder, or a high-end digital audio recorder. Depending on where the team(s) are in their collective practice, team members may begin by making individual recordings or they may go straight to recording collectively. Going out into the field, the team(s) record everything, which is to say they record beyond the boundary of any predetermined imagining of what they would hear and then chose to share with others. Later the team members listen to their individual audio files. They take diligent notes on what they hear.

Sound object 8: Ultra-red with Ann Snitow, "Sound object 7 for The New School Encuentro, New York (8 May 2010)," running time 1:32, unreleased.

What did you hear?

9. After repeated practices of listening, the team members begin to hear resonance and dissonance in the raw audio recordings. The team begins to organize sound objects from the audio source material. They may even go so far as to combine sounds from the original recording keeping in mind the initial question that guides the investigation. Either way, the richness of a sound object depends upon a mix of sounds that listeners will find familiar and unfamiliar. This is where aesthetics play a role. Researchers may apply digital manipulation to the recordings, resulting in objects that generate a balance between concrete and abstract modes of listening. From our experience, shorter objects of one to two-minutes in length engender robust feedback while allowing the group to remain focused on the collective work of listening in contrast to individual aesthetic immersion. Once individual team members have assembled an initial archive of sound objects, the first listening session occurs with just the members of the team. The team begins by listening to the first sound object with no introduction from the person or persons who organized it. The group writes down all the responses to the question, what did you hear? After the team exhausts their reflections, the author of each sound object tells the story about the recording. Notes are taken from the story and are compared with those generated during the first round of listening. What new resonances and dissonances have emerged? Does this help clarify, obfuscate, or refine the initial question? Depending upon the outcomes from the preliminary listening session, the group revises their sound objects. They convene a new listening session involving a larger assembly of people invited from the scene of struggle. It should be noted that the methodology we have described has, in fact, never occurred precisely in this form in the

twenty-years of Ultra-red investigations.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the process outlined in this text is a set of protocols that guide collective inquiry. Each investigation takes on its own character and tone. What remains a consistent trajectory, by intention and by improvisation, is the sequence of collective reflection leading to critical analyses that in turn inform actions. These actions and their effects are the focus of a new round of reflections.

Sound object 9: Ultra-red, "Sin Cargo (Edit)," running time 1:46, from *Amnistía*. Antiopic Records, 2003. CD.

What did you hear?

**10.** Listening events occupy just one moment in the militant sound investigation. They are tools within the long labor of solidarity. At the same time, organizers, activists, and base communities sometimes resist intentional protocols of listening on the grounds that such procedures feel artificial. In that resistance the researcher may hear a conflict between underlying ethical systems. For example, collectives organized around friendship can find intentional processes inauthentic precisely because they demand a reorganization of relations. In such an instance, protocols can shift a group's ethical foundation from one based on affinity to one that becomes available to the outsider. It could be said that listening, as a political practice, is always an encounter with the stranger.

Sound object 10: Ultra-red, "4 minutes 33 seconds, Los Angeles County USC Medical Center, 22 May 2004 (Edit)," running time 1:00, from *An Archive of Silence*. Public Record, 2006. MP3.

What did you hear?

*Works cited:*

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Ultra-red members have employed a variety of objects around which to convene listening sessions. Over the years we have used video, photographs, poems, sound walks, stories, plays and tableaux, etc. Sound objects have a particular utility in foregrounding listening as the site and means of the inquiry. They also carry the trace of time and location, which produce estrangements and ambiguities we find particularly productive for collective inquiry. Sound objects nurture tendencies toward addressing concrete instances and locations of an issue as well as the work of interpretation and theoretical analysis. The responses to other media are valuable in that the question, what did you hear (or see, or feel) will always launch the group into an investigation at the center of which is the shared pedagogical space of listening to and with each other.

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