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On Listening

me, a little drunk, and lets out this incredible laugh—I thought, *yes, that's it*. The laugh, this wild mysterious laugh, said so much: like a noise full of meaning, that is, arriving in this instant, of being more. Excess. Excitement.

But, maybe I'm getting carried away...

Maybe it is more basic: like in the morning, you wake, up, something cloudy, uncertain, a beginning. But, often, there is suddenly, there, in the head, a song—you know, that feeling. That moment, when suddenly, you find yourself singing some song, without even thinking. In the morning. Something maybe you haven't heard in years. It breaks in. Slips through. Like a breath, a vibration, from below, and then out—the words leave the mouth, a lyric, and you must, at least, laugh at yourself, a little. But also, enjoy the situation: the rhythm of the heart. Like a door opening. The inside, coming out. It fills the room: erupts, takes over, a vibration, and then, a voice. To become a theme. Something you carry along into the day: to refer back to, during lunch, or, at the café. It continues. A friend. Noise. Maybe it operates, like a shadow. It is there, you know, as shadows are, without real definition. But then, like shadows do, it gives definition: a sort of absence, making present, what is always already there.

I like the shadow. This, thing which is always no-thing. Like a breath. Or, maybe, like a sound. That fills, without being finished. A beginning and end, in one. An atmosphere. Maybe that's what I heard, that day, with Tommy laughing, a kind of: shadow. It took over, and then, was gone. I recognised, the meaning. An invitation. Where one could join in. Not that loneliness wouldn't persist, no, but that at least, there was someone else. Silence, of course, is always there. A stop. Like when, at the end of the day, taking off the shoes, you leave something behind. To enjoy what comes next. Silence, that is always already a noise. That's the beauty: Both, Together. The shadow, and the light. A rhythm. Tap, tap, tapping. Back, and forth. Memory.

Things unfold. But, things, also, echo. Back and forth. The beginning and the end, together. Music. Like a thread, going from there, to here. Or, like a balloon, which is, of course, a captured breath: held, inside, to carry forward, that energy, to, somewhere, else. I always thought, the balloon floating in the sky, was like a lost breath. A body, someone's. And if you were to find that balloon, open it up, slowly, you would receive, that breath. To let it, out slowly, against one's own lips. To inhale, that other breath, that had floated, from somewhere. Or, to hear it. Suddenly. A voice.

A Balloon for the Barbican —Politics of Listening in The City of London

Characters

YOU, the researcher who investigates space by listening to its acoustic qualities.

POLICEMAN, his duty is to ensure community safety and maintain public order.

POLICEWOMAN, her role is to prevent crime and improve security.

MANAGER OF THE ESTATE, he is responsible for the happiness and comfort of the residents.

Scene

The Barbican, City of London, UK, January 2012.

All characters are fictitious; any reference to real facts or people is purely coincidental.

Act I

Friday afternoon. 3pm.

Scene 1

The balloon is fully inflated. You are waiting for the right moment to pop it to listen to the echo bouncing off the surrounding buildings. You stand still with open ears. Suddenly two cops approach you from one of the public courtyards of the Barbican Estate.

POLICEMAN You al'right?

YOU Hi.

POLICEMAN What are you up to?

YOU What? Sorry?

POLICEWOMAN What are you up to?

YOU Ahhh... I'm doing a research project, it's basically about the acoustics of the place and I'm popping balloons here in the courtyard.

POLICEMAN Do you have a permit?
 POLICEWOMAN Do you have a permit?
 YOU Yes.
 POLICEMAN Have you got it with you?
 YOU No, it's not printed.
 POLICEMAN Right OK, because obviously we have seen you walking along... *(interrupted)*
 POLICEWOMAN We don't mind you doing stuff but our office is there and we saw you walking on that ledge.
 POLICEMAN Yeah, eh... *(interrupted)*
 POLICEWOMAN How many people live here?
 POLICEMAN Yeah, you... *(interrupted)*
 YOU How many people!? *(thinking about the connections between population density, surveillance and accepted behaviours in public spaces)*
 POLICEWOMAN Yeah, lot of people, if they see you they might call us in, so we need to be aware of this... err...
 YOU Ah!
 POLICEMAN You are walking around popping balloons and you might be disturbing residents here, while obviously some of them, I mean not all of them would be out at work, lots of elderly residents here will be asleep and everything... and you are just bursting balloons and obviously the way like... you know yourselves, you are doing a thing on it, like the Barbican, all the sound echoes around, so... I mean we heard the balloon all the way down there bursting and everything like that.
 POLICEWOMAN It echoes a lot, you know that, acoustics wise, it echoes a lot, stuff like that.
 POLICEMAN So... I don't know, if you want to go and do it outside the Barbican that's fine.
 YOU Well, the point of my research is to do it here inside the Barbican and... *(interrupted)*
 POLICEMAN Do you have any ID on you or anything like that?
 What I'll do is if I can take your name and everything like that. If we receive... err... no one has complained to us yet but if anybody complains you will have to stop straight away and that'll be the end of it.
 YOU Sure, OK, but can I pop this last balloon because I've already blown it up and then I'll give you my ID.
 POLICEMAN Fair enough, I suppose. *(resigned, as if something undesirable cannot be avoided)*

Baaang!!! The sound of the balloon echoes around bouncing back and forth off the building's concrete walls.

POLICEMAN You see that's quite loud, you are disturbing people as they are walking through and that's why you have to stop.
 POLICEWOMAN That's your last one, yeah?
 POLICEMAN Yes, so that's the last one, yes?
 YOU No.
 POLICEMAN Yes!
 YOU We can do this together if you want.
 POLICEMAN No we can't do it together, basically you are gonna have to stop because if we get complaints... Yeah, like I said!
 YOU No already? No, it's not possible, already?
 POLICEMAN The people are living, look, how far are you from that window?
 YOU Yes, but c'mon it was just one second!
 POLICEMAN No, no, no, mate, you might be waking people up... *(interrupted)*
 POLICEWOMAN We're telling you now, we let you do that one, yeah, we let you do that, all right?
 YOU The last one?
 POLICEMAN No, you have done the last one!
 POLICEWOMAN We let you just do that one, you listen to us now: no more that's it, that's it!
 POLICEMAN No more yeah, you are gonna have to stop now.
 YOU Why do they... *(interrupted while trying to explain the constructive value of noise as opportunity for social interaction and unexpected encounters)*
 POLICEWOMAN This is a private area! You understand there are people living here!
 POLICEMAN *(attempting to pacify the situation)* I'll tell you what, if you come down with me to the Barbican Estate Office, we are gonna speak to the Estate Office. If they are happy for you to do it, that's fine, if they say no, then no.
 POLICEWOMAN Come with us we'll go speak to them now.
 YOU OK.

The two police officers leave the public courtyard and lead You to the Estate Office.

Scene 2

MANAGER OF THE ESTATE Hi, how are you doing?

POLICEWOMAN (*patronisingly*) We saw this gentleman recording outside our police office, this guy (*pointing*) walking on the ledge which is 20 foot up, don't know if he has got a permit for that, and he's bursting balloons as well.

POLICEMAN He says he's doing an acoustic test; he said he's got permission to do it. What we are just worried about is... if you are happy for him to do it, it's fine but I've seen people, next to, err... outside people's houses and obviously if we get complaints...

MANAGER Yes, it's a residential area.

POLICEWOMAN He's got big balloons and he set them off outside the residents' flats. Popping them, it's really loud.

POLICEMAN Yea, so, what we don't want is complaints coming in but if you lot are happy for him to do it...

MANAGER Were you walking along the ledge of the wall?

POLICEMAN Yes.

YOU No.

POLICEMAN He was.

POLICEWOMAN Yep.

YOU Well the project is not about that, I was walking there because I found it interesting to walk there but... (*interrupted*)

MANAGER Well, of course in general I would prefer if you didn't walk along the parapet wall, quite frankly.

YOU Yes but I'm from the countryside and I climb trees every day.

MANAGER Yea, but we don't climb concrete in the city.

POLICEMAN If you fall off over here...

POLICEWOMAN People would ring and say someone is trying to commit something and so on.

MANAGER And also, the most important thing is, I've got to clear you up, when you are splattered on the public high walk afterwards and quite frankly I'm not happy about that.

POLICEWOMAN Yeah, and we would have to get lots of bodies to cordon off the area.

YOU So there's no way we can continue today, right?

MANAGER No, this is where people live, you know, it's unfair, if I came and banged big balloons outside your flat...

YOU We were thinking to do this again from 10 to 11 this evening.

MANAGER No. No, no, definitely no, no, I would say no, the noisy... err... time you can make a noise here is between 10 in the

morning and 4 in the afternoon; because again, I will quote, it's a residential area.

YOU The thing is that at that time the background noise is very loud and you cannot hear the sound reflections from the buildings.

POLICEMAN But at 10 o'clock and 11 o'clock when you want to do it people are gonna be sleeping...

POLICEWOMAN People are going to be sleeping ready to go to work the next day and so on.

POLICEMAN ...and you are gonna be waking them up with balloons and they are not gonna be happy.

POLICEWOMAN They are gonna call us and we won't be happy.

POLICEMAN We won't be happy.

YOU OK, so the best time you say is between 10am and 4pm.

MANAGER Well, it is not the best time, is the only time that you are allowed to do that kind of thing.

To be continued...

The project *A Balloon for the Barbican* was first presented at *Bang! Being the Building. A Musarc Salon at the Barbican* on the 26th of January 2012 as part of the OMA/Progress exhibition at the Barbican Gallery, City of London, UK.