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Title:

Sight Reading

Attribution:

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Sight Reading explores the relationship of silent reading and the spoken word, linking sight and sound through interactions of eye movements and recordings of creative writing drawn from the *Butler Argus*, a literary journal created by patients of Butler Psychiatric Hospital from 1940 to 1945. These current-day recordings of the patients' writing were modified via convolution to sound as if they were spoken within the hospital itself. Built using custom Max/MSP software and a face-mounted webcam, the system detects the user's eye movements and triggers various recordings depending on the location of the pupil. Closing the eye triggers the sound of the artist's own heartbeat. Manipulation of both direction and speed of movement results in a spoken-word, interactive sound piece in the tradition of Pamela Z, Imogen Heap, and Clarice Assad, all of whom work with modification of the voice using the body, and Jack Hamill, who specifically uses the eye to control (non-verbal) sound, while the user's own voice remains silent. Though many of the words in *Sight Reading* remain intelligible, the overall impact of the piece may also be likened to sound poetry, as originally performed by Hugo Ball during World War I, and more contemporarily by Jaap Blonk and Golan Levin in their audiovisual interpretation of Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*.

Expanding the existing practice of sound and vocal art into the arena of Narrative Medicine, *Sight Reading* brings to life the writings of mental health patients in a format that itself speaks to the experience of trauma and its treatment, especially EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) as a means for healing. Further, the specific use of the eye as a means for controlling sound recreates the lack of agency and control experienced by patients in a mental hospital setting, as the eye is subject to both voluntary and involuntary movements, and holding the eye steady in one position is physically challenging. Therefore, the constantly changing voices and inability to fully hear any of the recordings in entirety echoes the experience of feeling unheard and lacking full autonomy over one's mind and body, the bombardment of external sounds and voices one experiences in the hospital, and the internal experience of chaos and overwhelm, perhaps involving internal voices as well. Within the piece, relief from these voices is felt only by closing the eye, which refocuses from the mind onto the body by generating the sound of a heartbeat. In addition to this auditory experience, the screen also displays an extreme close-up image of the user's moving eye, alongside a camera-generated view of the lighted pupil being tracked. Humans typically do not view their eyes in such close proximity, disconnected from the face and body, nor do the movements of the eyes typically influence sound, especially the voices of others. The unsettling nature of seeing one's own roving eye, with its movements directly triggering heard voices, in some sense mimics the dissociative and hallucinatory experiences that can accompany mental illness. Thus through both auditory and visual means, using the patients' own words and the user's own eye, *Sight Reading* viscerally recreates the patients' perspective, enabling those who do not share in these experiences directly, including medical and mental health providers, to better understand and relate to patients.

Americans For The Arts. (2009). *2009/ State of the Field Report Arts in Healthcare*.

https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/pdf/get_involved/advocacy/research/2014/arts_in_healthcare.pdf

A joint creation by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Society of the Arts in Healthcare, this report describes how arts have been incorporated into the medical field, and details the findings from a selection of research studies on the impact of various art forms (visual, sound, writing, etc.) on the patient and doctor experiences.

American Medical Association. (2023, August 1). *Art for mental health: The well-being benefits of practicing art with Frank Clark, MD*.

<https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/physician-health/art-mental-health-well-being-benefits-practicing-art-frank>

An interview with doctor and poet Frank Clark, this article provides insight into the mental health benefits of artistic practice, particularly how this can promote healing for patients and prevent burnout amongst medical staff, enabling better connection with self and others, and details the universality of creative energy: the ways in which artistic practice can be simple and easy to incorporate into one's everyday life.

Assad, Clarice. (2018, July 21). *Sound Painting & Dynamic Composition: Your voice + body = Music*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEXqIThv9hY>

Composer and digital sound artist Clarice Assad describes her work and performs a number of pieces focused on the manipulation of the voice.

Caplan, Byron. (2013, August 10). *Hugo Ball, the sound poem & O Gadji Beri Bimba*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_BjdFbnrPDw

A brief documentary on the history of sound poetry as created by Hugo Ball.

Hamill, Jack. (2024, February 3). *MANIFESTO no.6 (2023) [FAVA Gallery, Oberlin]*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9PDFBrvoEI>

A video-recorded version of a live performance of Hamill's work utilizing interactive eye movements to manipulate sound.

Huang, CD., Jenq, CC., Liao, KC. et al. *How does narrative medicine impact medical trainees' learning of professionalism?*

A qualitative study. BMC Medical Education, 21 (2021). Article 391.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-021-02823-4>

This study describes the overall influence of narrative medicine training on medical students' ability to relate to their patients while also remaining self-aware of their emotions and their professional identity as medical providers.

Kac, Eduardo. (n.d.). *Negotiating Meaning: The Dialogic Imagination in Electronic Art*.
<https://ekac.org/dialogicimag.html>

This online version of Kac's article discusses interactive art and how, even in static art forms that would not normally be considered interactive, a dialogue is created between the viewer and the artist, wherein ideas, emotions, and insights are communicated via the medium of the art itself.

Lane, Cathy (Ed.). (2008). *Playing with words: The spoken word in artistic practice*. Cornerhouse Publications.

A compilation of writings by sound artists and composers who employ spoken words into their practice and/or use speech as inspiration for their work. Each describes one of their sonic art pieces which are featured on the accompanying website.

Lane, Cathy (Ed.) and Gruenrekorder. (2010). *Playing with Words: an online compilation | Various Artists*. https://www.gruenrekorder.de/?page_id=1771

A collection of word-based/vocal-based sonic art created by various artists as an accompaniment to their written descriptions featured in the compilation volume, *Playing with Words: The Spoken Word in Artistic Practice*.

Levin, Golan. (2009, January 1). *Ursonography (COMPLETE)*, Jaap Blonk & Golan Levin, 2007.
<https://vimeo.com/2687898>

A video-recording of a live performance of Kurt Schwitters' original piece, performed by a current sound artist, Jaap Blonk. This interpretation includes a live synch of the sounds aligned with the reading.

Peters, Emily F. & Collaborators. (2023). *Artists Remaking Medicine: The practice of imagination and the power to create a better healthcare future*. Procedure Press.

A wide-ranging book on the history and present-day application of arts and humanities in medicine, covering artistic mediums from visual and sound to movement, and describing the impact of artistic expression on health and the well-being of doctors and patients. It incorporates descriptions and stories from actual arts-in-medicine programs as well as recommendations for the future, moving forward into more culturally-conscious awareness.

TEDx Talks. (2012, August 3). *Acoustic sound storm: Pamela Z at TEDxStanford*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3U3iwir0wg>

Composer and digital sound artist Pamela Z performs a selection of vocal-based interactive sonic art.

Text-Sound-Art. (2024). *Sound-Poem videos*. <https://text-sound-art.org/sound-poem-videos/>

Examples by various artists of text-inspired sound art, specifically focused on poetry.

Thacker, Eugene. (2010). Biomedia. In W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Eds.), *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, pp. 117-130. The University of Chicago Press.

Thacker's article, part of a larger book discussing Media Studies, describes the relationship between patients and the code/data produced by their bodies, including their DNA, and how these may be seen as separate from one another, such that the code/data can simultaneously exist as both personal and relational, as information that others may be in dialogue with scientifically or artistically.

WIRED UK. (2013, January 11). *Imogen Heap Performance with Musical Gloves Demo | WIRED 2012 | WIRED*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6btFObRRD9k>

Singer/songwriter and digital sound artist Imogen Heap performs a selection of vocal-based interactive sonic art.