
Listening Post:

A Multi-Sensory Representation of On-Line Sociality and Technoculture

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When one thinks of “art,” often it is an image of an object, such as a painting or sculpture, that comes to mind. Art is often thought of as something to view and appreciate, or in more recent times, something to interact with. But art is not really the object. Art is not the painting or the sculpture or the installation; rather, a piece of art is the materialization of an idea. A piece of art represents all the circumstances that led to its creation, all the history that enabled its creation, and the social-psychological mechanics that allow for the piece to have meaning. A piece of art is a projection of the ideas of the artist and a reflection of the society in which it was created. *Listening Post*, a piece created by Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen, is a prime example of how a single piece of art can truly represent the collectivity of the experience called *art*.

I experienced *Listening Post* in November of 2007 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. As I approached the room in which *Listening Post* was installed, I heard it before I saw it. There was a synthesized, British, male voice rhythmically speaking lines in a cycle of tones; it was singing and there was ambient electronic music in the background. It created a very cinematic sound. I rounded the partition and fully entered the dimmed installation room, only to be met with a curved curtain of small text displays. These small screens were presenting text collected from English-language, public access chat rooms and other openly available Internet sites of public expression. A few box-like benches provided seating for the “show,” but people also situated themselves along the wall and even sat on the floor. Very few people ventured to look behind the curtain to see what the back of the piece looked like. Everyone was silent or communicated in lowered whispers. These behaviors were appropriate for the museum setting and also for a movie theater; the space felt like a hybrid of the two. The experience of the *piece*, on the other hand, seemed not to fit with either.

As I sat and experienced the piece (*watched* or *listened to* would not fully describe the action), I felt like I was inside it. It was truly an experience of immersion. The dimness of the lighting in the space meant that the majority of the light in the room was coming from the green light of the small LED text screens. Not only did the screens command the observer’s attention by being the only piece of art in the room, but the light they emitted surrounded the observer and became her means of seeing her immediate environment as well (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Photos of *Listening Post* taken at the Whitney Museum of American Art, December 2002. Photos by David Allison. Reprinted with permission. These and other photos, in addition to more information on the entire project, can be found at the EAR Studio website: <http://www.earstudio.com/projects/listeningpost.html>.

The effect on the audience is similar to that produced by a movie screen, but *Listening Post* is quite different from a movie screen. *Listening Post*'s screen is composite, made from more than two-hundred small screens with each creating its own small amount of illumination but also adding to the overall luminosity of the piece. Also, *Listening Post*'s "screen" is monochromatic, filling the room with a green glow rather than the spectrum of colors or dichotomous light or dark of a movie screen. *Listening Post* affects its screen-encultured audience in the same way a movie screen does, however. We, the public, have become so used to merely viewing what is presented to us. We watch images on screens as if they exist separately from us. We are used to seeing only the front of what is presented; if you walk behind a computer monitor, you do not see the back side of the image on the front, but only the back side of the monitor. Thus, very few people visiting *Listening Post* ventured to look behind its "screen," preferring to observe it passively from the front, as they would if they were watching a movie or looking at a computer screen. On the rare occasions that a person ventured to look behind it, however, another was likely to follow.

People are group-oriented and individuals are likely to match the behaviors of the people around them; through social conventions, people act automatically as a collective.

Listening Post represents a collection of collectives. It was conceived of, designed, and built by a team consisting of an artist, Ben Rubin, and a statistician, Mark Hansen. Its substance is the collected thoughts (via typed words) of the innumerable population of the Internet. And as with any piece of art, it would be nothing without an audience to view it. Beyond these three obvious categories of groups, there lie the invisible collectives such as the histories of the computer and the Internet, still significant because of their military origins and the continuing research by the military for “better” surveillance technology. Even the programs themselves, the “software robots” that actually mine the data that create the piece, are part of a collective (Bouman 2003:111-112). The uniformly fractured presentation of the “screen” of *Listening Post* could be seen as a visual representation of its multiplicitous origins. Many people, events, and materials are connected, as the many screens are connected, to create this singular piece, just as the many small screens create the appearance of one large screen.

Other aspects of its physical presence reveal other ideas represented by *Listening Post*. In her article about *Listening Post*, Margot Bouman describes the hundreds of small text screens as “a floating grid” (Bouman 2003:110). This is a good description of the piece’s design, as any visible parts of the structure that anchor the piece to the ceiling are practically identical to the structural supports that connect the small screens to one another. This design creates a sense of an unfettered continuum of the grid, just as the Internet itself seems to be an infinite resource of information with unseen support structures. If we interpret the piece as a conduit through which people’s thoughts pass, then the image produced by the word *floating* could be extended to the thoughts as well. This singular descriptor draws out the question of embodiment in virtual environments. The thoughts of the people who contributed to the piece via Internet messages seem to be disembodied or floating. They appear on a remote screen that was not their intended destination, and they are vocalized through a voice alien to their originators. But just as the screens in reality are *not* floating but attached to the ceiling, so, too, the thoughts channeled through *Listening Post* have corporeal origins.

The Internet has a way of acting like a wormhole or nexus, obscuring these origins. Although every thought on the Internet originates from a single body in a fixed location, it ends up being made available to anyone from anywhere. Any data entered from any point in real space can become available from any other point in real space (assuming the presence of Internet accessibility), effectively linking those two or more points in space and time (since Internet activity is not truly instantaneous). *Listening Post* taps into this dynamic process of extra-spatial communication. As Adam Gopnik points out in his article on *Listening Post* for *The New Yorker*, “No one, not Hansen or Rubin or even the machine, knows where any of this [text input] is coming from. The man... may be an anxious New Zealander or he may be the President himself” (2003). The medium of the Internet provides a veil of anonymity, but there is always *someone* behind the curtain.

The first movement of *Listening Post*’s performance serves to call attention to those people behind the curtain. Slowly, at first, the small text screens light up with, and the machine vocalizes, various short statements of being. Anonymous persons from around the globe offer their ages and statuses: “I am 18”; “I am freezin’”. These are matter-of-fact statements that identify single individuals; they say “I,” not “we”. The statements come from men, women, and children of different ages, races, and economic backgrounds. Each user types to express his or her uniqueness, but on the Internet, any sense of context is lost. One writer may be a woman typing that she is eighteen years of age, but the reader of this statement, who may be half way across the globe, cannot hear her voice or see her face to confirm that she is female. Text has no gender, no intonation. *Listening Post* represents this experience by vocalizing all these statements, whether originating from a child in England or a woman in Africa, through the voice of a single disembodied male.

It has been said that the Internet can be seen as “free, democratic, utopian, egalitarian, vernacular, communitarian; a medium that dissolves race, class and gender, producing instead ‘liquid’ identities” (Dyson 2005:86). This could be seen as a positive thing; prejudices based on visual cues may be erased. But on the other hand, people may express themselves in ways they would never dare to do in a face-to-face encounter. Beyond this, people make other assumptions when they do not have physical cues. Highly prejudiced people will still be prejudiced; they will just find other qualities to pick on. Being able to have a “liquid” identity on the Internet may allow people to feel that they can better express their various personality traits without being encumbered by their physicality, but it also fosters distrust. There is no way to be sure that that woman who says she’s eighteen years old is really not a forty-five year old man.

Then again, the point of *Listening Post* does not seem to be the truthfulness or deceit or any other single quality of any personality portrayed there. *Listening Post* is not for passing judgments on people; rather, it is, just as its title implies, an apparatus to eavesdrop on the countless conversations that occur on the Internet at any given time of the day or night. It is not so much about *what* people are saying as it is about the fact that people are saying anything at all. Ben Rubin, the visionary of the piece, says in an artist’s statement on his studio’s official website that the electronics of *Listening Post* are “constructed almost as wind chimes, where the wind in this case is not meteorological but human, and the particles that move are not air molecules but words” (2003).

The analogy of fluidity in the comparison between words and air currents recalls other metaphors of flow and natural processes related to *Listening Post*. Adam Gopnik points out that “when it started snowing outside, the machine was snowing, too, as all that snow passed through all those millions of minds” (2003). Encounters with nature are a collective experience, and *Listening Post* reflects the experience of a nation’s population encountering the same type of environment simultaneously. Gopnik recalls conversations during which Internet users in snowy Montana shared their thoughts about other Internet users’ opinions on the weather in the equally snowy Northeast. But as in the examples Gopnik provides, a common bond was created not just by people talking about the *subject* of snow but also by the increased frequency and amount of snow-related dialog. People didn’t necessarily notice how the snow was affecting them, but it was obvious through snow-related expressions such as, “I would probably throw his butt out in the snow” that the weather was having a major impact on their thoughts. The snow entered the consciousness of Internet users and in turn precipitated onto the screens of *Listening Post*.

The other naturalistic metaphor related to *Listening Post* connects the natural with the ethereal, in the “vast oceanic space” of cyberspace (Dyson 2005:86). Oceans call to mind waves, swells, floating, and currents, possibility and danger, all things that can also be associated with Internet activity. Thoughts move in waves through the Internet, as Gopnik demonstrates with the example of snow. Information is swept along through the currents of this virtual ocean, sometimes with destructive force; viral Internet rumors affect real people’s lives and are hard to kill. And unguarded ports can be infiltrated by spyware or infected at the hands of the vicious predators in this cyber-sea, in the various forms of computer viruses.

The second movement of *Listening Post* serves to visually and aurally depict this oceanic quality of online sociality. During this movement, the piece does not speak. All the screens are lit up with text moving horizontally leftwards. The displayed text cycles between very long pieces of input and less verbose entries, giving the illusion of waves of light. In addition to this, the only noises are the sound of small clickers located on the back of each screen, possibly augmented by wave sounds or generic white noise from the speakers, pulsing with the visual waves. The clickers are synchronized with the appearance of text on the screens, so when the text appears on screens on the right, the clicking noises

come from the right and move leftward with the text, making the wave sensation both a visual and an auditory experience. The clicking sound that accompanies this movement might also be interpreted as emulating the sounds of the millions of keystrokes used to type the messages. If the vocalization of the text is designed so that we can hear what the Internet would sound like if it could speak, then this one movement offers the alternative of what the typing would sound like as it occurs in reality—as countless, simultaneous keystrokes communicating words in silence.

In other segments of the show, the clicking sounds signal the initial appearance or imminent disappearance of scrolling text on a screen. The clicking also accompanies the rapid display of long passages of text on a screen, making it seem as though the text were “flipping” by and creating a sense of mechanical technology, such as flip number clocks or other such flip displays. It also made me think of old mechanical punch card or tape computers. For me, this sound effect carried the history of computer culture with it. It reminded me that our human relationship to computers has been steadily evolving and becoming more complex since they were first created. They have become integral to our everyday lives, not only in their use but also in the way they affect our social interactions and social structures. An example from the early days of computers can be found in the 1957 film, *Desk Set*, which gives voice (through a librarian) to the cultural fear at the rising potential of computers—fear at the possibility that computers might take over the uniquely human job of thinking in the same way that, in previous generations, machines had taken over some of the more physically demanding human jobs. In the end, the film makes the point that computers will always need people to create and monitor them and that computer “intelligence” can never replace the human mind.

Ben Rubin claims that technology is not the focus of *Listening Post*. In *Artforum*, he says, “It’s a lens on human social behavior. *Listening Post* is not about the Internet” (Nobel 2002). *Listening Post* may not be about the Internet itself, but it does draw a certain amount of attention to the Internet and how we as a mediated, electrified, digitized culture relate to it. It is also a spotlight on how we use and relate to the Internet as the newest form of nearly instantaneous long-distance communications.

The first movement of *Listening Post* seems to pay homage to long-distance communication of another sort. Before each statement read by the machine, there is a “beep.” This calls to mind the radio transmissions between mission control and astronauts in classic NASA footage, where a beeping sound often accompanied speech. The coverage of America’s landing on the moon is an example of the early crossover of government/military surveillance and public media. In a film clip of the planting of the first American flag on the moon in 1969, mission control jokingly says to Michael Collins in the Columbia command module orbiting the moon, “I guess you’re about the only person around that doesn’t have TV coverage of the scene” (Apollo 11 1995). This single sentence exemplifies how pervasive and influential television and mass media had already become. And, as an author in *Wired* magazine points out, “The goal of the mission wasn’t merely to get a man on the moon. It was to send back a live television feed so that everyone could see it – particularly the Soviets” (Kushner 2007:1). In the Space Race era of the Cold War, being able to transmit data and images from the moon to the people of the world was a potent weapon. The *Wired* article goes on to describe the difficulties encountered in making such a television feed possible. The effort put into televising the first steps on the moon, however, is not what people considered then or remember now, just as people today do not generally consider how the military may influence the media’s coverage of war.

Computers have been used for military surveillance since their advent. “The ground was laid in the 1950s,” according to Jordan Crandall in “Operational Media,” “when the development of computing became allied with the communication, command, simulation, and control imperatives of the Cold War” (2005). Surveillance and “real time” displays, like *Listening Post*, go hand in hand. Looking to a screen for real time, remote information became common in the 1940s with radar screens used to track

enemy movements. Military applications shifted, over time, with better technology: from simply wanting to know where the enemy is to wanting to see what the enemy *looks* like. The military's desire for seeing the enemy, or seeing possible scenarios, has been a driving force behind the entertainment industry's development of visualization software, which has contributed, in turn, to more advanced applications such as military simulations (Crandall 2005). Every time we watch a film or television program or play a video game, we are likely witnessing the result of something that was developed by or used by the government or military. But the military's influence is not always so visual. They also surveil non-images through data mining and communications monitoring not unlike *Listening Post's* software.

Bouman discusses the US government's data surveillance systems, such as ECHELON, which sift through transmitted messages to identify key words of interest. This is another point of articulation between the government and private sectors (Bouman 2003:113). Google relies on the same technology that the government uses in the War on Terror to run its search engine, the same technology that the artists behind *Listening Post* appropriated to bring it into being (Bouman 2003:117). *Listening Post* basically acts as a real time search engine that is limited to chat rooms and message boards searching for designated words. This makes me wonder how the piece's reception might have differed had it been titled "Search Engine" instead? Would people feel more uneasy about the idea of a piece of artwork treating their Internet conversations as mere data to be gathered and scrutinized? Does it foreground the difference between being overheard and being spied upon, the first being a passive act but the second being a deliberate one?

Temporality comes into play. The title *Listening Post* conveys a sense of passivity; the machine and observer are merely listening in on the line. But it glosses over the active nature of the piece; the piece is not about the Internet as a passive repository for words. It is, as Rubin states, about letting people "connect to this weird stream of data" (Nobel 2002). But the Internet does have some unusual temporal properties. It allows for nearly instantaneous communication around the globe, words that flare up like atmospheric sprites. The Internet feeds the growing public desire for instantaneity, but it also acts as a giant archive. If the words that *Listening Post* captured were really just instant occurrences that faded away after their utterances, as do spoken words, then the piece would be nearly impossible to implement; there would be nothing to gather. But the words that are typed on the Internet do not fade away like spoken words. They are gelled into the code of the Internet, at least for a short time, in such environments as chat rooms and instant messages. The Internet functions like a large recording device without any motive for preserving the words. It becomes like a camera for typed words.

In a sense, then, these words are like ghosts. Contemplating the lasting effects of images and the "ghosts" created by photos and films, philosopher Jacques Derrida describes a specter as "a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance" (Derrida 2002:117). When people "speak" on the Internet through instant messenger-type interfaces, they do so as they would speak with their voice. They speak/think/type a fleeting thought that becomes recorded visually in text. This form of recording does not fit many of the other descriptions of Derrida's photographic specters, since there was never a physical/visual origination of the words as there are for photographic subjects. But, the Internet's ability to create seemingly disembodied experiences, expressions, and interactions evokes one of Derrida's most powerful ideas about the connection between images and ghosts: their ability to evoke history in its immediate form. Photos capture an instant in time that is past and gone, but through the window of the image, you can remember or imagine the instant of its capture, thereby bringing past and present together. With chat rooms and other such instant text communications, others online are there to witness the capture of your thoughts in the online medium. Like a photograph, each entry is a captured moment in time, no matter how elusive and fleeting, and an idea is crystallized into words that reveal something about the writer that exists in both past and present, a ghost.

Revealing is a major theme of *Listening Post*. In an artist's statement on his website, Rubin says, "I have thought about ways to hear inaudible phenomena." *Listening Post* is a stethoscope with which to hear the otherwise inaudible mutterings of online chatter. As a work of art, it recalls an earlier project that was one of the first to combine technology and art: Alex Hay's *Grass Field*, performed during 9 Evenings, an innovative art event performed in New York in 1966. Seeking to make inaudible things audible, Hay worked with engineers from Bell Laboratories to create wearable electronics to detect and amplify the electrical currents generated by his muscles (Bardiot 2006). At the time of Hay's piece, social interaction was not possible on the scale that has since become possible through the Internet. But there is a clear parallel: while Hay's *Grass Field* was a piece centered on revealing the inner workings of a single human body, Rubin's piece is centered on the interworkings of people within a (global) community.

Both of these two performances reflect the relationship between its respective society and technology. In the 1960s, when *Grass Field* was performed, people's interactions relating to technology were primarily collaborative towards inventing the technology. For example, artist Alex Hay communicated with his engineer colleagues to create the technology for his piece as a tool. Forty years later, Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen, both of whom are fully competent in computer programming and both having creative input, collaborated to create *Listening Post*, but the subject of the piece was how people communicate *through* technology. Technology was once wholly external, objects to be created and manipulated and made to perform tasks for us. Now, as *Listening Post* reflects back to us, technology has been internalized—or we have been absorbed into technology—not just in literal ways such as implantation, but also within our social structures generally.

As Jordan Crandall points out, the history of surveillant/detecting technology began with the remote sensing of enemy movements. "Its tradition is one of precise locational and temporal specificity," but modern discourses have viewed "virtuality in terms of delocalization and disembodiment" (Crandall 2005). Frances Dyson observes that with the advent of more personal electronics, cyberspace is changing "from an interactive and collective enterprise to an array of intimate gadgets worn on the body or deployed in public space that engage or track the individual rather than unite the electronic community" (Dyson 2005:89). Technology and networked connectivity have become both personalized/local and disbursed. The remote tracking computers of old were stationary and detected things generally "out there," but today surveillance can be personal. You can be tracked through the Web, and the Web is wherever you are. The people whose chats were captured by *Listening Post* were not confined to desktop computers or even laptop computers. They could have been on a bus or out in a field communicating with the Internet community through their cell phone/PDA or Nintendo DS or other such portable, networkable devices. We can now carry the Internet in our pockets and we can commune with anyone from anywhere from wherever we happen to be. We can be physically isolated, but very socially active in the Internet community through our personal portals into cyberspace.

Listening Post is an intriguing piece; it has been described as having a magical and almost godlike ability to read the collective consciousness of the entire world. Because it speaks, it seems to have a mind of its own. But we should remember that it is not magical. It was made from familiar materials by men; it is only godlike insofar as they, or we, are godlike to have made it, and the only mind it has is appropriated from us. As a piece of art, *Listening Post* reaches beyond the conventional frame of art to captivate its audience. What it really does, however, is unite the ones who experience it within a frame that includes all the people who unknowingly contributed to the piece, all the people on the Internet, the government/military, Western culture, and technoculture as a whole. In form and in function, *Listening Post* is both a screen and a mirror, projecting a reflection of our society of individuals.

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