

Immersed in the anatomy of a symbiosis.
Witnessing the processes of the rhizosphere,
where underground bonds are taking place.

Ancient symbiotic bonds,
Now loosening and untangling, unravelling and
dissolving,
Leaving plants and bacteria alone and unconnected,
vulnerable and weak.

Their ceremony of parting was caused by human
intervention. (orchestration)
And now, we are listening to the trembling gradience of
data,
Perceiving the growing degrees of estrangement,
And occasionally hearing brief glimpses of beauty,
In the traces of the bonds that linger.

(Spačal 2023)

Text: Brandon Rosenbluth
Artistic work: Saša Spačal



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Fig. 1: Anatomy of a Symbiosis by Saša Spačal





»Thus, listening becomes both a political and ethical act which can benefit not only the individual or humanity, but the coexistence of all forms of life on earth through the intention and agency of humanity.«

Saša Spačal's *Anatomy of a Symbiosis* is the outgrowth of a dynamic, living intermedia installation, *Symbiome – Economy of Symbiosis*, originally presented as a generative 22 hour broadcast of the sonified data it generated, now edited and collected as a condensed listening experience, enabling wider transmission of the intrinsic messages and ways of being in the world which it invokes.

On the surface, one is listening to the audio artifact of the disintegrating symbiotic bond between soil bacteria *Rhizobium trifolii* and red clover caused by the introduction of nitrogen fertilizer by humans, eliminating the necessity for this unlikely and fragile collaboration, which had developed in the deep past, hidden from human cognisance by its macro time frame and micro scale, buried within the earth.

Aesthetically, one immediately is compelled by the organ-like dirge which emits both the sombre funereal tone conveying the melancholy of this instantaneous severing of centuries of symbiotic interspecies co-evolution, while also evoking a religious-like reverence for the hyperobject known as ›nature‹, encompassing all of the processes and interdependent forms of life or being, which have only relatively recently entered into humankind's field of awareness, de-centring the human by forcing humanity to reckon with its own interdependence with non-humans, whether that be with the bacteria in our guts, or the material reality of depleted natural resources and the ecosystemic repercussions of animal and insect extinction caused by the Western philosophical assumptions that justified anthropogenic extractivism.

Experientially, *Anatomy of a Symbiosis*, not only forces one to slow down to a non-human pace, but also to listen deeply and with expanded sensitivity to the micro-events unfolding within the sound, and consequently within oneself and the environment one is inextricably embedded within. The piece functions as both the expression of a material/chemical transformation, as well as the site of transformation within the listener. This convergence event can be identified as Quantum Listening in the formulation of seminal avant-garde musician/composer and

Deep Listening instantiator/practitioner Pauline Oliveros.

Listening (as opposed to passive hearing) is an act of co-creation and interrelation, just as it has been shown that the impact of humans viewing quantum phenomena alter the behaviour of quantum particles, thus being named ›observer effect‹. In her essay *Quantum Listening: From Practice to Theory (To Practice Practice)*, Oliveros expounds:

What is heard is changed by listening and changes the listener. I call this the listening effect or how we process what we hear. Two modes of listening are available – focal and global. When both modes are utilized and balanced there is connection with all that there is. Focal listening garners detail from any sound and global listening brings expansion through the whole field of sound. (Oliveros 1999: 1).

Deep Listening is active, a practice of focusing one's attention to make sense of, and consequently act within, the world. Not only that, but listening can also function as a social act, shaping culture both locally and globally. This is however not an automatic effect of listening, but requires a dedicated practice and training, drawing explicitly from Buddhist meditation traditions. Once the doors are open, according to Oliveros, one can listen to more than one reality simultaneously, so it's just a small leap to being able to act upon more than one reality simultaneously (ibid.).

How we listen, however, is not universal, but rather acculturated, and the acuity of every human's hearing is not all the same, so the practice of Quantum Listening will not inevitably lead to accessing and interacting with the same realities for everyone who engages it with dedication, or to producing a uniform culture (ibid.). That said, Oliveros does posit that »Quantum Listening leads you to an all-embracing perspective of an ever-expanding field [...] The Quantum Listener listens to listening« (ibid.: 14–15).

Ultimately, Oliveros concludes that Deep Listening in its

Symbiosis is an ever-evolving negotiation of power relations.

This what Morton coins as the ›symbiotic real‹. The breakage of this innate symbiotic state of interrelated being at a macro level between humanity and what has become known as ›nature‹, Morton identifies as ›The Severing‹. »The Severing is a catastrophe: an event that does not take place ›at‹ a certain ›point‹ in linear time, but a wave that ripples out in many dimensions, and in whose wake we are caught« (Morton 2017: 41).

The Severing is a foundational, traumatic fissure between, to put it in stark Lacanian terms, reality (the human-correlated world) and the real (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere). Since nonhumans compose our very bodies, it's likely that the Severing has produced physical as well as psychic effects, scars of the rip between reality and the real (ibid.: 35).

Following Jean-François Lyotard, Morton explains that the »real-reality boundary must be spongy«, leaky and porous. They continues:

Worlds are perforated and permeable, which is why we can share them. Entities don't behave exactly as their accessor wants them to behave, since no access mode will completely shrink-wrap them. So, worlds must be full of holes. Worlds malfunction intrinsically. All worlds are 'poor,' not just those of sentient nonhuman lifeforms ('animals,' as Heidegger calls them). This means that human worlds are not different in value from nonhuman ones, and also that non-sentient nonhuman lifeforms (as far as we know) and non-life (and also by implication the non-sentient and non-living parts of humans) also have worlds (ibid.: 38-39).

The enclosure of a world, specifically humanity's world from all other worlds, is then predictably experienced by a long, subconsciously felt melancholy – one expressly present and felt in Spačal's *Anatomy of a Symbiosis*, which invokes the perennial mystical motto »as above, so below« with its minuscule subject standing in synecdochally for a massive fissure in material and psycho-spiritual space that is begging to be addressed.

One facet of Morton's proposal for returning to this innate state of contingent unity, or at least the mentality that recognizes this fundamental state of being, is to readopt an animistic attitude of spectrality which re-enchants the world without seeking to explain away and quantify it – this is core tenet of the philosophical movement known as ›object-oriented ontology‹ of which Morton is a key figure.

Symbiosis is framed as not simply a mutually beneficial and balanced alliance, but is shown to take form asymmetrically and sometimes ambiguously, depending on which perspective you inhabit, host, or parasite. In the case of *Rhizobium trifolii* and red clover, the bacteria initially enter the plant as a parasite, but the relationship evolves to be ultimately of mutual benefit, exchanging carbon for nitrogen through a process that exerts much energy to establish, but sustains both in the long term.

[...] to care for ourselves and other lifeforms beyond mere maintenance of vanilla existence, we will need to embrace a haunting, uncanny, spectral dimension. Ecological reality is suffused with a ghostly, quivering energy that cannot be contained as ›spirit‹ or ›soul‹ or ›idea‹ or ›concept‹ without violence. It pertains to phenomena that we call ›paranormal‹, which is easiest to think as action at a distance, non-mechanical causality: telepathy, telekinesis, nonliving things moving by themselves—life as a subset of a vaster quivering, movement itself as a subject of a deeper shimmying. To think the human without recourse to reactionary essentialism, to embrace other lifeforms and other humans in solidarity, would need to allow for the possibility of tables that can dance (ibid.: 77–78).

Spectrality in musical terms denotes a focus on the timbral quality of the sound as the basis of its formal language – it enhances certain fundamental aspects of the sound as if under a sonic microscope, centring the listener's awareness on otherwise hidden elements buried within the composition. This often results in a haunting affective experience, as if somehow the spirit of sound is being summoned forth, and can function at the limits of human auditory perception, exposing both the embodied and deprived nature of the sensory experience. *Anatomy of a Symbiosis* may not formally be considered ›spectral music‹ however it unquestionably amplifies the spectral dimensions of sound as a medium for the bacteria *Rhizobium trifolii* to exert its slow-motion dying gasp.

Bringing the spectral dimension of reality into the foreground requires a specific type of attention which must be cultivated through practices like Quantum Listening, and re-centres value systems and beliefs from a seemingly distant pre-agricultural past, which in fact persist outside of and despite Western humanity's self-imposed blindness enacted to give us an artificially comprehensible order to the world. It gives agency to the seemingly inanimate, and enables a practice of awareness that Morton calls ›rocking‹, which, like Oliveros, is informed by their engagement with Buddhism. Rocking is conceived as a subversion, or ›queering‹, in their words, of action in opposition to awareness. In an interview with the Cente de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Morton elaborates:

There's not that much of a difference between awareness and action. In fact, in a funny way, you could say that awareness was a kind of quantum of action, sort of like zero-degree action, because when you are aware of something, you are with it in some physical sense, as

well as some sort of more ethereal sense. Even if that thing is not located anywhere in your vicinity. All you have to do, to think about this, is to think about art. When you think about your favourite piece of music, or your favourite installation or whatever, that installation or that piece of music isn't strictly there, nevertheless you were just affected by it, by visualising it. Art has a nonlocal cause and effect. And what art actually is, is directly tampering with cause and effect [...] the aesthetic dimension, which is where the art happens, is actually the causal dimension.

They continues:

We've sort of removed the anthropocentric copy-right control on who gets access, and we've removed the idea that thought, in particular human thought, is the top or only true access mode. So I think awareness isn't simply a prequel or not to action. I think it's a kind of action, and that we actually need to soften the notion of what action means, and sharpen the notion of what be aware means. And the two have much more in common than you might think (Morton 2016).

In this sense, rocking is a stand in for a type of awareness which effects the world through intention rather than action, on a non-hierarchical plane, in dynamic interplay within an ›explosive holism‹. A relational form of co-constitutive agency, which Karen Barad has famously termed ›intra-action‹, defying causal logic, linear time, and subject-object dichotomies. Fundamentally, in the words of Oliveros: »Our world is a complex matrix of vibrating energy, matter and air just as we are made of vibrations. Vibration connects us with all beings and connects us to all things interdependently« (Oliveros 1999: 6).

Without relationality, there is no agency, which is distributed and co-creative. And awareness, when cultivated intentionally, can act as an agent for change within a complex acausal network. Such an awareness is always in concert with its web of relations, human and non-human, animate and inanimate. No inside or outside, nor unvital matter, all vibration. *Anatomy of a Symbiosis* operates as both a mirror or microscope for this inextricable web, and as rock or root from which one can cultivate an expanded awareness through Deep Listening, tuning into the spectral frequencies and actualizing kindred spirits by recognizing one's place within the symbiotic real.

Spačal, Saša (2023): *Anatomy of a Symbiosis*.
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