

failed attempts at
listening / failure as a
strategy for listening

To be listening is to be failing at
listening.

Failed Attempts at Listening

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Failure as a Strategy for Listening

At Bureau *for* Listening, we would like to propose, practice, and continue to reformulate failure as an essential strategy for listening. We understand listening as more than a passive act of receiving sounds or data – let's call that hearing. Instead, listening becomes a critical practice of being present, of fostering attention, and of staying with the shifts of our orientations - both internal and external. In this framework, failure itself becomes a generative direction and framework, a form of disorientation that invites us to reconsider and challenge our ways of knowing and being in the world.

To listen, then, is to fail at understanding in the traditional sense. It is to tremble and await, to dream, to explore, and to remain open to the dissonances that arises in the encounter

with otherness. Through failure, we come to realize that understanding is not a final destination but a continual process of questioning and renegotiation.

Listening as failure is not about getting it right; it is about staying with the messiness, the uncertainty, and the profound not-knowing that is necessary for true connection. This form of listening allows us to engage with the contradictions that arise from living within a society shaped by racism, colonization, and capitalism. It asks us to critically examine our participation in systems we wish to dismantle and make fail, acknowledging that even in our attempts to break free, we remain entangled in the very structures of oppression we seek to escape.

We are implicated, and so is our listening. Realizing this, failure becomes a radical tool for transformation. It is in the failure to completely escape these systems that we find the space to imagine other ways of living, being, and listening.

We argue that we need 'messes', disorientation, and failures to cultivate listening otherwise. When we fail together, we do not collapse into despair; instead, we rebuild and reconnect, fostering new capacities to dream, imagine, love, and heal. In this process, we fail miserably in the hearts and minds of oppressors, for it is in our refusal to conform, our refusal to listen only to those in power, that we find our strength.

Failing, then, becomes a form of resistance - a refusal to accept the status

quo, and a commitment to creating new spaces for listening to the un- and underheard, the unsaid and unsayable.

Listening, then, must thrive in failure. For it is through failure - through the refusal to settle for easy answers and the rejection of one-dimensional understandings - that we discover the profound potential of listening.

Listening is in this context more than sensing audible signals or training such an ability. Rather, listening is practiced as a relational capacity, a (re)generative and critical engagement. As a philosophical framework and artistic practice nurturing listening as an evolving process of awareness, reorientation, and attunement, and thus proposing a continuing process of failure and learning.

The following as an equally real and
imagined list of failed attempts at
listening:

Failing at tuning into
the collapsing
soundscapes of species
gone.

Failing to hear the
quiet revolution in the
cracks of my bones,
where brokenness
becomes the melody of
healing, echoing
across the landscape
of a wounded world.

Failing at falling into
deep dreaming while
listening to the voice
of a friend.

Failing to listen as
the world's wounds
reverberate through
the fragile ecosystems
of my own body.

Failing to find comfort
in the rhythm of my
own breath, steady
and fragile.

Failing at being slow,
soft, stealthy as
modes of being in the
world.

Failing at recognizing
the ungraspable and
yet conditional modes
of support that makes
me sing.

Failing at trusting
your touch, your
pulses, and rhymes;
your unexpected
capsulating waves
surrounding my body.

Failing to trust that
untamed listening can
carve pathways
through uncertainty
and open thresholds to
liberation.

Failing at listening to
quiet whispered
warnings of the dead.

Failing to listen
without the filter of
my privilege shielding me
from discomfort.

Failing at listening
without the intrusion
of my desire to fix.

Failing to understand
my own listening as a
form of taking.

Failing at listening to
the fear in a voice
hardened by survival.

Failing at tuning into
the hum of
untranslatable worlds
vibrating beyond
words.

Failing to remain in
the always already
uncertainty of sound.

Failing to discern what
my body refuses to
hear.

Failing to hold space
for the rupture that
listening to pain can
create.

Failing to attune to
queer frequencies.

Failing at hearing the
air rustle through my
lungs as both life and
debt.

Failing at listening to
the fear and trembling
in myself as I
attempt to listen to
others.

Failing at joining the
protest of noise.

Failing to listen to
the unspoken
agreement of seeds
breaking soil.

Failing to attune my
heartbeats to those
of others.

Failing to honor the
quiet courage of those
voices that remains
unheard.

Failing at hearing the
pulse of solidarity in
the chants that
shake the streets.

Failing to listen to my
own body's quiet
requests for rest
amidst the roar of
urgency.

Failing at listening
untamed and full of
desire.

Failing at fantasizing
about the long ago
censored away sounds;
songs, cries, and
moans.

Failing to hear the
layers of a moment,
mistaking the present
for the past's
shadow.

Failing to let silence
speak louder than my
need to fill it.

Failing at not being a
capitalistic listening
body.

Failing at hearing the
satire in a bird's
mimicry of machines.

Failing to remain with
the unknowable,
rushing to make sense
where none exists.

Failing at registering
the inaudible as vital
and alive.

Failing at listening to
the fragile hum of my
body's resilience,
trembling between pain
and possibility, as it
pulses with the
rhythms of survival.

Failing at safeguarding
the BioSymphony
sounding still but not
much more.

Failing at recognizing
my activism's
soundscape as complicit
in the noise of
oppression.

Failing to listen across
borders, where sound
becomes muted or
distorted by fear.

Failing at training and
transforming my
listening body.

Failing at laying down
and listening.

Failing to listen to
the echoes of my
footsteps as reminders
of place and
displacement.

Failing at dreaming
about a not-yet
possible future.

Failing to recognize
the sound of silence
as an act of
defiance.

Failing at hearing the
resistance embedded in
the lullabies of the
displaced.

Failing to keep
listening when it
hurts, when it
accuses, when it
demands.

Failing to distinguish
the cosmic background
noise from the sounds
of our halted
breathing.

Failing to love without
fear and to trust the
tenderness of
hesitation.

Afterthought

In this exploration of failed attempts at listening, we seek to confront the tension between the ideal of perfect comprehension and the reality of disorientation, discomfort, and contradiction that true listening demands. Listening, as we propose, is not merely a mechanical act of reception, but an embodied process - always evolving, always unfinished.

Through failure, we discover that to listen is to embrace not-knowing, to acknowledge the complexity and richness of the world without the presumption that we can fully grasp it.

Each failure is an invitation to listen more deeply, to reconsider the power dynamics embedded in our modes of hearing, and to honor the unheard voices and silences that shape our collective experience.

The failures we describe are not points of defeat but opportunities for radical growth and love - where listening itself becomes a form of resistance to the dominant narratives that shape our world. To fail is to be. To be beautiful and lovable.

In failing to listen, we disrupt the very idea of mastery, allowing space for new forms of connection, learning, and unlearning. These failures are not an end, but a continual process of attunement, of engaging with the messiness of the world as it is, rather than retreating into comfort or certainty.

By failing radically, we open ourselves to new possibilities, to a listening that is untamed, unfixed, and always in process.

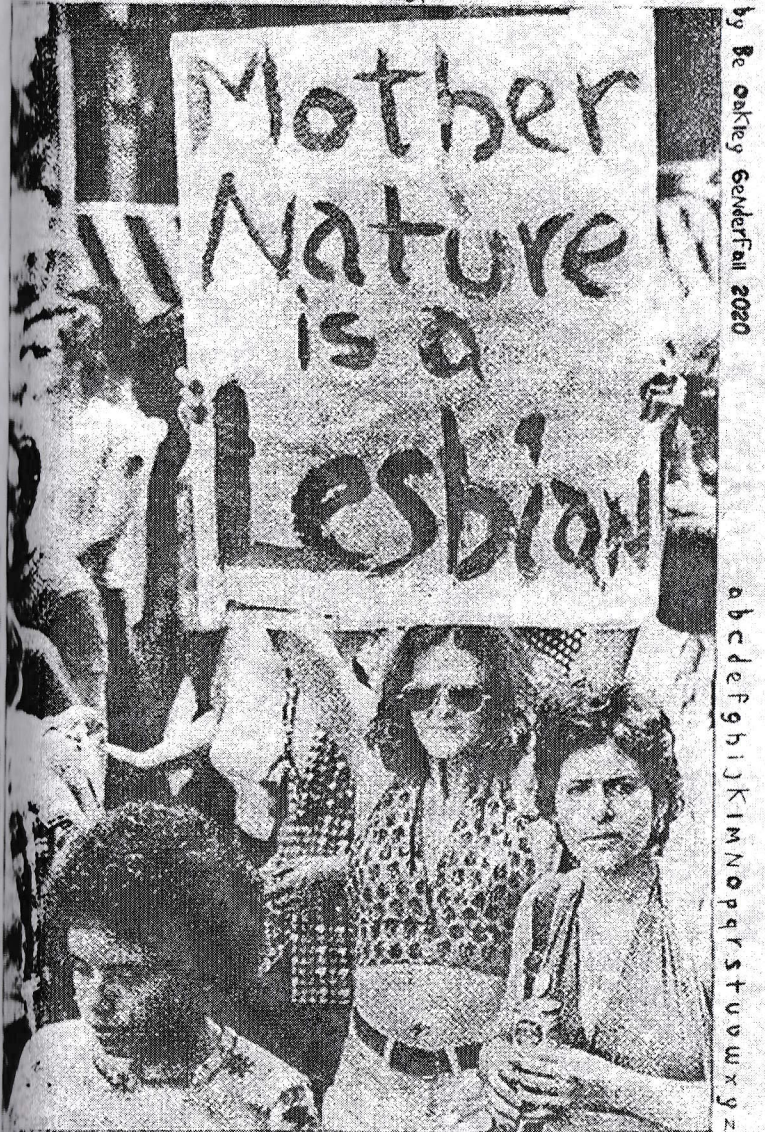
Through failure, we listen differently - not for answers, but for the spaces in between, for the dissonances, and for the potentials of what is yet to be understood, misunderstood and beyond understanding.

We would like to thank GenderFail Press (Brooklyn, New York) for inspiring to a path of failure as resistance.

The list of failed attempts at listening is set in the protest-font: **Mother Nature is a Lesbian**. Created by artist and activist Be Oakley and based on a 1972 Gay Parade sign.

Thank you for failing.

Mother Nature is a Lesbian typset



One woman makes herself clear in the 1974 New York Christopher Street gay parade.

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