

Immersion and the Relational Listener

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Immersive art commonly aims at a fusion between the fictional world of an artwork and an external, non-art reality. Yet rather than a seamless absorption in an aestheticized environment, my compositional practice seeks to iterate the structure emerging from the interplay between immersive aesthetic perception and its constitutive conditions. Thus, I reject treating immersion as mere engulfing affect or sonic landscape. I propose instead that immersion's semblance of multisensory inundation that spatially surrounds the audience can be reformulated within the principle of the *relational listener*. This principle, by schematizing its latent perceptual categories, would not only address the risk of naively implemented immersion falling into kitsch or ideology. Much more, by situating itself in the perceptual mediations underlying immersion, conceiving of a relational listener could build an approach that is both critical and constructive, yielding new compositional tools along the way.

Composing for a relational listener means treating the audience as a multisensory locus that is not simply a combination of different senses, not only the site of physiological stimuli, and not just a participative agent. Rather, it centers on how virtual, concrete, and situative dimensions of listening that are activated by immersion are dynamically mediated by each other in the individual and collective audience member. It maintains a blank space for the audience to account for the inherent impenetrability of the listener as material, yet manifests this blankness by creating structures and situations that allow room for the individual to negotiate the mediations as individuals, savoring the difference as a collectivizing principle. The goal of composing towards the relational listener is to highlight the ways in which the individual relates to virtual projections, concrete stimuli, and a social situation. As the listener is fundamentally variable, this relation cannot be finally specified, only outlined and qualified.

A threefold structure of mediation emerges. The first is the virtual, where sounds are projected into the speculative, imaginary space in our heads. They become there abstracted and metaphorized, forming properties of proportion and activating memory and association. This corresponds with the fictional diagesis of immersion, the world of 'as-if' that would seem to surround us. The second mode is the concrete. Here, sounds are perceived primarily through their physiological affect, taken in bodily. They press, rub, and caress us, producing therein a sense of their material presence or production technics. This corresponds with the bodily 'real' of affective stimuli of immersive effects that activates our senses. The third type is the situative. With this, sounds are heard in context, in physical spaces and more importantly in their social (and by extension political or institutional) surroundings. This corresponds to the *in situ* and socially

mediated dimension of immersive works that emerge through activating the audience as a collective body and moving it through space. These three modes of relational listening co-constitute the act of perception and in correlation also focus and attenuate each other. However, since they all are located in the sensory flow of an individual (or collection of individuals) they never truly appear alone; nevertheless, I maintain it is possible and productive to theorize them as distinct in order to apply them in compositional admixture.

The preceding theoretical formulation was developed from my composition *HAPPY NO NEW YEARS* [2025], for performers, instruments, electronics, and video, which addresses an immersive paradigm by using the relational listener as starting point. This means the material was conceived at the meeting point of the acoustic-formal (musical), social-participative (performative), and visual-spatial (installative). Practically, the work was composed as a three-room parcourse as an attempt to schematize the virtual, concrete, and situative modes of mediation. It is important to emphasize that while each room may be designed to emphasize a single mode, the dynamic nature of the relational listener and the synthetic demands of composition means that each room does contain other modes in supporting roles. For brevity's sake, I mention here only the primary mode of each room.

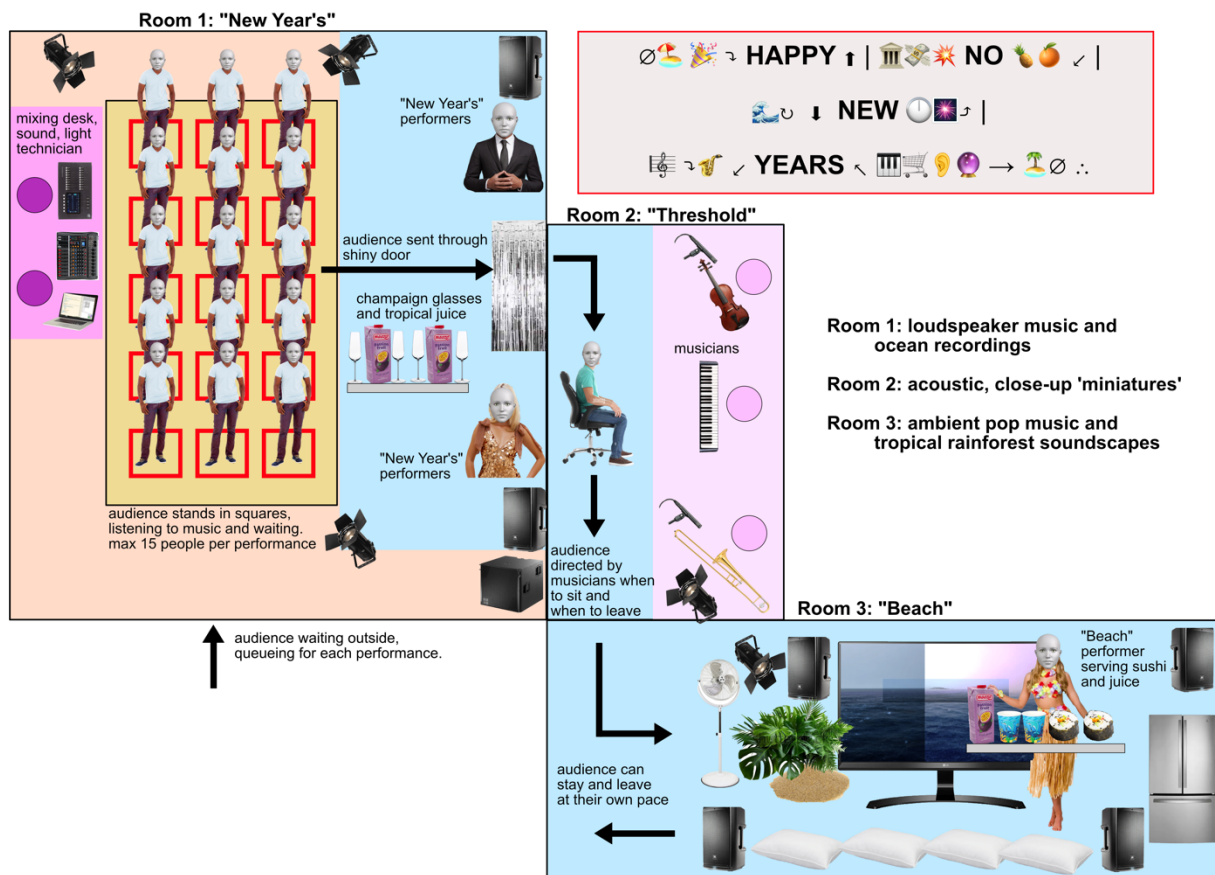


Figure 1: HAPPY NO NEW YEARS stage plan

The first room of the parcourse, decorated in a 'new year's' theme, is meant to emphasize the mode listening which would build a 'virtual space' or 'fictional world' implicit in a concept of immersion. The audience waits in front of a shiny doorway, listening to field recordings of the ocean and pointillistic music from loudspeakers consisting of samples and live instruments. This music alternates with a 'countdown' section led by performers. In each successive countdown, audience members are alternatingly given plastic champagne glasses and led from the waiting area one-by-one through the doorway into the next room.



The virtuality here is first and foremost the loudspeaker music, mapped onto a stereo image from absent sound sources. Although the instrumentalists play from the next room – the virtual space of the loudspeaker is perforated by live imperfections – they are not seen by the audience in the first room. They become flattened to the same sonic plane as the samples, which are not only virtual through their digitization, but also speak to the virtuality of the theme: of expectation for the new year, or more abstractly, the anticipation of crossing a threshold into the speculative realm of fiction that immersive effects aim at.



The second room in the parcours is built to reflect concrete listening, a secondary dimension of listening implicated in immersion's attempt to fuse reality and fiction. Insofar as this fusion will inevitably fail since art can never really efface the 'real' world it inhabits just the same as that 'real' also never fully materializes, immersion must use strong bodily affects to create the semblance of fusion which paradoxically cast attention to the perceiving body of the listener. Since I favor the structure rather than the effects of immersion, I do not seek to manufacture strong affects or emotions. The second room is undecorated; similarly, its music seeks to minimize the virtual plane of projections and associations (which nevertheless never truly disappear) and instead focus on the materiality or production mechanics of hearing sound. Thus, in the second room, audience members arrive (mostly) one-by-one into the room, are invited by musicians to sit in a chair, and receive intimate 'miniatures' close to their ears. The music is composed with subtle spatiotemporal formations: long textures and semi-regular pulses that allow the materiality of sound take the foreground.



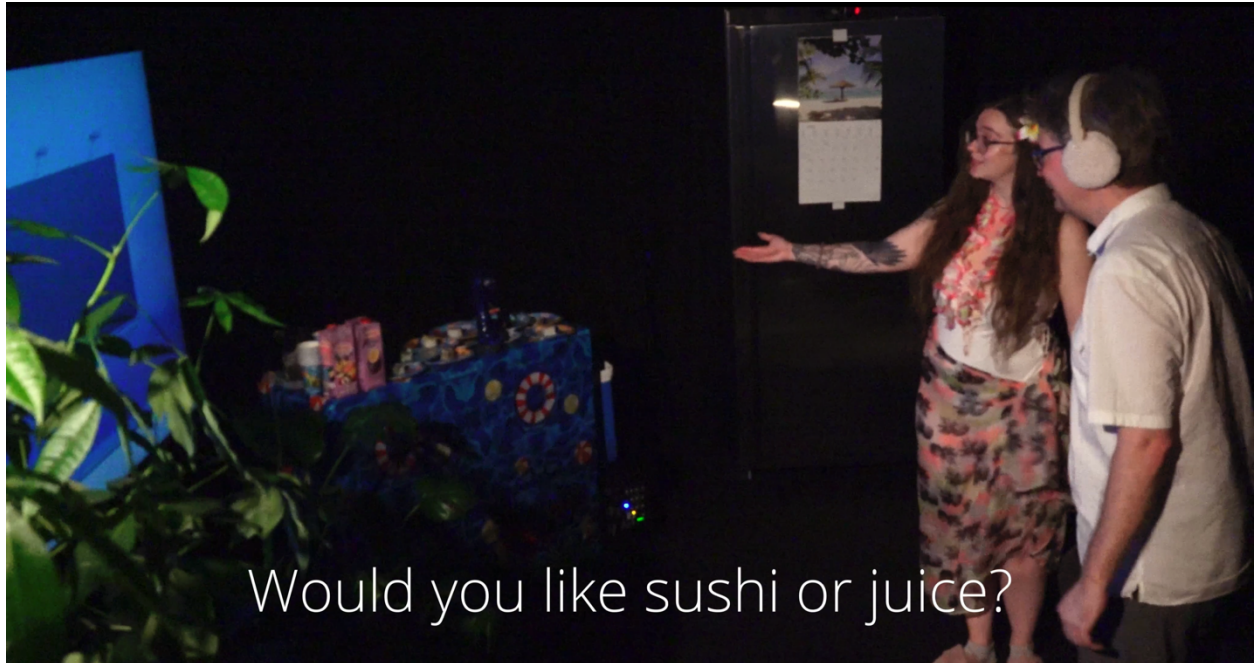
These sounds, mostly small noises from the violin and trombone, are therefore intended to foreground the texture of sound, architecture of the instruments, or even the responsiveness of the ear itself that preforms music over any abstract relation or association. A second important facet of this material is that it is very quiet and purely acoustic. The musicians are instructed to enter into close proximity to the ears of the seated audience member. This would constitute a literal reading of immersion's semblance of proximity and engulfment by simply placing instruments in a very close sonic field around the ears of the listener.



The third room is designed to be more situation than concert. The music here is 'ambient,' reflecting one of the most widespread functions of music today: to serve as an accompaniment to sociality, labor, commerce, and leisure. The material is thus placed more than formed; it consists of speakers arranged in a ring, playing "The Sweet Life" by Frank Ocean at a barely discernable volume, overlaid with a generic 'tropical forest bird' ASMR YouTube stream, complete with YouTube advertisements at interval. The sound projection itself is indirect: speakers have various high- and low-pass filters applied and are pointed at the walls rather than at the area where the audience is invited to sit. What is created is an indistinct sound mass: at times the bass of the pop song is most present, other times the noise of an unnamed rainforest. Other times the YouTube advertisements poke through, further perforated by the sound of a room fan continuously blowing air onto the 'beach' scene.



This amorphous blob of samples, songs, and noise, besides being reflecting the blurriness of that speculative space which a virtual listening would aim at, is meant to create an acoustic environment that encapsulates just the same as it barely holds attention, serving mainly to underscore the situation: at the end of the parcourse, audience members are not only given time and space to sit down, relax, watch an ocean video, and consider their journey thus far (it is up to them when to leave), but are also offered sushi and tropical juice by a performer. The audience thus chooses when they leave and whether they interact by eating and drinking. This loose frame is meant to give a space for reflection, but also to experience through multiple senses the absent (and imaginary) space of a tropical paradise, ending the parcourse in a process of social and spatial negotiation that localizes the experience of the work in the individual's situation.



Here a further implication emerges from composing towards the relational listener: the concert hall ceases to be a temple of solitude, comfortable in its anonymous darkness. Virtual fictions and concrete stimuli never act alone when they engulf us: the audience that accompanies the artwork is also immersed in its own intersubjective space. For this reason, to the extent that schematizing the modes listening deduced from the structure of immersion necessitates moving the listener through different spaces and audience-performer formations, a distinct social-participative dimension emerges in which individuals negotiate explicit and implicit rules and conventions of the work. This is meant to materialize the difference between individuals in order to negatively address the audience as social body.

This is primarily accomplished through building parallel pathways through the work. In the first room each audience member chooses a starting square to stand in, determining at which point they will be sent through the parcourse, how much of the performance in the first room they will see, and which miniature in the second room they will receive. They are not informed which position is first and in which order the square are chosen. Their decision is thus based only on the instruction to 'take your place' and some implicit convention of how one stands in squares and how one orders oneself after queueing in line. Thus, nobody gets the same experience and nobody gets the whole experience. For this reason, the work should be repeated multiple times at a given performance. This not only gives the audience a chance to see the piece again and choose a different path, but also to then compare experiences with other audience members. To the extent this occurs, an implicit 'fourth room' is hinted at: the non-art space outside the work.