

A small print stares at me from the corner of my desk. It stares from a rectangular shape made of Japanese watercolour paper, edges torn. Against a bright yellow and partly erased background, two teal doodles hover one on top of the other. At the bottom, one word in light brown small letters:

Listen.

That a flat print is prompting me so directly to listen, might seem an awkward proposition in itself. That the two teal zig-zagging shapes now take the shape in my mind of two small and squashed loudspeakers, only reinforces the short-circuit between seeing and hearing, enacted by this work – at least, in my reading of it. Or shall I say in my hearing of it?

The first time I interviewed Steve Roden, the author of this print, I asked him about listening and silence. It wasn't much of a philosophical enquiry, but a specific question about a project called *Vascellum*, in the 1999 anthology *Site of Sound. Of Architecture and the Ear*: there, Steve had chosen to reproduce one of his drawings of a small speaker. A speechless object that channels sound but does not generate sound itself: to see it appear in a drawing opens up to another way of channelling sound, indirect and imagined. Steve wrote to me that *Vascellum* was about the activity of listening, which lies at the foundation of many of his works.

'Vascellum' in Latin is a vessel: both a small ship and a container and indeed, Steve's drawing both channels imagined sounds and ambient sounds, and contains them as possibilities, as gentle prompts to listening. In his long engagement with silent media, Steve is well at ease in the absence of sound – and when sound does appear in his works, it seems saturated with silence, each of its particles sifted or absorbed by myriad quiet moments of reading, of looking, of hearing.

*

Every time I get close to a new work by Steve I am confronted by something vaguely familiar but blurred, and I rediscover lost memories as they reappear filtered by years and experience. It is a nuance in his way with colours, an inflection in his aural arrangements, a distinctive cadence of thought and eye, which imbue Steve's words and sounds and paintings and seem to come from far away, from the ragged edges of some forgotten age - just like when, down a lost alley in an old village you see a step out of place, or a broken buttress with no weight upon itself, and wonder why it's there; and then you no longer think of the why, but of the way it's there. You begin to trace other architectures around them, and to think of other ways of seeing and hearing.

Steve approaches his source materials with dedication. He moves his pace around each of them in a silent, enduring commitment to its space. And each of them becomes a perceptual asymptote: a possible landscape where all that is read and heard in Steve's works constantly tends to, but is forever distinct from it.

Every time Steve sets out to tell a new story (I believe there is one disclosing in each of his

pieces), he keeps tight links with the pre-existing suggestions in his source materials, and with the trails of his encounters with objects, sounds, maps, songs, books, postcards. In Steve's records, drawings, objects, sound installations and paintings, many disparate sources coexist in the same resonating vessel. He makes the connections among them come to life, he elevates his references from simple footnotes into active motors of each piece. On the shadow-line between what's certain and what's possible, he shows the potential for transformation within his chosen materials, shedding an enchanted light upon them. As he activates them, he achieves a very subtle sense of their initial manifestation. His works point at a projected inner space, which slowly unfolds through a series of quiet interactions with surfaces, and calls for any presence enwrapped by them and hovering around them. Nonetheless, Steve does not impose a backwards decoding activity on us as viewers and listeners: his creative process is more akin to a layering and a morphing that include unpredictable decisions, and he is happy to stray within his materials as he transforms them, not letting the rigour of the system come in the way of his - and our - eyes and ears. Each reference is worked through layers of transformations and digressions, not as a quick appropriation of an external other but as the result of a time-laden dedication.

Often a text - or a book - are starting points for Steve. By working on structure and rhythm, he infuses his own voice - literally and metaphorically - within the pre-existing texts. 'Meaning' comes in a lot later, and it's made of texture, of particles of colour and sound, it's ingrained in the materiality of his sculptures, pages, melodies, colours. 'Understanding' too lies within the materiality of words as they are spoken out or drawn upon a page, within rhythmic arrangements, within the weight or the sparse texture of pigment.

*

Long-lasting impressions seep out of his works, at times unveiled, at times glanced off.

They stay and resurface as quiet apparitions, as frayed icons.

Daniela Cascella, 9 March 2011