

Careful Whisper, Heart Feminism

Anne Pollock

King's College London

anne.pollock@kcl.ac.uk

Nina Wakeford

Goldsmiths, University of London

n.wakeford@gold.ac.uk

Maithili Pittea

Imperial College London

maithili.pittea@gmail.com

Aysha Leach

Goldsmiths, University of London

ayshaleach@gmail.com

Abstract

This Image & Text piece is a polyvocal account of Careful Whisper, an experimental installation at the Science Gallery London involving a re-engagement with an essay published in the inaugural issue of *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, "Heart Feminism" (Pollock 2015). After an introduction that situates the project in the domain of art and STS, each of the project's collaborators contributes a section to this paper: feminist STS scholar Anne Pollock on how the project emerged, artist Nina Wakeford on its site specificity, recent neuroscience bachelor of science student (now master of science in science communication student) Maithili Pittea on how the sonic experiments engaged with Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), and bachelor of fine art student Aysha Leach on the making of the zine for the project. This account illuminates the generativity of immersive yet disorienting engagements in which feminist STS, art, and science can barely be disentangled.

Pollock, Anne, Nina Wakeford, Maithili Pittea, and Aysha Leach. 2025. "Careful Whisper, Heart Feminism." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 11 (2): 1–28.

<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312

© Anne Pollock, Nina Wakeford, Maithili Pittea, and Aysha Leach, 2025 | Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license

Keywords

interdisciplinary collaboration, site specific art, laboratory science, sonic experiments, zines

Introduction

Creative engagements that combine images, video, poetry, and academic prose have been part of the project of *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* since its inaugural issue in 2015. Jackie Orr's (2015) piece in the first issue and the many Image & Text works since have been part of the development of a distinctively creative and humanistic tone of *Catalyst*, relative to most STS journals. Since then, *Catalyst* has emerged as a vibrant venue for wide-ranging forms of inquiry at plural intersections of art practice and feminist STS (see, for example, Berkhout et al. 2024; Brown et al. 2016; Cheang 2021; Mora Gámez et al. 2023; Willet 2021). At the same time, exploration of multimedia forms in *Catalyst* has also been part of a growing number of modes of undertaking and sharing STS more broadly, evidenced not least by the expansion of the Making and Doing section of the Annual Conference of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) (Downey and Zuiderent-Jerak 2016). Collaborations with artists and other creative practitioners yield objects and viewer experiences that draw on a wide variety of contemporary art practices, including performance and film-making (Salter et al. 2016). More broadly, an increasingly articulated body of work at the nexus of art and STS has moved beyond figuring "art as either handmaiden to or parasite on science" (Rogers and Halpern 2021, 7; for discussion and contextualization, see Horst 2025).

The social relations embedded in the very act of researching can be given new forms, and practices such as sculptural assemblage have entered STS, for example Katrina Jungnickel and Julian McHardy's [*Enquiry Machine 1: Interview Machine*](#), performed at the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST) conference in Trento, Italy in 2010. Comprised of abandoned materials, mostly from bicycles, it foregrounds the collaboration needed in fieldwork via a witty and queered version of a tandem (which goes nowhere), as if kinetic sculptor Jean Tinguely had been commissioned to address power and reflexivity in fieldwork. Jungnickel and McHardy's machine reminds us that the borders of what constitutes an STS presentation can be extended and trouble the boundary between practices.

Our own investigation presented in this contribution to *Catalyst* offers a kindred kind of experiment in sense and that which escapes immediate comprehension. Framed by a desire to engage and expand feminist STS encounters with contemporary art practice this Image & Text piece is a polyvocal account of *Careful Whisper*, an experimental installation at the Science Gallery London stimulated by a re-engagement with an essay published in the inaugural issue of *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, "Heart Feminism" (Pollock 2015). In

the installation, we combined vocal improvisations with recordings of the machine noises of the cardiovascular labs, enveloped the space with academic essay text, and let different conceptual and material enunciations of site amalgamate in other unpredicted ways. In this account of the installation, each of the project's collaborators contributes a section that corresponds with a chronological step through our process: feminist STS scholar Anne Pollock on how the project emerged, artist Nina Wakeford on its site specificity, recent neuroscience bachelor of science student (now master of science in science communication student) Maithili Pittea on how the sonic experiments engaged with Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR),¹ and bachelor of fine art student Aysha Leach on the making of the zine for the project. Though we cannot welcome readers into the physical space, we provide links to the four sound experiment episodes as well as images, and we encourage readers to also listen. Our collective account foregrounds the generativity of disorienting engagements across feminist STS, art, and science.

Re-engaging with Heart Feminism in Emergent Collaboration (Anne Pollock)

Collaborative conversation across art and feminist STS was at the root of an article that appeared in the first issue of *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, "Heart Feminism" (Pollock 2015). A few years before that, new media artist and feminist theorist Katherine Behar was instigating a set of panels around a thematic of Object-Oriented Feminism (for the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts), and my contribution to the first such panel, in 2010, took the heart as my object.

My most extended engagement with the heart had been (and continues to be) focused on race and racism (Pollock 2012, 2024), and deep concern with the embodied burdens of living in an unequal society would continue to underlie my interest in the heart, even as the central focus in this particular paper shifted as I brought both lay and cardiophysiological understandings of the heart into conversation with then-current debates around abortion and end-of-life politics as well as new feminist materialisms. In a period in which many feminist theorists were drawing inspiration from neuroscience, I was drawn to the ways in which the heart—as understood both in mundane everyday experience and in cardiovascular science—might provide feminists with an object with which to think otherwise. My goal was not to replace neurofeminisms with a cardiofeminist alternative, but rather to generatively disrupt and complexify feminist engagements with the body—as something known both through mundane experience and through pathophysiology—by articulating cardio-curiosities.

“Heart Feminism,” as I presented it at the conference and developed it for that inaugural issue of *Catalyst*, offered an invitation to “think with the heart” across scales—from its electricity at a cellular level, to its hydraulics at the organ and vascular level, to its responsiveness to the load of the body in a world of multiple pressures that are simultaneously material and semiotic. It also considered the heart’s beat as part of our mundane experience of aliveness—of ourselves and of those with whom we are intimate—and as vital sign relevant for medical ascertainment of aliveness including but not limited to the fetal heartbeat and the cardiopulmonary death that might or might not align with brain death. Exploring the heart’s dualities—bounded and dispersed, autocratic and receptive, emotional and machine-like—offers powerful ways of understanding bodies simultaneously as somatic, symbolic, and political-economic entities.

Session 8 (D) Circle Centre (AV)
Object-Oriented Feminism 2: “Parts”
Chair
Katherine Behar

SLSA 2010 Annual Meeting 62

“Object-Oriented Feminism 2: Parts” takes an Object-Oriented Feminist view of bodies and body parts. As objects, bodies provide a case study of how Object-Oriented Philosophy introduces an unusual, nearly topological, imperviousness to scale: objects are composed of objects. Body parts are objects, having the same value and integrity as the body objects they are arranged to comprise. This regressive modularity leads to questions about when a body object is considered a living object or a dead one, and about how body parts can be differently systematized. In Object-Oriented Feminism, bodies are programmed objects *par excellence*. How are bodies programmed differently when practices like cardiology construe hearts as different kinds of objects (as electrical systems or as hydraulic systems)? How do transgenic art practices challenge *quid pro quo* bioethics in the “art object” of a living (or dead) organism? In transgenic infection, what determines how art objects and objects of science attain legal standing or ritual value? As a specific, historical, cultural object for segmenting the body, can a corset provide *anamorphic* insight into objects in general? And how does this complex nomenclature (the theory of relations between parts and wholes) intersect with practices of the self that employ the corset, like fetishism?

Anne Pollock
Heart Feminism
When feminist theorizations of the body have foregrounded particular body parts, whether breasts or uteruses (too many to cite) or more recently brains (Wilson) and bones (Fausto-Sterling), they have rendered feminism and the body in distinct ways. What might starting analysis from the heart offer for feminism? The heart’s mechanical and hydraulic aspects have been important in articulating implicitly male bodies since early modern medicine, and the organ’s electrical aspect is also evocative. Spurred by the etymology of “articulation” – from ancient Greek, both dividing the body into parts and segmenting speech into intelligible language (Kuriyama) – this paper grapples with a heart-centered feminist articulation of the body.

Heart Feminism

CATALYST
feminism, theory, technoscience
Issue 1, Vol. 1, Fall 2015

HTML
PDF

Published: Jun 11, 2015
DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.28968/cft.v1i1.28811>

Keywords:
heart, physiology,
personhood, power

Abstract

This article considers wide-ranging heart-centered approaches to understanding bodies, objects, and personhood. It puts these into in tension with other ways of approaching questions of life and embodiment, especially ones inspired by neuroscience, to argue that thinking with the heart has value for feminist theory. The heart that is my object traverses scale, and the paper’s analysis moves from the inside out – from heart cells, to hearts and circulatory systems, to women interpellated into heart health, to public debates on personhood that mobilize fetal heartbeats and contested cases of women on life support. I draw on biological and lay ways of understanding the heart, and on mundane intimacy of knowledge of the heartbeat as a sign of life and personhood. Articulating the body through the heart provides opportunities to theorize the body and the object in new ways, pushing back against rhizomic and egalitarian aspirations and toward nuanced accounts of power. The engagement with the heart is speculative and wide-ranging, a provocation for feminist theorists to think with the heart.

Issue

[Vol. 1 No. 1 \(2015\): Inaugural Issue](#)

Figure 1. An excerpt from the 2010 Program of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts, showing the description of the second session of the set of panels on Object-Oriented Feminism and the presentation on “Heart Feminism,” alongside the cover and abstract view of the essay “Heart Feminism” published in the inaugural issue of *Catalyst*.

More than a decade later, I was spurred to return to the essay by another feminist artist and theorist, Nina Wakeford. We had known each other for decades and she had drawn on another of my essays (on queer birds, which was published in the *Object-Oriented Feminism* edited collection, Behar 2016)—in a project commissioned by Science Gallery London that involved drag kings and endocrinologists. Nina had an opportunity coming up at her academic home, Goldsmiths, University of London, to apply for an internship scheme for a fine art undergraduate, and she approached me wondering if there was something else from my oeuvre that might be generative for another collaboration at Science Gallery London. Perhaps because it had already been fodder for collaboration with design scholar and feminist theorist Nassim Parvin and neuroscientist Lewis

Wheaton and numerous students when we were all based at Georgia Tech (see JafariNaimi and Pollock 2018), what came to mind was “Heart Feminism.”

Serendipitously, at a meeting among heads of department at King’s College London, I met the scientist who would be a key contributor to the project. At the time, I was serving as head of department of Global Health and Social Medicine, and got to chatting in the in-between times with the colleague sitting next to me, who happened to be Susan Brain, the head of the Vascular Biology and Inflammation Section in the School of Cardiovascular Medicine & Sciences. Sue was already well aware of the Science Gallery London, and welcomed the chance to be in conversation. Her openness was extraordinary, and she both connected us with others in the cardiovascular labs and was amenable to conversation across the disorientation of our project.

An additional bit of serendipity came through an undergraduate class on gender from interdisciplinary perspectives convened by a neuroscientist at King’s. I contribute a lecture on sex and gender in STS, and I showed the class a clip of the film that Nina had made with the drag kings about endocrinology. Afterwards, one of the students in the class, Maithili Pittea, approached me saying that she was about to finish her undergraduate degree in neuroscience and pursue science communication, and if there was ever anything else I was doing along those lines, she would love to participate. Her intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm were palpable from the start, and the timing was perfect. I was able to reallocate a small pot of funding to hire Mait as an intern to be paired with the intern appointed by Goldsmiths, art student Aysha Leach. It’s impossible to overstate how much this shaped the project: Having Mait and Aysha both as undergraduate interns working with Nina and me meant that we had a full team, and it made the collaboration dynamic.



Figure 2. Still of a video of artist intern recording in the cardiovascular lab.

The Science Gallery London is an extraordinary space at the edge of the medical campus of King's near London Bridge Station. We were fortunate to have been given the opportunity to set up our collaboration in an area referred to as the "Takeover Space" (described further below). Nina's initial idea for the project was that it would be a set of sonic experiments, and she knew that cardiovascular laboratory sounds and vocal improvisation would be involved, but what to put on the walls while we did so? She suggested putting up an extract from "Heart Feminism." Iconic. Then we all set about doing the work.

Finding the "Site Specificity" (Nina Wakeford)

In our original response to the invitation to the Science Gallery London curators, Anne and I had agreed that we would spend some time in cardiovascular laboratories to enable us develop a sonic or vocal re-engagement with the ideas within "Heart Feminism," informed by current research projects at King's in the School of Cardiovascular Science. However, we were interested not only in how feminist STS-informed sounds and vocalizations might disrupt a straightforward engagement between experiences in these cardiovascular laboratories and the resulting soundworks, and make for a complex encounter, but also in how layers of such encounter with the claims of original argument might provide a new mode of engagement which did not prioritize a linear encounter with the text. In other words, we didn't want to use the sonic works to explain but rather to invoke, to be performative.





Figure 3. Images of the gallery space. Photo: George Torode.

Science Gallery London is spread across two levels of a building outside of which is the busy commuter transport hub of London Bridge Station. For the project we were allocated the ground floor “Takeover Space,” which sits at a corner of a larger area full of tables often occupied by students and others on laptops. A café area on the ground floor is a draw into the building, and external doors on either side of the ground floor allow a flow through the space and spontaneous encounters with what is shown in the Takeover Space.

Even before we began the first sound recording in a laboratory, we considered the question of how to generate a distinctive atmosphere of encounter with feminist STS in this space full of other visual and audible distractions. Drawing from discussions on the methods and tactics of contemporary art, we recognize what we developed as a kind of site-specific working. One of the art historians whose work has popularized the term *site specificity*, Miwon Kwon, has described a historical shift from the attitude that art (sculpture in particular) should be independent of where it was located to an emphasis on the unique characteristics of a place: “Site-specific art initially took the ‘site’ as an actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a unique combination of constitutive physical elements: length, depth, height, texture, and shape of walls and rooms; scale and proportion of plazas, buildings, or parks; existing conditions of lighting, ventilation, traffic patterns; distinctive topographical features” (1997, 85).

Operating in this way, all aspects of the site had to be considered—including interior décor, proximate furniture and signage, and the acoustic conditions.

Sets of headphones, hung around the space, provided an isolated, perhaps even intimate, experience for our audio experiments. We looked into the cultures of online communities formed around ASMR practices, but also were in conversation with Julie Rose Bower, whose ASMR-informed unwrapping project consisted of an experimental videography, using a specialist microphone, of conservators unwrapping precious museum artifacts (such as Charlie Chaplin's hat) with the intention that the viewer was provided with an enhanced and intimate sensory experience of being "behind the scenes" at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Some of the activities, such as the humidification of a ballet tutu, are foregrounded in the same way as we attempted to foreground the machines whirring, clicking, and humming on the cardiovascular lab benches.

However, to bring Anne's text to prominence in the space, while signalling how it might be transformed, we needed a further source of inspiration.

Intervening in public spaces using words and texts has been pioneered by artists such as Jenny Holzer. Holzer has used billboards as well as electronic signs, light projections as well as stone carving. Drawing on the language of painting and installation, Holzer is always probing where language and how might appear. For example, in the work *Softer* (2017), she engaged with the military history of Blenheim Palace in the United Kingdom, incorporating light projections on the architecture to deliver to the viewer descriptions of war, including first-person accounts from soldiers and civilians.

Words and slogans affixed directly to gallery walls have been used by artists such as Barbara Kruger with great effect. Drawing on the look of a billboard, knowingly reappropriating the attention aspirations of advertising, Kruger's texts often fill a wall. Most often associated with image-text combination with blunt observations such as *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* (1989) and *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)* (1987), more recent work has abandoned the image and worked with text alone. The immersive display *Thinking of You. I mean Me. I mean You* (2023) wraps in language not only the walls, but also the floor of the Museum of Modern Art's Marron Family Atrium. This tactic of wrapping caught our imagination. Rather than extracting quotations and using vinyl lettering on a wall, a practice which is often used in museum displays, for example, we proposed that a full wrap would be, effectively, to wallpaper the space with Anne's text, printed on a vinyl background. We worked with a graphic designer to determine the extent the text had to be cut to fit into the space while keeping the words legible. Anne edited accordingly, selecting the most cardiophysically-engaged elements of the paper and carefully leaving the argument intact. We determined a

shade of very pale pink as background—enabling us to transform the whole color scheme of the area, clearly demarcating our “takeover.”

Two further specifications for this wrapping were particularly important, both elements which ran counter to a “clean” reading. First, we asked the designer to make an allowance so that the vinyl fell over the join between wall and floor and intruded onto the floor. The aim was for the viewer to experience the text intruding even further into the space—a nod to Kruger’s MoMA installation. Health and safety regulations only let us extend a few centimetres, but the awkward angle of reading of this text forced people to approach the wall and look down at the floor to get to the bottom line of each column. Second, we wanted to signal our mode of revisiting this text and the potential activation of it which would happen as the takeover unfolded. This led us to ask the designer to insert musical note symbols next to keywords rendered in bold font. These became more prominent graphic features which jumped out at the viewer—a kind of patterning which was agnostic to, and fractured, the argument, yet provided a way of visual skimming of a surface. When the audio recordings which involved singing were experienced through headphones, the listener-viewer could make sense of the notes as a signal which brought together audio and text. Reflecting on this intervention, we realized how unusual it is to be able to display and transform a feminist academic text so prominently in public space. Rather than extracting slogans, the extended extracts, punctuated by notation, offered the viewer the option of being absorbed in a single argument and/or browsing, or floating between keywords.

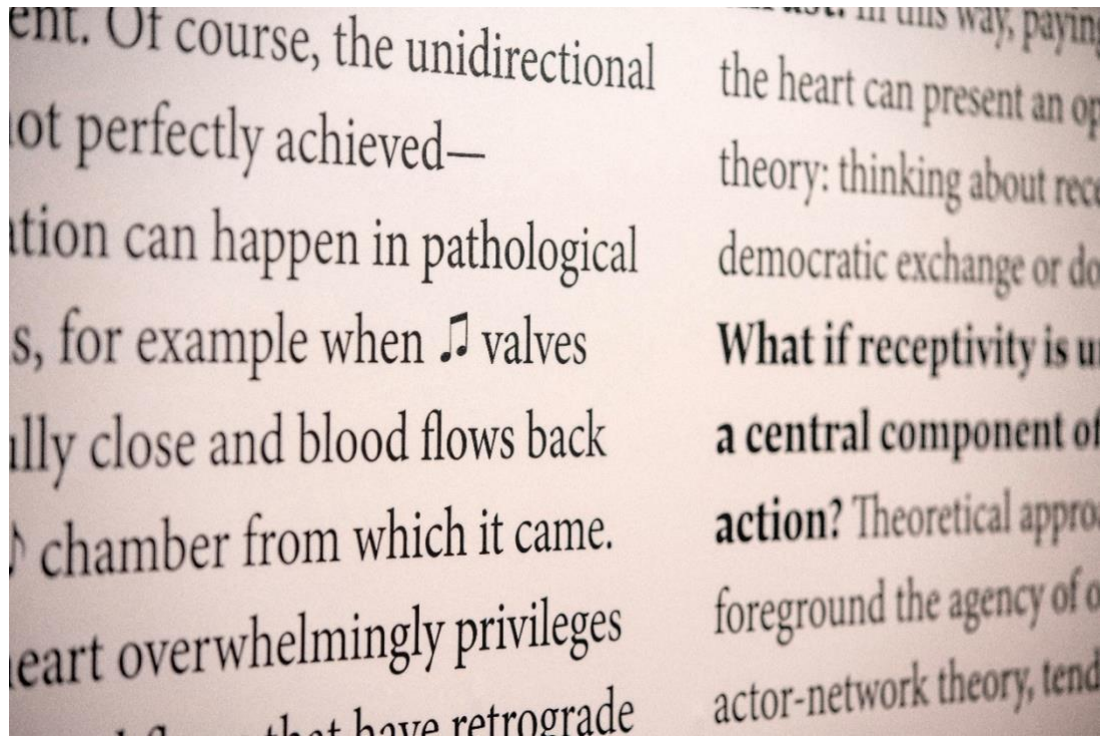


Figure 4. Close-up of wallpaper text showing musical notes. Photo: George Torode.

Although our intervention used a typography, we recognized that manifesting a kind of graphic takeover of the walls is a tactic which has been deployed by artists who use more direct and less technologically mediated mark making. Jade Montserrat's project *Learning in-and-within relation (after Édouard Glissant)* (2021), in which collaborators wrote on walls with charcoal, offers a model of how reading and annotation of walls might work in an alternative fashion. In Montserrat's project, a group of fine art students devised and inscribed texts in response to Montserrat reading aloud works by Jamaica Kincaid and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Montserrat works at the intersection of art and activism, and in this exercise sought to not only to mark a space but to practice a form of stewarding in which exchanges of energy, lines, and communication took place. We recognize in her work that the practice of drawing might also be an alternative method to intervene and overwrite the authority of a given site. In our experiment the typography of Anne's original article was retained and the wrapping of the space took precedence. We mention Montserrat's project as a reminder that there are other very effective art-activist practices in relation to knowledge (e.g., Glissant) which can be undertaken with less finance outlay.

The final intervention was the production of a black felt curtain which hung on a pre-existing semi-circular rail. This curtain allowed some sound insulation, but, more importantly, gave the space a more enclosed ambience. The blackout curtain is often used at the entrance of art space where some isolation of sound or light is needed. Although we could not entirely isolate the Takeover Space, the presence of the curtain offered a more demarcated area. And within its curve, we added more chairs, so that the lab stools were not the only seating offered.

Sharing Science Through Sound Art and ASMR (Maithili Pittea)

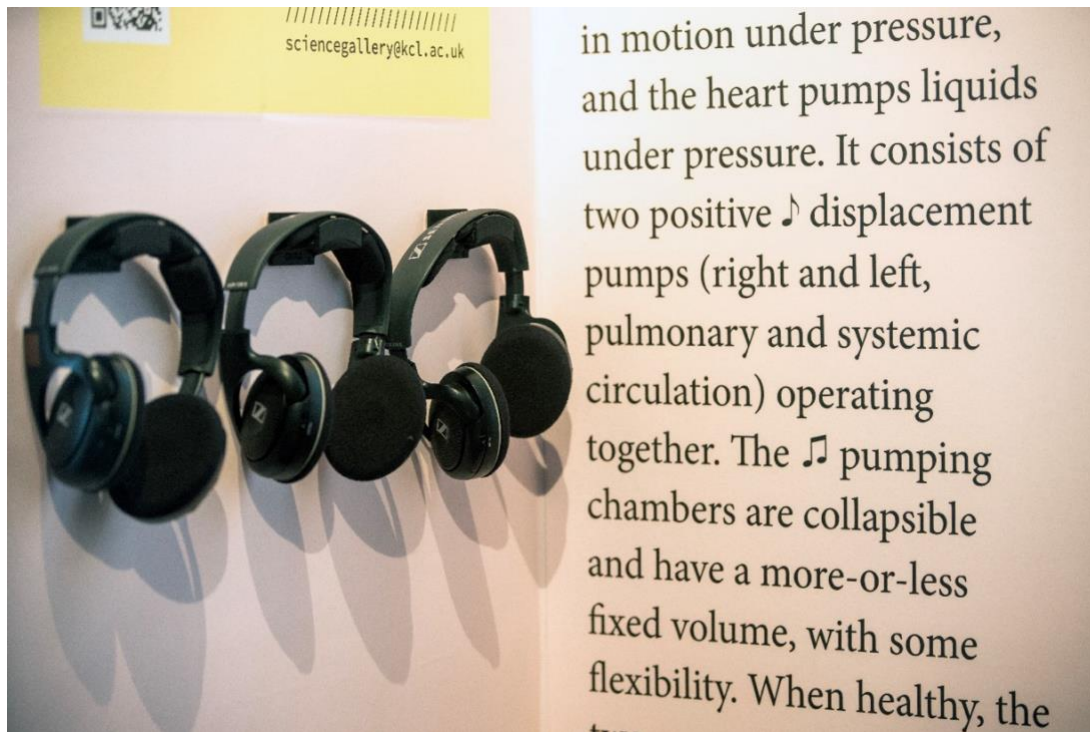


Figure 6. Close-up of headphones and wallpaper text. Photo: George Torode.

What might be a feminist approach to sharing science? Typically, when science is communicated in a unilateral manner (e.g., in a lecture), the communicator is encouraged to project their voice, to be loud and dominant—values that are typically associated with the masculine. An obvious and well-defined power structure is formed between communicator and recipient. But what if science was whispered, shared with a soft intimacy? Our goal for the auditory aspect of the installation was to explore these and other questions inspired by “Heart Feminism.” We also wished

to further push the boundaries of how a journal article could be engaged with—we had a wallpaper, but could we turn it into a sound installation?

I joined this collaboration with the perspective of a life sciences student: a familiarity with both the lab and cardiophysiology. Incidentally, I also joined with an appreciation for ASMR and its relaxing whispers and noises; this would come in useful in our attempt to share science with intimacy. Though I had not dabbled in creating it, I was an avid listener long before I joined the project.

We created four episodes which were played on headphones that were installed over the course of the installation; these were not exhibited at the same time, so visitors would have to return four times across the weeks to hear each episode. They contained sounds that we recorded in the cardiovascular labs using directional and contact mics, as well as our layered voices that whispered, sang, and spoke. We explored different concepts in each episode. Please refer to the supplementary files for a transcript of the audios. The episodes are best listened to with headphones—aligning with the tradition of ASMR.

[\[Episode 1 link\]](#)

In Episode 1 I respoke our interview with Fan Yang, a postdoctoral research associate at King's College London, relating the concept of plumbing to her research. Our process of respoking involved listening to the original interview and repeating it as we heard it. This meant that what is heard in the episode is not always the scientists' words verbatim; there is not scientific content intended to be understood, further foregrounding disorientation. This episode features the clicking sound of a centrifuge, the squeak of rubber gloves, and the screech of stools amongst other lab sounds.

[\[Episode 2 link\]](#)

Episode 2 was about the cardiovascular lab itself: whispered descriptions of lab apparatus as experienced through our senses. It features the rippling of the water bath as well as the use of the InVivO₂, a machine which recreates physiological oxygen conditions.

[\[Episode 3 link\]](#)

In Episode 3 we became more musical, interweaving our voices and vocalizations—informed and inspired by Nina's apprenticeship with a feminist vocal improviser. Nina and I respoke excerpts of "Heart Feminism" and our

interview with Giovanni Mann, professor of vascular biology at King's College London, about his approach to science. This episode includes Giovanni's vocalizations interspersed with sounds of lab mixers and shakers.

[\[Episode 4 link\]](#)

Finally, in Episode 4, we returned to the central question of "Heart Feminism": What would happen if feminists did look at the heart? (Pollock 2015). The last episode was slightly different in that it included the whole team's voices and no whispering. It features an excerpt from our event in the Science Gallery London space with Sue Brain, citations of her research papers, as well as excerpts from a poem in our *Careful Whisper* zine.

When we started this project, we hoped that the four episodes would be an experiment in themselves—literally describing them as "sonic experiments." Our approach was dynamic; there was no concrete plan for what each episode would cover. Instead, our interactions with the cardiophysiologists and subsequent conversations within our team guided us into different areas to explore. We would create the next episode whilst the previous was installed. Our process was as follows: We would research into the scientist's work and how it could relate to our interests (e.g., plumbing), then recorded interviews and lab sounds. We would listen back to our recordings and reflect, picking out interesting concepts, turning them into a script, before recording ourselves respeaking in sound booths, and finally Aysha would edit the recordings into an episode.

ASMR refers to the affective response to auditory stimuli, often reported to feel relaxing or pleasurable. Content is often promoted by the ASMR community as a solution for stress and insomnia (Andersen 2015). Furthermore, numerous videos on social media promote ASMR for ADHD and autism as a therapeutic tool—bridging the knowledge from my undergraduate dissertation (equivalent to a US senior thesis) on autism and gender to this project. Common sounds include whispered voices and tapping on or using objects—both of which occur in our episodes. ASMR creates intimacy through the whispered voice, and while we did not originally intend to create ASMR, it did align with the questions we wished to explore.

ASMR content often involves role-play that recreate the performance of familiar everyday tasks, which tend to derive from domestic or care-related spheres such as brushing hair, a spa appointment, or health checkups (Andersen 2015). Medical role-play ASMR is particularly popular (Hillcox 2023); comparatively, scientist role-play or science communication ASMR is non-existent. Interestingly, ASMR content creators and consumers recall mother-child relationships when describing ASMR experiences (Cheadle 2012; Marsden 2012). As such, Joceline Andersen (2015) argues that ASMR utilizes gendered notions of care, with common scenarios and the overall experience coded as feminine. I propose that our

installation disrupts traditional ASMR and these ideas of gendered care. While it may produce an ASMR response, it is not intended to evoke care or comfort; our episodes likely evoke curiosity or confusion. The episodes already contained feminist discussions but disrupting heteronormativity in ASMR added another feminist dimension to the installation.

The sounds of a lab are an atypical scenario for ASMR, and many visitors would likely be unfamiliar with a research laboratory. Yet, for scientists, the sounds of a centrifuge or water bath may be a familiar aspect of their everyday. Regardless, for both scientists and non-scientists, the episodes allow science and STS to be experienced rather than comprehended—an atypical approach to engaging with academia. It foregrounds disruption by removing the context from both the lab sounds and respoken interviews. We did not attempt to communicate any specific academic knowledge; we only wished to immerse the visitor in the audio, as they were also immersed through the space and the wallpaper. Exhibitions often tend to involve dissemination of scientific knowledge complimented by art illustrations. Amelia Hine and Fabien Medvecky (2015) propose that science museums and institutions adhere to the “public deficit” model of communication (which assumes a knowledge vacuum in a layperson that can be filled), due to their role as informal education. This idea is problematic not only in that it assumes a passive and receptive public, but as Hine and Medvecky suggest, it removes the vital context of research from science by presenting science as completed understanding. *Careful Whisper's* focus was the sound art which then explored descriptions of lab equipment, investigations into scientists' motives, and orations of citations. The process of research is therefore a central theme to our project, contrasting deficit-model-aligned exhibitions. Furthermore, in a broader sense, the episodes do not fit into traditional science communication—they allow the visitor to make meaning on their own terms, rather than receive and integrate articulated information (see Rogers and Halpern 2021).

Our different disciplines and contributions within the team enabled us to create this encounter. Each of us were involved in different levels of the process, but it is interesting to consider our roles as creators of the sound installation. We come together as the medium through which visitors engaged with the science themselves. Yet our unique mix of backgrounds—art, science, and STS—led to a wide range of engagements with the science and opened a diverse set of enquiries. Alone, I would not have considered challenging conventions of science, and my background could have steered me toward creating traditional science communication. As a team, we were able to interrogate science. Indeed, ideas that one team member came up with may never have occurred to another. For instance, a member of the team asked one scientist if there were any pictures of her cells that she thought were beautiful; the scientist had never viewed the cells with aesthetics in mind. This interaction led to a discussion in our team around how different disciplines consider the manifestations of their work. Other

discussions centered around motivations for scientists, conventions of a scientific laboratory, academic posters. These conversations allowed us to fully engage with science at different levels: approaches to-, the production of-, and post-publication. Through this process, I believe we all developed our individual understandings of science.



Figure 7. People listening in the space. Photo: George Torode.

Finally, I return to intimacy once more. There is a juxtaposition between the intimate whispers through headphones and the public nature of the space, heightening the intimate nature of the audio. A one-to-one relationship is momentarily created between listener and whisperer. Yet several visitors could listen to the audio at the same time as several headsets were installed in the space. A connection is created, even across strangers, subverting the intimacy constructed.

Our feminist exploration of sharing science with a soft intimacy allows for the listener to uniquely engage with science and STS. It provides a different understanding and appreciation for these fields, and challenges traditional views of what engagement with academia can look like. Utilizing feminist approaches may therefore open a whole world of novel engagements.

Notes on Careful Whisper (Aysha Leach)

Making the zine *Notes on Careful Whisper* was another way of creatively engaging with *Heart Feminism*. Essays in books are familiar, but to have essays on pink paper and accompanied by graphics and images from our time in the cardiovascular lab makes the traditional format of the academic essay text once again unfamiliar. It is wonderfully perverse to bring the STS article into a zine.

Zines are rooted in feminist and queer history. And also sci-fi. The first zine dates back to May 1930, and was created by the Science Correspondence Club in Chicago. It was called *The Comet* and contained a letter section where fans discussed science and science fiction. Science fiction fanzine culture continued to grow throughout the 1940s, with Russ Chauvenet coining the term *fanzine* in *Detours*, a sci-fi publication (Hero 2021). *Vice Versa* was North America's first lesbian zine, created in 1947 by "Lisa Ben" (pseudonym and anagram for lesbian) covertly at her place of work. Incredibly ahead of its time and influential, *Vice Versa* "provided the blueprint for the gay magazines that followed" (LGBT+ Cultural Heritage, n.d.). The zine was not an initial part of the *Careful Whisper* project, and it was not made because of the history of zines, but more because of its format and the other possibilities it provided. But it is interesting to consider the history of the form, as perhaps this is why we gravitated towards creating a zine, and felt so comfortable within it. The zine functioned differently to the essay-as-wallpaper format, although they are both situated further into the art world of showing text than the science world. The zine bundles the essay up into something you can hold in your hands, take away and sit with. The entirety of Anne's text "Heart Feminism" lined the left side of the zine, which was spiral bound with a metal spiral like that of a notebook. The right side was filled with a variety of scientific and audio ephemera inspired by our time in the cardiovascular labs.

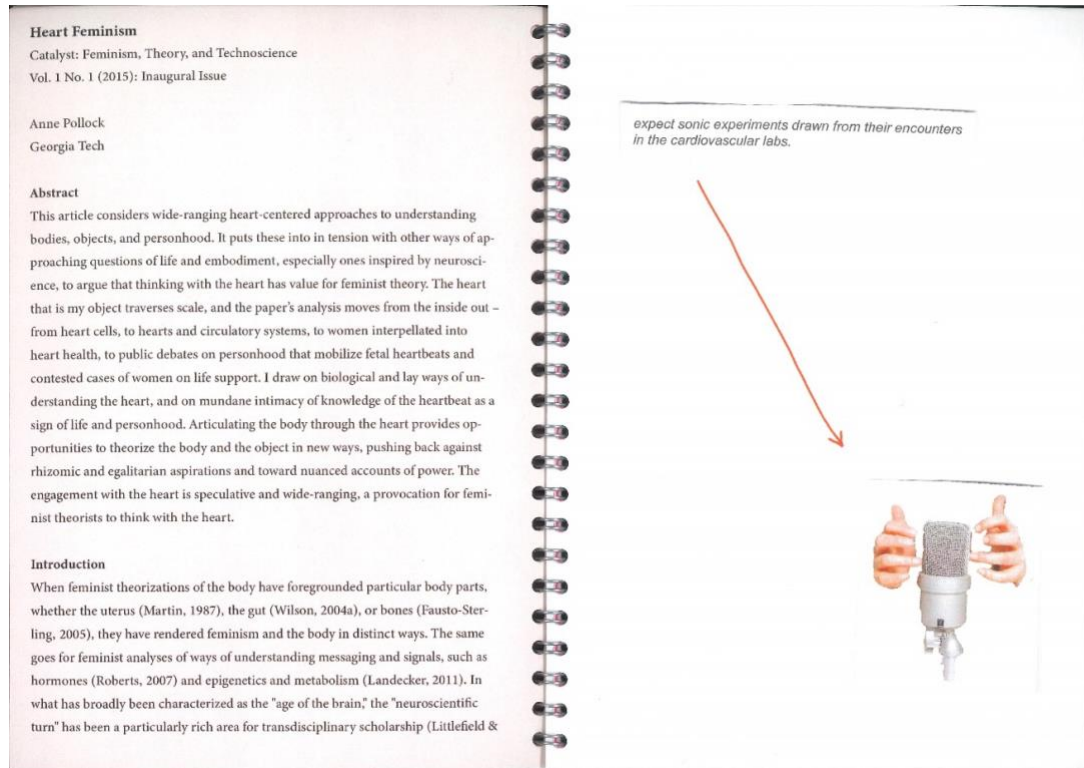


Figure 8. Zine pages showing part of “Heart Feminism” on one side and drawing of microphone and hands on the other.

There is something inherently inharmonious between the STS essay and the zine; they seem to be at opposite ends of the print world. Where zines are lo-fi, ad hoc, DIY collections of things that all revolve around fandom, the academic essay is perhaps the opposite. Zines are often made quickly and distributed widely, whereas scientific essays typically require a lot more research and preparation than the standard zine, but they are still typically distributed within a niche. Formal and knowable. Having the essay within the zine was another way of disorienting standard ways of knowledge and learning. Often in zines, text is cut up and fragmented. Text in zines are usually snippets or short quotes; they feature the greatest hits. To include the entirety of “Heart Feminism” was an unusual choice for a traditional zine format, but like so many other elements of the installation, there was something important in things not functioning exactly as they should.

We imagined the zine as a lab notebook, an important document bundled up into a format that encompasses the academic, scientific, and artistic. For me, *Notes on Careful Whisper* straddles both the scientific and the artistic. It has elements that are more formal than the traditional DIY aesthetics and cultures that zines grew from, and we also drew on aesthetic choices informed by the scientific lab; blank, sterile pages, faux adverts advertising scientific hacks we learnt in the cardiovascular lab, one page disguised as an Eppendorf CyroCube fridge. Other pages had an aesthetic more typical to usual zines. Having a range of different

influences from different (and broad) disciplines involved within the project accumulated visually within the pages of the zine. Working closely with Mait (a neuroscience undergrad) was integral to establishing the semi-scientific aesthetic of the zine, and my background in fine art similarly provided strong design choices. Finding the meeting point of our two approaches was key to the developing the outcome of the zine, exploring where our ideas and experiences clashed or overlapped.

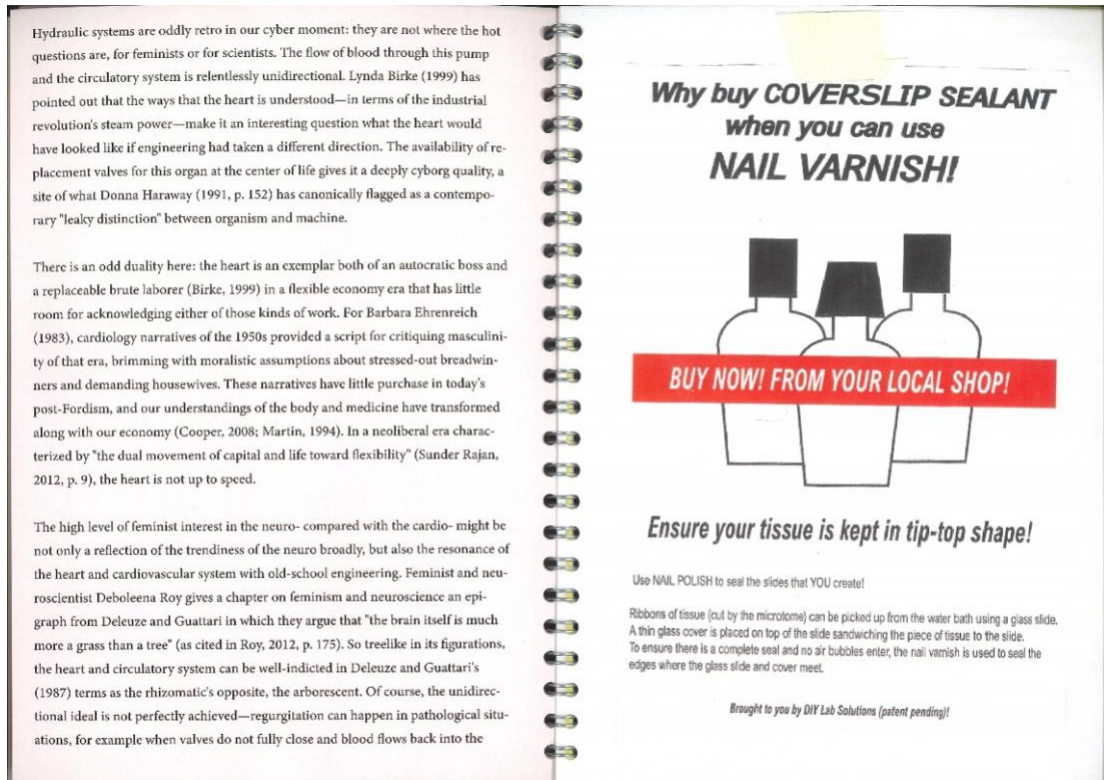


Figure 9. Image of zine pages showing continuation of "Heart Feminism" on one side and spoof advertisement for nail polish as lab sealant on the other.



Figure 10. Zine pages showing continuation of "Heart Feminism" on one side and lab fridge with descriptions of audio samples we recorded from the fridge.

We included quotes from lab discussions conducted with the scientists we met working in the cardiovascular labs. Taken out of context of scientific conversation, the quotes are somewhat bizarre, bordering on motivational wall art at times. Not quite "Live, Laugh, Love," but, "Do you practice science with love and passion and happiness?" Similar vibes.

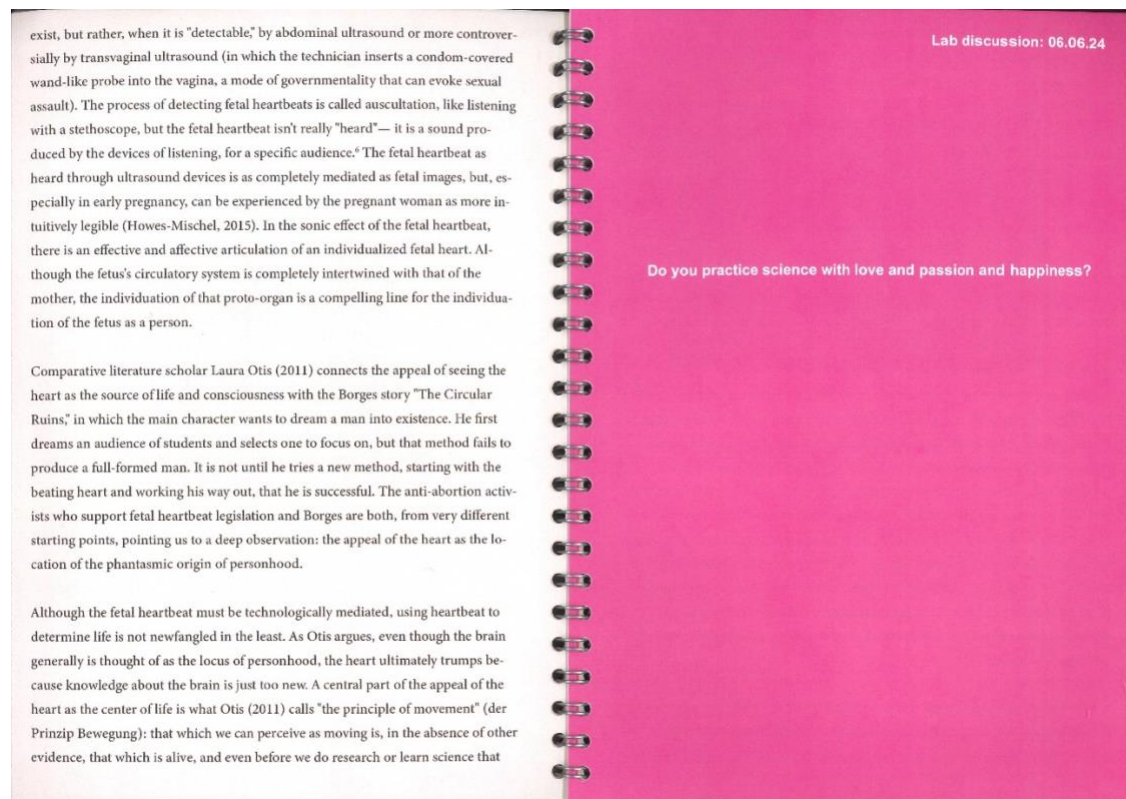


Figure 11. Image of zine showing continuation of "Heart Feminism" on one side and a question from a lab discussion on the other.

We created a scientific research poster on ASMR; we displayed the audio files from our field recordings. We created a logbook with day-by-day diary entries so that the reader could follow along our explorations. We described what the sounds sounded like in words. Rachna Chowla, a poet and primary care doctor in the community in which the Science Gallery London is situated, who also contributes to clinical strategy for King's, wrote a poem. Rachna seamlessly blended scientific knowledge into a beautiful love poem detailing her experience of the installation. Her contribution happened serendipitously; she was walking through the space during setup, and her response to seeing the feminist text on the walls was "I write poetry, too." To have all this work in one place, all this documentation of collaboration and experimentation, which was what the project was and what it created, is such a privilege.

The zine created another bridge between the cardiovascular lab and the installation. It explored and displayed how we were thinking about what we were doing. It brings the both the essay to the lab and the lab to the space. It is also important to note that it contained the full text version of Anne's essay—as the essay was condensed for the wallpaper installation. The interplay between having one page as Anne's essay and the other side of the page as documentation and

exploration of the cardiovascular lab helps to keep the viewer suspended in the constant back and forth between things, between science, art, sound, the lab, the Takeover Space.

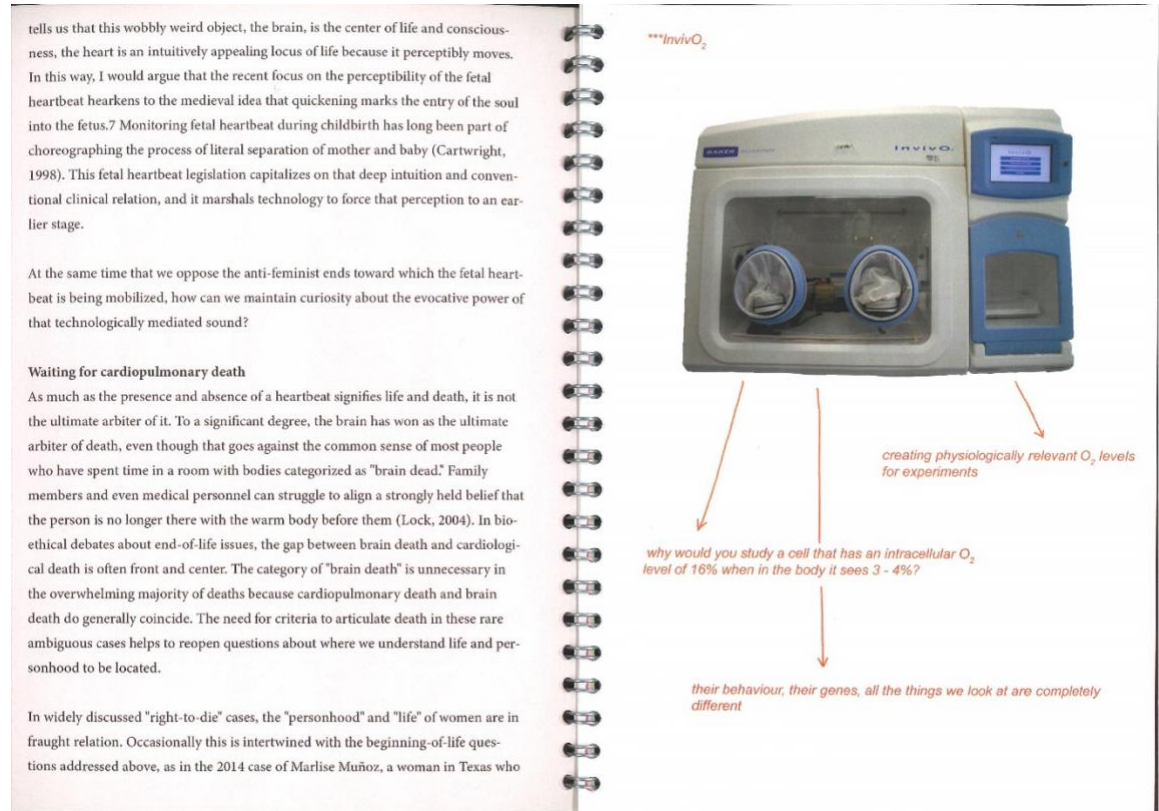


Figure 12. Image from zine showing continuation of "Heart Feminism" on one side and image of InVivoO₂ lab machine with sound descriptions on the other.

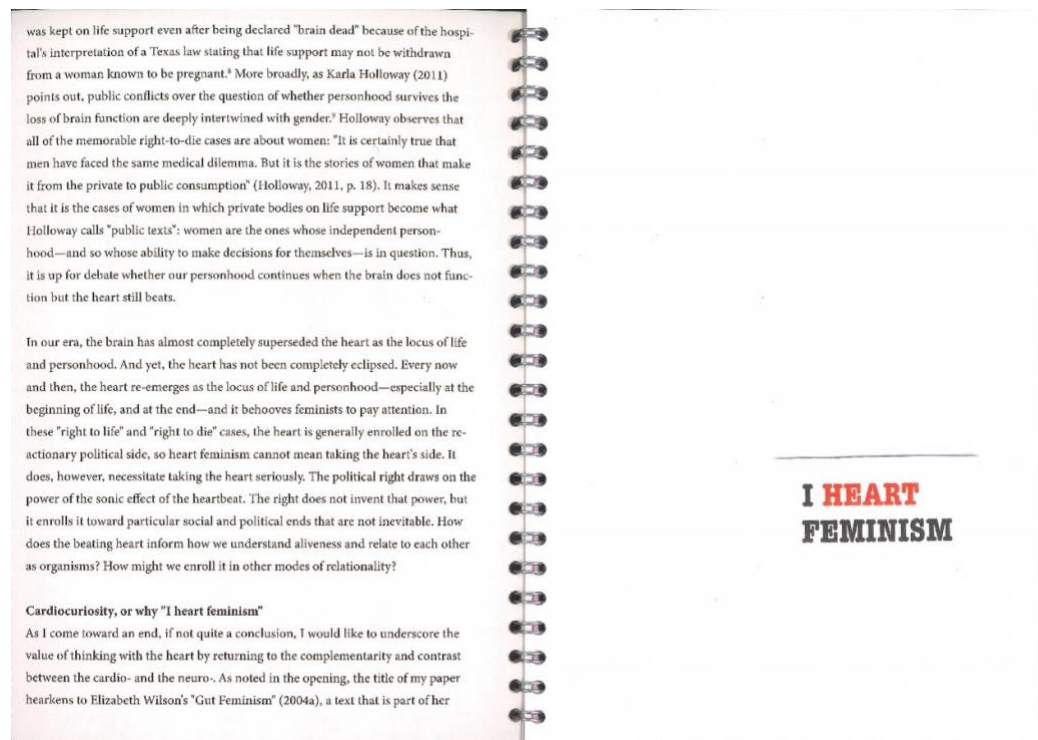


Figure 13. Image of zine showing continuation of "Heart Feminism" on one side and "I heart feminism" on the other.

Concluding Reflections

This Image & Text piece documents a short-lived installation of several weeks. Yet we produced a set of encounters characterized by an open-endedness which resisted straightforward "knowledge transfer," to use the phrase often deployed when research travels. Our generation of an atmospherics of feminist STS, rather than a transfer of findings, is not fully recuperable in a write-up like this one, but we take advantage of the multimedia capacity of the digital journal to share the sound works which will at least bring the reader a little closer to a small bit of London in June and July 2024. As a team, we never settled on whether we were using science to make artistic interventions and/or using feminist STS to make artistic interventions. On the contrary, in the cardiovascular lab visits and in the team conversations over lunch thereafter, in the design and realization for the gallery space and in the zine, and in the conversations convened in the space, we were constantly reframing and reworking the endeavor live.

Feminist STS always framed how we entered the cardiovascular lab, and emboldened by creative engagements such as those by Jackie Orr, we let ourselves work at the limits of the immediately comprehensible—we make non-sense as well as sense. The results were something quite different from normative

modes of communicating science. Rather than communicating, we scattered, diffused, distributed, seduced. We whispered in the visitors' ears, and then sang over words repeated from interviews. We shared our own immersion in plural conversations, situating us all within the essay.

It is perhaps unusual for an author to return to their own academic paper to re-engage it, rather than leaving it to others to pick up the essay should they feel so inspired. Yet, as this experiment with the Science Gallery London has shown, doing so in diverse configurations of interdisciplinary collaboration can be generative. And doing so multiply.

Careful Whisper has been a very different mode of re-engaging "Heart Feminism" than the previous collaboration with design scholar Nassim Parvin and neuroscientist Lewis Wheaton and evolving teams of students at Georgia Tech (JafariNaimi and Pollock 2018), along plural vectors: this one was site specific, was disrupting different sets of ideas, and was foregrounding of text and sound rather than visualization.

And this may not be the last interdisciplinary re-engagement with "Heart Feminism." During the *Careful Whisper* installation, Nassim traveled through London and participated in a well-attended public conversation in the space. Nassim pointed out that now that there has been a set of installations around visualization and this one around sound, the time is ripe for a "Heart Feminist" engagement with touch—further potential for new generative disorientations.

Note

¹ Individuals reporting ASMR experience a tingling, static-like sensation across the scalp, back of the neck, and at times further areas in response to specific triggering audio and visual stimuli. This sensation is widely reported to be accompanied by feelings of relaxation and well-being. Barratt and Davis (2015) associate the sensory phenomenon ASMR within other heightened flow states of such as synesthesia and identify several common triggers used to achieve ASMR, including whispering, personal attention, crisp sounds, and slow movements.

Artworks Referenced

Katrina Jungnickel and Julien McHardy. *EM #1 – Interview Machine*
<https://katjungnickel.com/portfolio/em1-interview-machine/>.

Barbara Kruger. *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)*. 1987. Screenprint on vinyl, 108 7/8 × 209 3/16 × 2 1/2 in. (276.5 × 531.3 × 6.4 cm).
<https://whitney.org/collection/works/34103>.

Barbara Kruger. *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*. 1989. Photographic silkscreen on vinyl, 112 × 112 in. (284.5 × 284.5 cm).

<https://www.davidzwirner.com/artworks/barbara-kruger-untitled-your-body-is-a-battleground--69bda>.

Barbara Kruger. *Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You*. 2022. Installation, Museum of Modern Art, New York. <https://www.davidzwirner.com/artworks/barbara-kruger-installation-view-barbara-kruger-thinking-of-you-i-mean-me-i-mean-you-museum-of-modern-art--7cf87>.

Jenny Holzer. *Softer*. 2017. <https://blenheimartfoundation.org.uk/product/softer-jenny-holzer-at-blenheim-palace/>.

Jade Montserrat. *Learning in-and-within relation (after Édouard Glissant)*. 2021. Performance. <https://hanoverproject.wordpress.com/2021/04/22/jade-montserrat/>.

Nina Wakeford. *on being allergic to onions...we read Susan Leigh Star*. 2020. Video work. <https://london.sciencegallery.com/genders-exhibits/on-being-allergic-to-onions-we-read-susan-leigh-star>.

References

Andersen, Joceline. 2014. "Now You've Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community." *Television & New Media* 16 (8): 683–700. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414556184>.

Barratt, Emma, and Nick Davis. 2015. "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A Flow-Like Mental State." *PeerJ* 26 (March). <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.851>.

Behar, Katherine, ed. 2016. *Object-Oriented Feminism*. University of Minnesota Press.

Berkhout, Suze, Kelly Fritsch, Brian Keeley, and Bibo Keeley. 2024. "Troubling Transplant Temporality Through Crip Technoscience and a Sensory Aesthetics of Time, Machine, and Health." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 10 (2). <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v10i1.42961>.

Brown, Kimberly Juanita, Cheryl Dunye, and Dell M. Hamilton. 2016. "Toyin Ojih Odutola's Art Practice as a Technology of the Skin." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2 (2). <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v2i2.28807>.

Cheadle, Harry. 2012. "What Is ASMR? That Good Tingly Feeling No One Can Explain." *VICE*, July 31. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/asmr-the-good-feeling-no-one-can-explain/>.

Cheang, Shu Lea. 2021. "3x3x6 – 9 Sq.m. and 6 Surveillance Cameras." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 7 (2). <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v7i2.37644>.

Downey, Gary, and Teun Zuiderent-Jerak. 2016. "Making and Doing: Engagement and Reflexive Learning in STS." In *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, 4th ed., edited by Ulrike Felt, Rayvon Fouché, Clark A. Miller, and Laurel Smith-Doerr, 223–251. MIT Press.

- Hero, River H. 2021. "A History of Zines." *Book Riot*, December 2.
<https://bookriot.com/history-of-zines/>.
- Hillcox, Jack. 2023. "Inside the World of Accidental ASMR Celebrities." *CNN*, June 24.
<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/24/us/asmr-unintentional-celebrities-youtube-tiktok-cec/index.html>.
- Hine, Amelia, and Fabien Medvecky. 2015. "Unfinished Science in Museums: A Push for Critical Science Literacy." *Journal of Science Communication* 14 (02): A04.
<https://doi.org/10.22323/2.14020204>.
- Horst, Maja. 2025. "The Art, Science and Technology Studies Movement: An Essay Review." *Social Studies of Science* 55 (1): 131–50.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/03063127241270917>.
- JafariNaimi, Nassim, and Anne Pollock. 2018. "Heart Sense: Experiments in Design as a Catalyst for Feminist Reflections on Embodiment." In *Design as a Catalyst for Change – DRS International Conference*, edited by Cristiano Storni, Keelin Leahy, Muireann McMahon, Peter Lloyd, and Erik Bohemia.
<https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2018.409>.
- Kwon, Miwon. 1997. "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity." *October* 80 (Spring): 85–110. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778809>.
- LGBT+ Cultural Heritage. n.d. "Zines." Accessed January 21, 2025.
<https://www.lgbtculturalheritage.com/zines>.
- Marsden, Rhodri. 2012. "'Maria Spends 20 Minutes Folding Towels': Why Millions Are Mesmerised by ASMR Videos." *The Independent*, July 20.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/maria-spends-20-minutes-folding-towels-why-millions-are-mesmerised-by-asmr-videos-7956866.html>.
- Mora Gámez, Fredy, Eliana Sánchez Aldana, and Dimitris Papadopoulos. 2023. "Affecting Infrastructures: Crafting and Weaving as Alternative Repairs." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 9 (2). <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v9i2.39206>.
- Orr, Jackie. 2015. "Enchanting Catastrophe: Magical Subrealism and BP's Macondo." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 1 (1).
<https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v1i1.28813>.
- Pollock, Anne. 2012. *Medicating Race: Heart Disease and Durable Preoccupations with Difference*. Duke University Press.
- Pollock, Anne. 2015. "Heart Feminism." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 1 (1). <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v1i1.28811>.
- Pollock, Anne. 2024. "Angiotensin." In *Hormonal Theory: A Rebellious Glossary*, edited by Andrea Ford, Roslyn Malcolm, Sonja Erikainen, Lisa Raeder, and Celia Roberts, 27–36. Bloomsbury.
- Rogers, Hannah Star, and Megan K. Halpern. 2021. "Introduction: The Past, Present, and Future of Art, Science, and Technology Studies." In *Routledge Handbook of Art*,

Science, and Technology Studies, edited by Hannah Star Rogers, Megan K. Halpern, Delia Hannah, and Kathryn de Ridder-Vignone, 1-46. Routledge.

Salter, Chris, Regula Valérie Burri, and Joseph Dumit. 2016. "Art, Design, Performance." In *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, 4th ed., edited by Ulrike Felt, Rayvon Fouché, Clark A. Miller, and Laurel Smith-Doerr, 139-167. MIT Press.

Willet, Jennifer. 2021. "INCUBATOR Art Lab: Reimagining Biotech Futures Through Integrated Laboratory Practices." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 7 (2). <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v7i2.34926>.

Author Bios

Anne Pollock is Professor of Global Health and Social Medicine at King's College London. Previously a member of the Lead Editorial Team of *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, she continues to serve as an Editor of *BioSocieties*. She is author of multiple books, most recently *Sickening: Anti-Black Racism and Health Disparities* (Minnesota 2021), and co-author with Nadine Ehlers, Anthony Ryan Hatch, and Amade Aouatef M'charek of *The Racial Cage* (Minnesota 2025).

Nine Wakeford is Professor of Art at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her work has been shown at venues including Focal Point Gallery, Southend; Glasgow International; Science Gallery London; London Transport Museum; The Barbican; Reading International; Statgalerie, Bern. She is the author of *Our Pink Depot: The Gay Underground FLO-N202-236000000-TRK-MST-00002-SAY-HELLOWAVE-GOOD-BYE-KEN-NIE-BPS* (Book Works, 2019), and co-editor with Celia Lury of *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social* (Routledge, 2012).

Maithili Pittea is a Science Communication Master's student at Imperial College London, with a bachelor's degree in Neuroscience from King's College London. Her Master's thesis explores decolonization in museums.

Aysha Leach is a BA Fine Art graduate working mainly in video, with an interest in the deceitful allure of film production, superficiality, and the inherent seductiveness of being on camera.