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“Cannibalizing Sound: Deaf Performance as a Site of Trespass”

Introduction

Deaf artists Aaron Williamson and Christine Sun Kim use their voices violently, subversively and radically as a guerilla tactic to re-claim or take ownership over sound in order to “cannibalize” it. Williamson and Sun Kim “write the body” through the eruption of speaking, murmuring, sound distortion, noise, poly-vocality, silence and especially screams within media-based performances. Williamson uses voice recognition software to generate a text that becomes the focal point. While Williamson cannot hear his own voice, the computer is the interpreter for his screaming and moaning sounds. Sun Kim uses her voice to generate sounds as the basis for drawings that are created from the ink and powder-drenched quills, nails and cogs that dance across boards to the vibrations from subwoofers and speakers beneath. This paper will demonstrate that Sun Kim and Williamson's “aural violence” or “sound trespass” offers a transformative yet uncomfortable politicized space where the “other” can resist their peripheral positions. Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren states, “deaf aesthetics seek to create new public space for the inclusion of different sensorial frames, reject the moral and medical model of disability, and strive to shift mainstream cultural and experiential frames...”¹ The confluence of deafness and performance offers an avenue for deaf oppression, where new ways of listening might be developed.

¹ Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, “Hearing Difference across Theatres: Experimental, Disability, and Deaf Performance” in *Theatre Journal* 58 (2006) 417-436 by The John Hopkins University Press.

Background: The Sonic Turn in Contemporary Art

This section will provide some brief contextual background to the art practices of Christine Sun Kim and Aaron Williamson within the lingua franca of the sonic turn in contemporary art that places them squarely in the center of other visual artists, sound artists, performance artists and musicians who are working with experimental sounds in new formats. Sun Kim and Williamson are thus a deaf performance and sound artists working within a mainstream context, but speaking in a minority language. The lineage of sound art is one that Jim Drobnick talks about in relation to how sound art has proliferated over the last quarter century so that it could now justifiably merit being its own discipline, or at the least, a sub-discipline within larger fields.² Zeynep Bulut says that “Historically speaking, sound art derives from contemporary music or so-called ‘new music’ and contemporary art practices. Specifically, sound work refers to a sound sculpture and/or sound installation, via which the physical and the experiential relationship between sound and space, sound and music, and sound and image are explored.”³ Sun Kim’s and Williamson’s work can be placed in the tradition of work by other contemporary artists such as Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Ann Hamilton, Susan Hiller, Cristian Marclay and Chistof Migone. There are also other deaf artists who experiment with the versatility of sound as a representation of the visual, such as Joseph Grigely and Alison O’Daniel.

Christine Sun Kim: Sound as “Ghost”

Performance artist Christine Sun Kim explores sonic media without the benefit of

² Jim Drobnick, “Listening Awry” in *Aural Cultures*, ed. Jim Drobnick (Banff, Alberta: YYZ Books, Walter Philips Gallery Editions, 2004), 9.

³ Zeynep Bulut, “The Problem of Archiving Sound Works” in *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 11 (Winter 2006), 5.

hearing. Her work closely resembles the performances of Aaron Williamson as she also finds how to make the presence of sound more physical, to show greater dimensions of movement, and to establish a personal connection to the aural. Deaf from birth, Sun Kim turned to using sound as a medium during an artist residency in Berlin in 2008, and has since developed a practice of lo-fi experimentation that aims to re-appropriate sound by translating it into movement and vision through performance. While growing up, Sun Kim perceived sound as a form of authority and without realizing it, the artist was never at ease nor in complete control of sounds she made. She states, as a child her parents would teach her “sound etiquette”: “They [her parents] would tell me: be quiet. Don’t burp, drag your feet, make loud noises.”⁴ She was still expected to abide by the conventional norms of sound.

As she grew older, she acquired two languages, American Sign Language and English, and she became aware of her relationship with sound, at which time she began to use question the “ownership” and control of sound and how much value it carries in this society. Sun Kim’s reception of language is shaped by sign language interpreters, limited subtitles on television, written conversations on paper and emails. These modes have naturally led to a loss of content and a delay in communication, which greatly influences the way she perceives reality and experiences the world.⁵ Sun Kim says, “Despite the fact that I cannot access sound directly, I perceive ideas surrounding the concept of sound as intriguing, hierarchical, and authoritative—the society clearly privileges auditory communication over other forms. Hence, I have embraced sound as a medium in my

⁴ Selby, Todd. NOWNESS.com Productions. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqJA0SZm9zI>

⁵ Christine Sun Kim, artist statement, 2012 from www.christinesunkim.com

work because it gives me the most direct connection to society at large.”⁶ The artist pushes her relationships to sound to different physical and conceptual levels, challenging is visual absence and limitations. Sun Kim often uses two terms around her practice and relationship to sound: currency and ghost. “Currency” refers to how the artist recognizes the “value” of sound in the world, while “ghost” characterizes its inaudible quality from Sun Kim’s perspective. The reference to “ghost” resembles Williamson’s discussion around sound as “phantom.”

In fall, 2012, curated the group exhibition *What Can A Body Do?* for Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College, PA, and Sun Kim participated in a sound performance at the opening reception on October 26. The performance was composed of her voice-box – screaming (or screeching?), blowing, whimpering and murmuring into a microphone, and also sounds she created using various objects around her, such as her fist banging on the wall, swinging and sliding a microphone through the air and along the ground and the tick-tocks from a metronome.⁷ *Speaker drawings #1-#10* (2012) were then created from the ink and powder-drenched quills, nails and cogs that danced across round wood boards to the vibrations of subwoofers and speakers beneath that responded to Sun Kim’s sounds. The ten wood board *Speaker drawings* were then hung up on the walls of the gallery space after Sun Kim’s performance. Along with drumhead, subwoofers, paper, objects, and wet materials, the end results come out as physical and visual records of sounds. She combines these various systems in an attempt to open up a new space of authority/ownership and rearrange hierarchies of information. Sun Kim’s performance located sound in an aggressive, forceful act of cannibalization and inversion.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ To watch (and hear) parts of Sun Kim’s riveting performance in addition to an interview with the artist, please visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ivcf2YCedtE> Accessed December 13, 2012

As one observer to the performance commented,

During her live performance there were many times the feedback got so loud, audience members covered their ears or made uncomfortable facial expressions...Sun Kim used her voice box to create a sound that, for me, sounded like something between anxious humming and screaming. The sound made me feel nervous; I could imagine hearing it from another room and wanting to run in and check if everyone was okay. I felt on edge at this point in the performance because the sounds that were being created evoked panicky feelings in me; as an audience member I was experiencing stress... in using her own voice [as a deaf person] to create sound, Sun Kim is defying social norms and stretching both herself and the audience outside of their comfort zones. One might perhaps describe her performance as deviant.⁸

Sun Kim's piercing noise through her voice and feedback "cannibalized" sound. She reclaimed it as her own, tormented and played with it and spat it back into the ears of the many people sitting up close to her during the performance. Ultimately, Sun Kim has undertaken a type of 'trespass' in order to energize, expand, negate, or flip the idea of 'access' within the territory of sound, in order to mobilize trespass in a way that reimagines the agentive capacity of those not normally 'permitted' equal access, such as herself as a deaf subject.

Aaron Williamson: *Hearing Things*

Aaron Williamson's performance *Hearing Things* (1998), is a meditative work based on the oracle at Delphi, enacted for the 1998 Dutch Electronic Arts Festival. According to the ancient Greek story, Delphi was the most important shrine in all of Greece and people would come from all over to have their questions answered about their futures as a more authentic Church of Holy Blood. The oracle delivered cryptic messages and arguments over the correct decoding were common. In this performance, Williamson

⁸ <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/exchange/christine-sum-kim-silence-discipline-and-mediated-viewings-art>, Accessed December 13, 2012

carries around a large ear on his back, indicating the burden or weight of hearing, and his face is covered in white make-up. He also uses voice recognition software to generate a text that becomes the focal point of his performance. He lost his hearing in childhood and was profoundly deaf by his mid-twenties. He uses his own voice to generate the sounds that are then converted by the software into a text of recognizable English words. That text is then projected from the ceiling onto the floor and is also reflected on two large transparent sheets of glass set up behind the performer. Williamson moves around the text on the floor, looks at them and makes a variety of additional sounds, such as whoops, cries, chatters and moans which are meant to evoke the indecipherable words of the oracle.⁹

So while Williamson cannot hear his own voice, he sees it as a representation in words by it, where the computer is acting as the interpreter for the sounds. Michael Davidson says of this, “Thus, by a curious inversion of agency, Williamson may encounter his own words as alien – which for the deaf person living in an audist world is precisely the case.”¹⁰ The title of the work “Hearing Things,” is unpacked by Williamson. The phrase refers to the phantasmal quality of words when encountering alien forms. But again according to Davidson, “at an epistemological level, “hearing things” refers to the binary opposition by which humans are measured in hearing culture – in which an originary Logos (the oracle) must be heard in order to be incarnated in flesh.”¹¹ Like deaf subjects in mainstream culture, Williamson is literally alienated from the text in his performance as he relies on a translator to communicate that which he cannot hear. His

⁹ To watch an interview with the artist and view parts of the *Hearing Things* performance, please visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_nHO2Pfk8 Accessed December 13, 2012

¹⁰ Michael Davidson, “Hearing Things: The Scandal of Speech in Deaf Performance” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002, 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

words appear on the ground as though they are exotic, unusual forms. He may be able to step on them and play with their form, but he is still ultimately removed from their production. Davidson says that, “His nonsemantic roaring...is a speech act that challenges the ordinariness of ordinary language, making strange not only sounds but also the discursive arena in which speech makes sense.”¹² Williamson has drawn from the legacy of Artaud in this work the troubles the limits of the socialized body by exploring how meaning can erupt from the body like a scream. He is also taking up the action of “inversion” by embodying the very monstrosity in which his identity as a deaf person is consistently lampooned. He acts the part of primitive and savage, proving the theory that disabled people are monsters, although Williamson, as one who is in control of his own portrayal, swallows such pejorative constructions and spits it back out to the visitor by reclaiming the phantom notion of sound as a space for the deaf as well as the hearing. He successfully cuts across stereotypes and assumptions that have plagued disability for centuries.

‘Normal hearing’ and ‘Deaf hearing’

In thinking about the two artists together now, Sun Kim and Williamson trouble just how ‘inaudible’ sound really is in their visceral experiences of it. Disability and music theorist Joseph N. Straus has discussed how the concept of ‘deaf hearing’ may seem like an oxymoron, given that the stereotypical view of the deaf experience is a life of total silence and that the deaf subject has no concept of sound. But deaf scholars Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, say that on the contrary, deaf people actually know a lot

¹² Ibid., 87.

about sound and sound informs and inhabits their world just as much as the next person.¹³

The distinction, however, between the deaf person and the hearing person in their relationship to sound is the extent to which deaf people use senses other than the auditory to understand what they are hearing. The deaf must also determine all the “complicated meanings attached to various sounds.”¹⁴ For example, for a deaf person, music is felt and music is seen, as demonstrated in the work of famous deaf Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who usually performs barefoot in order to experience the music viscerally. Straus continues, “hearing does not necessarily involve a one-to-one mapping of sense perceptions onto a single sensory organ; rather, hearing can be a much more multi-sensory experience.”¹⁵ Sun Kim and Williamson’s art practices exemplifies the notions that Straus articulates and their ‘deaf hearing’ often involves sensory input from a variety of sources.

Sun Kim and Williamson also proves how a so-called universal experience of sound can actually be manipulated by the atypical hearing experience. What they bring to sound is deepened connection through a counter-standardization. Through their work, we cannot assume that there is a universal listener – they abolish the universal listener through their performances. They create an impasse to the ideology of the listener as a universal standard, where sound coming from the body, the subwoofer or the tick-tocks of a metronome are just as powerful as sounds from nature that experimental composer John Cage was so interested in.

¹³ Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, “The Meaning of Sound” in *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988), 91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁵ Joseph N. Straus, “Prodigious Hearing, Normal Hearing, and Disablist Hearing” in *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)167.

Following this, the performance work by Sun Kim and Williamson gives new weight to the term, “The silence is deafening.” This very common idiom means that any silence or lack of response in an exchange between people is usually construed as disapproval or lack of enthusiasm. Disability studies scholar Lennard Davis talks about how “the economy of the body is involved in our own metaphors about language and knowledge.”¹⁶ So the deafened moment, then, through this idiom, is one that suggests deviancy: the purposeful inability to follow the text of the conversation, the breath, the voice, the presence, as what was heard was not agreeable. Deafness then, is equated with ignorance, muteness and lack of communicative response or exchange. Davis also talks about other common significations for ‘silence’ that seem to embrace binary positions, such as being either punitive or transgressive. He says, “we say that people who are silent are unfriendly, hostile, or passively aggressive, although silence can signal intimacy, but only because intimacy removes the public ban on silence.”¹⁷ Sun Kim and Williamson certainly employ silence in its most powerful transgressive mode, although ‘silence’ and ‘deafness’ are completely unhinged in both of their practices, shattering the ‘silence is deafening’ idiom into many new dangerous and equally exciting directions.

Conclusion: A New Aurality

In their acts of relinquishing control over sound in different volumes, Christine Sun Kim and Aaron Williamson ultimately regain control through their acts of subversion, anarchy and guerilla tactics that have visceral, profound sensorial affects marking the body inside and out. Both reject the notion that sound (or architecture, or art,

¹⁶ Lennard Davis, “Deafness and Insight: The Deafened Moment as a Critical Modality” in *College English*, Vol. 57. No. 8 (December, 1995) 884.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 888.

or bodies) can be universal or standard. Perception can be unfocused, and it can even be deaf. Their oppositional aesthetics serve a reorientation of perception towards the experience of differentiation within the lingua franca of contemporary sound and performance based practices. Their performance-based work offers a fuller spectrum of human experience – of being in the world, in this neo-liberal age. Sun Kim and Williamson also offer deaf space and form as a platform for opportunity and transformation, where the process of becoming ‘being’ will incorporate more diverse en-fleshments that are embedded with auralities spanning tones, myriad inflections and multi-modal sensations.