

Jan Allen

Speaking Through Silence

The title of my presentation, cleverly following “Art Speaking”, is “Speaking Through Silence”, but I’ve developed a subtitle, which is “Flowgateslipreading: Thoughts on the Limits of Articulation and the Nature of Curatorial Authority”.

Other Can you say that again?

Jan (*laughs*) “Flowgateslipreading”—that’s all one word—“Thoughts on the Limits of Articulation and the Nature of Curatorial Authority”.

I just want to take an opportunity to thank you all for inviting me to participate in this forum. In its eloquent staging of silence, media artist Matt Rogalsky’s application of gating software to broadcast audio streams offers a metaphor for curatorial practice. Rogalsky’s work—and I’m going to play a segment of one in a moment—serves as a starting point for my analysis of method and effect, what I call the spectral mechanics and uncanny valleys integral to the materialization of meaning and aesthetic resonance in the art exhibition. Matt Rogalsky’s electronic audio artworks conduct operations on broadcast streams, subjecting them to software processing that exposes aspects of the specific material and of the medium in general. The work of interest in this context was inspired by a programme called Cash. It’s software that was marketed for a short period in California to talk radio stations, to enable them to remove silences from broadcast audio and to make this saved time thus available for commercials. The time could be sold and thereby improve their profits, thus the name “Cash”. The application became controversial when speakers objected, pointing out that the excision of silences changed their speech, and the issue actually went to court. Blinded by the profit motive, the users of Cash failed to take into account the degree to which meaning is shaped through the pauses and rhythms of speech.

Matt Rogalsky developed a series of art projects and performances based on software that does the opposite of Cash, essentially capturing the silences in

broadcast audio, amplifying them—not squeezing out the silences but rather amplifying them. I’m going to play a clip called *two minutes and fifty seconds of silence (for the USA)*. It’s from 2003 and it consists of the silences extracted from American president George W. Bush’s speech in March of that year, announcing the invasion of Iraq.

Perhaps that’s enough. (*laughs*) I played the whole thing one time and people were just about running out of the room.

So what you’re hearing there is the timbre of the hull, the resonant after-effects of the amplification system, its ghostly glottal stops and hums. The silences are bracketed by these little clips of sound as volume declines, so Matt Rogalsky is capturing just the tag ends of the speech. The recorded silences capture the ambient sound, the background hum of the space in which it’s generated, the physical setting of the performance—that is to say, the first space of the listener. The silences might signal hesitation; more often they stage emphasis. In this sense, the silences represent the space of reception, the outward trajectory of speech to audience and the absorption of its meaning. They are the elements of communicative resonance and, perhaps further, the zone in which that which is suppressed or unsaid may be apprehended. *two minutes and fifty seconds of silence (for the USA)*, with its haunting, memorializing title, represents the interstices of a historic speech in an act of scrutiny, or—a more hysterical interpretation—a fearful blockage of its content. Most of all, this audio work emphasizes very beautifully the unspoken elements underpinning such a public proclamation of war: the unacknowledged motives, the unstoppable displacements and deaths.

Keeping this in mind, I want to talk about the silent zones of curatorial practice. Within the exhibitionary complex, with its jostling of property, history, and personalities, spiked with our yearnings for popular and critical relevance, we can think of curating as an orchestration of productive suggestion, a selective framing of associations that gain potency from the residual aura of suppressed content. In laying out sets of unspoken dynamics underpinning curatorial practice, I want to talk about and highlight the core of curatorial practice that consists of amplifying the resonance of the work of art in the context of its physical and social spaces.

I have questions about the degree to which conditions—that is, institutional settings and their streams of funding and operational reflexes and their presumed relationship with audiences—support the presentation of new forms or even new interpretations of art, and hope to identify some of the tensions inherent in the institutional curator’s role, in order to consider the nature of curatorial contributions to culture overall.

So I invented this term “spectral mechanics” to talk about those material conditions and the orchestration of resources that underpin curatorial activity. These silent if not secret determinants are spectral in that they haunt the exhibition, suffusing it all the more powerfully for being unspoken. The curator’s role as guarantor of aesthetic integrity often entails a mediation of the relationship between public resources and the private agendas of, for example, collectors, dealers, sponsors, in a process that conjures up the ambiguous term “curatorial terror”. We have to navigate our way among these different agendas. I suggest there is a need to understand curatorship as a series of working relationships first and foremost, and to invite consideration of the question what is the nature of curatorial authority? Several presenters have made reference to a kind of presumed power that the curator has and I’m interested in looking inside that assumption—in fact questioning that assumption in fundamental ways.

What kind of leverage do we have, and thus, responsibility? If we have power, how do we use it and what’s our degree of accountability? Is it access to resources—that is, that we have access to exhibition spaces and publication budgets? Is it professional contacts, knowledge, aesthetic judgment? Specific sets of skills, everything from grant-writing to exhibition layout? Curatorial value is obviously different to different people, to an artist or collector, for instance, and we might consider to what end we wield this capacity, or, as Jeff Thomas put it yesterday, who benefits from our work?

What do we value? Our capacity to champion specific types of work, to bring recognition to a talented individual, or to animate a particular community? I think that’s something you [Jeff Thomas] were referring to yesterday.

Amid the perennial vexations of inadequate resources and competing agendas, what are the implications for professional ethics and presumed adherence to a public trust in a setting in which entrepreneurial-style initiative is increasingly evoked? Further, what is the role of the artist and the artistic community in this arena of spectral mechanics? What is their value, how do we value them and take them, balance their needs within the overall agenda?

Within shifting rules of engagement, the curator mates enlightened self-interest with aesthetic effect. If “spectral mechanics” refers to the conditions surrounding exhibition production, on the other side lies the context of reception wherein measure is taken of what can be articulated, received, and understood—what I call that sweet spot nestled between complacent comprehension, as in marching out what people expect to see—and productive confusion. You don’t want to baffle them completely.

One of the tools of—or do you? (*laughs*) One of the tools of curatorial practice, I’m calling this “uncanny valley”, a silent zone of apprehension that rides on the power of understatement, fear, excess, or irrationality, that is, the long-noted congruence of sublime response with aesthetic experience, the connection between bafflement and wonder.

Extending the aural metaphor, I want to talk about a second work. I’m not going to present it, I’m just going to describe it. It’s a second work of art that uses silence in a larger project that employs digital media to excavate and redress historical trauma. It’s a sequence from Vision Machine’s *Reconstructed Speech: Successive Layers Over Silence*, from 2004. Vision Machine is a collective, a group that works with communities to recover—and recover from—historic trauma. The work they’re doing is the type of complex artistic practice that poses challenges both to the curatorial imagination and institutional frameworks. They are based in East London, UK and their goal is to foster film production collectives around the globe to research, analyze, and respond to conditions and mechanisms of power. They work with local populations producing what Vision Machine member Michael Uwemedimo calls “networked solidarities and circuits of infiltration”. The tape that I have is part of an ongoing three-year project working with palm-plantation workers, a union in North

Sumatra, to investigate a campaign of ostensibly anti-Communist terror waged in the Indonesian archipelago after October 1965, which saw the slaughter of somewhere between a hundred thousand and two million people.

As part of their research, Vision Machine located a videotape of a speech by William Colby, the then-chief of the Far East Division of the American CIA, an official accused of being the principle administrator of the civilian extermination program. In this recording of his speech, Colby is reporting on the progress of democracy in Southeast Asia, which has a lot of, of course, resonance right now with events in Iraq. Although the video image was available, its soundtrack had been classified, that is, censored. So, Vision Machine hired a lip-reader to watch the video and provide translation, to try to see what he was saying. The recording they presented has a series of eight repeated passes over this video clip of what was a public speech, offering interpretations, and what happens in this process is that all the bureaucratic phrases come out, all the kind of safe-making power-structure institutional phrases are the ones he is able to translate. The resulting track is fragmentary, full of gaps and repeated phrases, and it takes on this aura of a possession by demons. The end result holds equal measures of horror and humour. What it conveys is the effort required, and the necessity of coming to a shared understanding of past histories, and the difficulty of doing so amid fragile and ever-shifting codes of reception.

Reconstructed speech is of interest here, not only for its power as aural performance and mobilization of the poetics of critical witness, but as an example of current forms of artistic practice that call for particular forms of support in relationship to audience. That film clip is part of a massive project involving opposing sectors of a local culture. Vision Machine is working with former executioners in the massacre and former victims and their families, in which the artists stage a series of re-enactments of historical events that are then commented on by other members of the community to bring to light this suppressed cataclysmic trauma. In this stream of artistic practice, aesthetic focus is placed on a series of gestures functioning in a reciprocal dialogue, a form requiring an interpretive valence that produces and prolongs the duration of “thinking through” or aesthetic encounter.

I'm suggesting here that curatorial efforts must focus on staging and maximizing the resonant capacity of the work of art by defining curatorial strategies that shape the space surrounding that articulation. A large question for me in relation to developing exhibitions is the identification of viable forms of material support for production and exchange. What kind of assumptions and pressures of unspoken expectations come into play with the use of new sources of support from corporate to nontraditional government sources for tourism development funding?

Are we as curators able to cultivate and access a new patron class and at what price, and what is the place of the enduring linkage of the art market to the production of value? How do artistic and curatorial forms of practice stay aligned? And I think this is my core question in raising Vision Machine's practice: what happens if they—artistic and curatorial practices—do not change in concert? Can that happen? What happens when artists and curators shift the zone of discussion and what devices sustain that alignment of resources with practices, especially for those of us working in institutional frameworks? To what degree do the opportunities of resources, freighted with values and agendas of their own, drive curatorial and artistic practices and possibilities so that our very imagination starts to be shaped by funding opportunities?

Certainly some exhibitions and events become more possible, while others become less likely in the absence of a compelling rationale. Some intelligent forms of curatorial practice languish for lack of avenues of support. I was speaking with a colleague recently about a proposal that had come before us that was very intelligent, very refined. It was a group exhibition proposal that had an interesting, finely rendered aesthetic concept underlying it, and we could not see a way to bring it to the public. We could not see a way to make it transparent to the public, nor to fund it. It would have been expensive; it would have entailed travelling artists from all over the world and it was just... it was beautiful, but our imaginations just couldn't make that leap. So I think practices like that have, over the past few years, languished and practically disappeared from the landscape in favour of other types of practice.

So we are in a point of flux and I think it is good to talk about it and be aware of

what we lose while other sorts of things become possible. More alarmingly, certain other practices which I might characterize as dull, superficial, redundant, and retrograde, flourish. These shockingly robust forms are firmly alive with systemically embedded forms of self-interest and curators are called on to navigate these sets of accountabilities.

Failure to find a productive balance of interests can put projects or even institutions at their peril. For example, an institution might face a downward spiral of resources or the greater risk of selling their soul to the highest bidder, thereby eroding the respect central to their authority in relation to a presumed public trust.

Are curators intended to act as advocates or mediators of such changes? My suggestion is that crafting this space between the artist and a cultural of reception is a key role and it is our responsibility to deploy and cultivate resources to this end.

The challenge for curators is to find ways to contribute to the fluidity and relevance of the system, to produce a space for visual pleasure, intellectual curiosity, and affective satisfaction. What is required is a discipline of invention, which moves beyond passivity. Incisive articulation is a part of this process of holding in mind the seductive vitality available in the production of new experience—that is, the beautiful risk it is our privilege to orchestrate—always keeping in mind that the exhibition is a communicative form of noise and resonant silence: the very nature of its articulation is episodic, contingent, and incomplete.

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