

Speaking through Silence

flowgateslipreading: thoughts on the limits of articulation and the nature of curatorial authority

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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. His piece, entitled *2 minutes and 50 seconds of silence (for the USA)*, 2003, serves as a starting point for an 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 digital processing that exposes aspects of the specific material, and of the media in general. The work of interest in this context was inspired by a program called KASH, software marketed for a short period in California to talk-radio stations to enable them to remove silences from broadcast audio to make this "saved" time available for commercials -- the time could then be sold to increase profits. Thus, the name: KASH. The application became controversial when speakers objected, pointing out that the excision of silences *changed* their speech. Blinded by the profit motive, KASH failed to take into account of 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 set thresholds of volume to harvest, in real time, the silences of broadcast audio. In Rogalsky's software silences are not eliminated; they are instead amplified.

For example, *2 minutes and 50 seconds of silence (for the USA)*, 2003 consists of the silences extracted from American President George W. Bush's speech, in March of that year, announcing the invasion of Iraq. In this piece, you hear the timbre of the hall, the resonant after-effects of the amplification system, its ghostly glottal stops and hums. The silences are bracketed by little clips of sound as the volume declines; even for very short dips. So, the recorded silences capture the ambient sound, the background hum of the space in which the source is generated, the physical setting of the performance, that is, 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, I suggest, the zone in which what is suppressed or unsaid is may be apprehended. *2 minutes and 50 seconds of silence (for the USA)*, with its haunting, memorializing title, presents the interstices of an historic speech in an act of scrutiny, or, a more hysterical interpretation: of 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 that will be its outcome, the immeasurable tally of losses and gains.

Keeping this work in mind, I want to speak about the silent zones of curatorial practice.

Within the exhibitionary complex, with its jostling of property, history and personality – spiked with conflicted 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 highlight a 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, the institutional settings and their streams of funding and operational reflexes, presumed relationship to audience etc – support the presentation of new forms or even new interpretations of art, and I want to identify some of the tensions inherent in the institutional curator’s role in order to consider the nature of curatorial contributions to culture.

In using the term spectral mechanics, I refer to the material conditions and 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 curators’ role as guarantor of aesthetic integrity often entails mediation of the relationship between public resources and private agendas of, for example, collectors, dealers, and sponsors, a process that conjures up the ambiguous term: curatorial terror. Curatorship today, I suggest, operates as a series of working relationships, a condition that invites the question: what is the nature of curatorial authority? What kind of leverage, and thus responsibility do curators have? Is it access to resources (e.g. exhibition space or publication budgets)? Professional contacts? Knowledge? Aesthetic judgement? Or a kit of skills from writing to installation design? Curatorial value is different to different people – to an artist or a collector for instance –

we might consider to what end do we wield this capacity? Who benefits from our work? Do we aim to champion specific types of work? Or to bring recognition to a talented individual? Or to animate a community? Or – when we lose sight of the distinction between self and public good – to advance our own careers? Amid the perennial vexations of inadequate resources and competing agendas, what are the implications for professional ethics and presumed adherence to the public trust in a context where entrepreneurial initiative is increasingly invoked?

Further, what is the role and place of the artist and artistic community in this arena of spectral mechanics? What role can and should the public gallery play in ensuring the social status and financial well being of artists? I can't help but note that understandings that pertained in the public sector even ten years ago have withered away to the point that some art gallery professionals – juggling tight resources, business models with unlikely “earned revenue” lines, and escalating expectations – respond with indifference when artists' rights are invoked.

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, the sweet spot nestled between complacent comprehension and productive confusion. One of the tools of curatorial practice is the 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 and aesthetic experience, the connection between bafflement and wonder.

Extending the aural metaphor, I want to bring forward now a second work of art that uses silence, a multi-part project employing digital media to excavate and re-dress historical trauma. Vision Machine's *Reconstructed Speech: successive layers over silence*, 2004, is part of this group's work with communities to recover – and recover from – historic trauma. Theirs is the kind of complex artistic practice that poses challenges both to curatorial imagination and institutional frameworks.

Vision Machine is a collective based in East London that aims to foster film production collectives around the globe to research, analyze and respond to the conditions and mechanisms of power. They work with local populations producing what Vision Machine

member Michael Uwemedimo calls “networked solidarities and circuits of infiltration.” *Reconstructed Speech* is part of a 3-year project working with a palm-plantation workers’ union in North Sumatra to investigate a campaign of ostensibly anti-communist terror waged in the Indonesian archipelago after October 1965, in which somewhere between 100,000 and 2 million people were slaughtered. As part of their research, Vision Machine located a video tape of a speech by William Colby, then Chief of the Far East Division of the American CIA, and an official accused of being a principal administrator of the civilian extermination program. In the video-recorded speech, Colby is reporting on the progress of democracy in Southeast Asia. Although the video image was available, its sound track had been classified, that is, censored. Vision Machine’s *Reconstructed Speech* presents the video with voice-over of a lip-reader’s translation layered in eight repeated passes.

The resulting audio track is fragmentary, full of gaps and repeated phrases; it takes on the aura of possession by demons. The end result holds equal measure of horror and humour, capturing the effort and necessity of coming to a shared understanding of the past -- 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 types of support and relationships to audience. The short film I just described is a fragment within a massive project involving opposing sectors of a local culture: former executioners and former victims and their families, in which the artists stage a series of re-enactments and commentaries (re-narration) to bring to light the suppressed cataclysmic trauma of a massacre. In this stream of artistic practice, aesthetic focus is placed on a series of gestures functioning in a reciprocal or dialogic form requiring an interpretive valence that produces and prolongs the duration of “thinking through” or aesthetic encounter. The complex aestheticization of history/interpersonal encounter of such extended, participatory art-as-service presents opportunities but obvious challenges for the public art gallery.

A large question for me in developing exhibition programs is the identification of viable forms of material support for production and exchange. These force consideration of the assumptions and pressures of unspoken expectations that come into play with use of new sources of financial support from corporate to non-traditional government sources like tourism-development funds. In wistful moments, I ponder the discipline’s

capacity to develop a new patron class. Another issue, even for those of us working in what we might consider a research environment, is the enduring linkage of the art market with the production of value – to what degree can and should such realities, what I would term “the blue-chip effect”, become determinant?

Evolving artistic practices (like those of Vision Machine) and the very real issue of limited resources raise the biggest question of all: how do artistic and curatorial forms of practice stay aligned, and what happens if they do not change in concert? Can that happen? What happens when artists and curators shift the zone of discussion? What devices sustain the alignment of resources with practices? To what degree do the “opportunities” of resources (freighted with values and agendas of their own) drive curatorial and artistic practices and possibilities? How do we manage these forces?

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. They are not arguable: whatever their degree of sophistication, their realization as exhibitions, as productions, becomes impossible. Certain other practices – which I might characterize as dull, superficial, redundant and retrograde – flourish. These shockingly robust forms are firmly allied with systemically embedded forms of self-interest. Given this, curators are called on to navigate sets of accountability: failure to find productive balance of interests can put projects or even institutions in peril, caught between a downward spiral of resources or the skew forces of a calculating benefactor, all in the context of a presumed public trust. Are curators intended to act as advocates or mediators of such change? My suggestion is that crafting this space between the artist and culture of reception by cultivating and deploying resources in support of emerging, vital artistic expression is the key professional role of the curator today.

The challenge 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, of incisive articulation and of holding in mind the seductive vitality available in the production of new experience: that is, the beautiful risk it's 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.