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Silence, Wielded

When *SOUND OFF: Silence + Resistance* opened in January 2020, we were staring down the barrel of an upcoming election season sure to be equally, if not more, clamorous than the last, amidst a cacophony of global anxieties – climate change, migrant crises and stock market volatility, to name a few. The show opened, in fact, not five days after the assassination, by American drone strike, of Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani that might have set a course for war between the two countries. As the political theater ramped up in those early months, the exhibition wondered aloud whether silence was more than a type of protest, or a retreat from the noise. When, for instance, is silence an intervention? When is it *resistance*?

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I write now a year later, through the lens of what was then only a looming possibility but is presently a very real pandemic, looking back at an exhibition about sound that closed on the very day Gavin Newsome announced widespread closures across the state. It's hard not to imagine the gallery speakers and projectors powering down and taking the whole city with them. The weeks that followed were marked by an eerie, anxious quiet, punctured in the summer months by uprisings over the lynchings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Streets previously empty for fear of infection, contagion, were reactivated in anger. The danger in gathering, and the choice to do so nevertheless, only underscores the urgency of justice, the absurdity of having to choose one life-or-death emergency over another. The silence that had represented safety, care, altruism even, suddenly came to represent the opposite – erasure, violence, apathy – recalled, instead, Act Up's imperative in the face of the AIDS epidemic: Silence = Death. In this case: Say their names.

This is exactly the dichotomy the exhibition confronts: the assumption of sound as powerful, energetic, present, and of silence as meek, meager, empty; the definition of silence by negation, by that which it is *not*. This is the space of the pervasive ethos equating speaking up with speaking out: a system that is founded on volume, bombast, excess, where sound is a currency of power – to deploy or dampen it, to eavesdrop, to make speak – and to silence is to disempower. But what of silence claimed, wielded? Not the master's tools – censorship, erasure, repression – appropriated, but undermined – withholding, evasion, protection, meditation, study. Taken up, silence is a resistance to the very system that seeks to define it as absence, as lack.

In *SOUND OFF: Silence + Resistance*, artist-curator Abigail Raphael Collins culls works from seven artists whose practices engage silence and sound as modes of action and attention. The impetus for Collins, a video and installation artist whose own work often entails unscripted dialogue and interviews, is a study of the pauses, the stutters inherent in conversation, in curiosity and discovery, in disagreement and contention. Collins's curatorial impulse is an extension of the study and observation that is foundational to her broader practice. Here, as in her experimental documentaries, Collins puts forth questions, propositions, then attends to their unfolding.

For the artists in *SOUND OFF*, silence is a deliberate, active state, a subject and a device. To be clear: the exhibition is not silent. Silence here is distinctly not absence. If anything, the works make visible the architecture and the materiality of sound in their attempts to control it: built rooms, carpeting, curtains, sound-proofing materials, speakers placed just so or color-matched in an attempt to disappear. Some of the works – Sharon Hayes's *Parole* and Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's *Silent* – take up space, are assertive in their particularity. Aliza Shvarts's QR Codes (*Sibboleth*) are so small they could easily be missed but come with a "WARNING: This piece makes use of loud sound and binaural beats."

As a whole, the exhibition requires participation of the visitor, activates the body. This is not a show that traces the perimeter at a steady pace. One must bend over, move a heavy curtain, let the eyes adjust to darkness, take out a phone to scan a QR code (then choose to press play), lean into speakers, or even take off their shoes to experience these works. This is not to mention the exhibition's cumulative run-time of 87 minutes. Some works might even appear standoffish or more trouble than they're worth. As a collection, however, the works resist passivity, each demanding its own particular mode of engagement as they deploy various tactics to undermine the systems within which they operate.

At the heart of the space is **Sharon Hayes's** four-channel video installation, *Parole* (2010), composed of free-standing plywood walls into which three flatscreen monitors and a rear-projection screen are built, sound proofing materials and multiple standing speakers. Named for Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the lived experience of language, *Parole* follows an androgynous Listener whose mic and headphones transmit all the work's audio components: a palimpsest of recordings, interviews, street performances, a dancer's movements, a university lecture, the entire duration of a kettle of water coming to boil, then whistling. Seemingly disparate, the audio sources revolve thematically around a dissolution of boundaries and come together materially as they are internalized by the central figure, whose pervasive headphones represent not only a mechanics but, more importantly, the intentionality of listening. The camera often closely frames, rests on, our protagonist's face as they

silently attend to each utterance. In an early scene, the Listener stares intently (mic in hand) into the eyes of a queer performer reenacting Anna Rüling’s 1904 speech, *What Interest Does the Women’s Movement Have in Solving the Homosexual Problem?*, in which she asserts that “homosexuality is a natural bridge between man and woman,” and therefore presents not a problem but an opportunity to “gain rights and recognition, and to eliminate the injustice which condemns them [both] on this earth.” The intensity of the Listener’s gaze seems at first to unsettle the performer, but neither is deterred, and when the Listener begins to walk backward, the speaker, in a moment of mutual recognition, raises their voice so as to still be heard, maintaining the chain of interdependence that is communication.



An excerpt from James Baldwin’s 1974 lecture at UC Berkeley, heard via tape recording through the Listener’s headphones, speaks more pointedly to the function of silence in dissolution. For Baldwin, this happens during his time as an American ex-patriot in France, where he “could speak to no one because I spoke no French – yeah, but no one wanted to speak to *me* [audience laughs, Baldwin chuckles] – I dropped into a silence in which I heard for the first time, really heard and then began to try to deal with, the beat of the language of the people that had produced me.” This “beat” is the structures of and within language, what Saussure calls *langue*. For both Baldwin and Rüling, justice is founded on radical structural change beginning with hierarchical systems of differentiation embedded in language. But this dissolution takes place at the level of *parole*, wherein the individual is both the subject and the point of intervention.

Artist duo **Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz**’s protagonist, the Venezuelan musician Aérea Negrot, takes up a silence of a more confrontational sort. Installed in a room exaggerating the gallery’s artifice through white carpeting, and requiring the removal of shoes to preserve it, *Silent* (2016) begins with an interpretation of John Cage’s *4’33”* by Negrot on a rotating stage in Oranienplatz, a public square in Berlin. Per Cage’s score, Negrot, a singer, stands with a collection of ten microphones, not singing, though very much communicating, at times flirtatiously, at others rejecting eye contact, laughing to herself, smoking a cigarette, drinking water, gesturing off camera, but always returning her gaze to the viewer, in the all-white room. As in *Parole*, the visible microphones are the source of the audio, in this case capturing the sounds of the plaza – birds, people, cars – and of Negrot, herself – the crinkle of the plastic water bottle, the tapping of her finger on a mic, the rustle of her sequined dress – as her attention visibly shifts from the camera to the plaza to her interiority, back and forth fluidly,

though performatively, before settling into a meditative space that brings her to tears.

Negrot's interpretation of 4'33" is followed by a song addressed to a "President," whose "profile is vague," and the "visitor." Here, the confrontation takes a more specific form: demand. To the President, Negrot articulates a need for recognition of non-binary gender identities in the form of "make-up, underwear and hormones!" To the visitor, however, Negrot folds the arts as an institution into the larger structures of war and genocide: "What is the difference between museum, artwork and enemy?" While it's unclear to whom the antagonism applies – is the museum the enemy of the visitor, or the state? – the blunt equation points back to the white wall, white carpeting, markers of an institutional structure that depends on its own preservation, the removing of one's shoes a silent agreement to the terms of engagement.

Returning to Hayes' *Parole*, in an academic lecture attended by the Listener, the writer Lauren Berlant speaks to her theory of sentimentality as a space "in which people assume that their emotions express their true feelings and that other people should have an obligation to hold those feelings and recognize them, that what they're seeking in recognition is a fundamentally emotional thing." Berlant goes on to describe love through the lens of sentimentality as a space where one "holds what's in you as a kind of precious thing... One way to think about love is, since you often fall in love with someone before you know them, is two people coming together, or people coming to the world, with the intention to recognize each other and the intention to get that feeling together."

In the light of Berlant's "sentimentality," the Listener comes to embody love, the ever-present microphone and headphones markers of intention and our protagonist's silent, but attentive, gaze that of recognition. The Listener is our model, as viewers; the custom of silence within art spaces is redefined as an intention toward recognition, toward love. This identification is especially striking when taken to the all-white room of Boudry and Lorenz's *Silent*, where one can easily imagine the Listener's microphone among the collection. A chain of interdependence emerges between Negrot, silently demanding recognition, and the Listener, silently giving it.

Silent ends where it began, ten microphones in front of a white wall that falls away to reveal Oranienplatz, only this time there is no performer. We now confront two absences. Aérea Negrot's physical absence reiterates the richness of her silent communication, that silence is distinctly not absence. But there is a more insidious absence that might go entirely unrecognized to the non-Berliner. While the public square is generally a locus for public address, Oranienplatz specifically was the site of a pro-immigration protest encampment from October 2012 to April 2014 in which occupants demanded asylum: residency beyond designated refugee camps, and the right to work and study in Germany. The occupation finally ended with promises of

government housing, but that most of the activists' applications were denied is the erasure embedded in the otherwise typical sounds of the plaza – the birds, the people, the cars – sounds that signify absence.

This is the silence to which **Aliza Shvarts's** *Sibboleth* (2016) refers, that of ideology, the hand that guides but depends on its own invisibility. The pristine white walls of the gallery framing a calm public square is a voice that doesn't have to say, "there is nothing to see here." *Sibboleth* is a series of five QR codes in place of didactics that, when scanned, bring up audio files describing the nature of art spaces and viewership, and their relationships to the larger structures of patriarchy and capitalism. Where wall texts and audio tours are typically entry points to work, expand upon and contextualize it, Shvarts's iterations challenge the viewer at every turn. They're inconspicuous, require a smart phone and internet connectivity, "all of which presume an access to knowledge and resources... that goes unmarked but is nonetheless embedded" in the code. The QR code, a cypher, "is not an exercise in information, but access," is symbolic of the inherent hostilities foundational to cultural capital by way of infrastructure, architecture or exhibition design that controls one's movement through the space. "They call and your body responds," says Shvarts. "The silence of the call, its indiscernibility, is the mark of its efficacy."

The broader code here is the ideological conceit of the arts as cultural institution. I'm reminded of the time my grandmother ran her hand across a Mark Rothko painting out of amazement, and in response to the ruckus she caused turned to me and said, "but I can touch your aunt's paintings at home." But the museum is neither the public space of the square, nor the privacy of one's home. The institution is a closed system whose capital is wholly dependent on exclusivity articulated through coded language and reinforced by codes of conduct – amazement, say, but contained. As Shvarts's address to the Listener/Visitor points out: "The voice of the gallery space must be constantly trimmed, kept in check, kept clear of sentiment and deep theory, of political advocacy and personal stake. Properly marshalled, this voice produces feelings of trustworthiness and believability, effects of a universal knowledge experienced as truth."

Though *Sibboleth* addresses the same visitor as Negrot, the use of the QR code complicates the public/ private dichotomy. While the work requires a sort of access that limits its reach to a specific audience, the files do live on the internet, a public, and as such can be taken out of the gallery for private listening, sustained study. The files are essentially a digital "take-away," can be shared, distributed, experienced ad infinitum. What begins as a 2-inch by 2-inch black and white sticker that one might miss altogether, that points directly to that which is invisibly operating on the visitor, becomes the one thing that has the potential to breach the boundaries of the gallery. It is code, taken up.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed takes up not the code but coding, which presents

an opportunity for carving out a space of protective opacity, a cover for subversion, a refusal to be legible, knowable – read controllable – by systems of power, including the gallery. In *Particularly Evasive*, a lecture and workshop performed live, once, Rasheed meditated on evasion as a historical practice in defiance of the systems that have exploited, violated, the Black body, mind and spirit, pointing to Zora Neale Hurston, who, in her 1935 anthropological collection, *Mules and Men* (1935), writes, “[t]he Negro in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive [...] All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind.”

As in Hurston’s collection that brings together oral histories, sermons and songs from Black American folk traditions, Rasheed’s broader practice is one of collecting artifacts, first from her personal life, then sources ranging from institutions to flea markets, family members to visitors, which are then shown as part of growing, iterative installations called *No Assembly Required*. The archive, when shown, is organized in a non-linear, unstructured layout, in direct contrast to the pseudo-scientific, colonial pursuit of defining a culture, a people, by anthropological means. Where anthropology seeks to know, to define and to fix, the ever-expanding archive has no organizing principle in either its method or its exhibition. What amasses over time, instead, is, like history itself, both complex and complicated.

The vulnerability of being knowable, known, is articulated too in the Biblical allegory that gives Shvarts’s work its name:

Shibboleth is a code word that, through its variations in pronunciation, demarcates belonging. In the Bible’s Book of Judges, after the armies of Gilead defeated those of Ephraim, the surviving Ephraimites tried to cross the River Jordan, back into their homeland to live unnoticed among their conquerors. It was difficult to tell who was a Gileadean and who was an Ephraimite, so the armies of Gilead invented a test: before they were allowed to cross the river, each suspected survivor was asked to say the word shibboleth, which in Hebrew translates to the part of a plant that bears the edible grain. The Ephraimite dialect had no “sh” sound, so those who pronounced the word as sibboleth were identified as Ephraimites and killed... Even in metaphor, the Shibboleth has mortal stakes, for to be on the wrong side of value is to risk access to sustenance, to perish at the periphery.

In the hands of the Gileadean army, the code seeks to identify, to root out, the Other. To evade, then, to invoke one’s “right to remain silent,” is not only a refusal to incriminate, to give oneself away, but to defy the system altogether.

Rasheed's text-based wall installation, pulled from *Editions Michel Obultra2* (2019), is a series of collaged inkjet prints and vinyl. Footnotes, numbered lines and what appears to be a distorted photocopy point to having been appropriated from unnamed sources. A single-stroke drawing could be an enlarged notation or the index of an intuitive gesture. Like the folkloric Trickster who uses intellect and secrecy to outwit, elude and escape, Rasheed's prints are coded and illegible to the uninitiated viewer. Even the artist's website is password-protected, undermining the expectation of art, of the artist, to be ever-present and accessible to the viewer, or that the work should cater, bend, to posterity. Rather, Rasheed occasionally places something outside the door of her mind, giving us something to play with. We can see the work, examine the archive and attend the lectures, but we cannot, may not, read her mind.

Baseera Khan's *Acoustic Sound Blanket* (2017) stands as a monument to both opacity and quietude, where noise and silence are evoked, rather than pictured. Worn during performances for both the public and the camera, the *Acoustic Sound Blankets* are made of felted industrial sound-insulation blankets, altered with a hole framed in custom gold silk embroidery in the middle. The patterns, reminiscent of designs on the covers of Qurans, have been in Khan's family for generations, marking births, marriages and deaths.

In documentation from the 2017 Women's March at Washington Square Park in New York City, protesters pose with an unknown figure draped in the sound blanket, but the embroidered frame is collapsed, closed; no face is visible. Like Aéria Negrot in Berlin's Oranienplatz, the wearer is silent but visible, yet cloaked and unidentifiable. When activated, the blanket is reminiscent of a burqa or niqab, a protective, personal space both carved and transported by and for the wearer. In the public square, the presence of such a figure is even more vociferous than protest chants. The embroidered opening at the center, however, lends the sculpture a more subversive potential function, exploiting the Orientalist fascination with modesty and ornamentation in Islam to gain access, as in the covert operations carried out by women in the Algerian War for Independence. The hole at the center is not a rupture but an orchestrated breach point for a face, or a hand, with the possibility of denying or granting access to another, or to venture out at will.

The use of acoustic materiality in protective gestures is also found in **Nikita Gale's** *Three-Dimensional Rest* (2019). The intimate sculptures, which derive their name and shape from the musical notation indicating quiet or pause, are a series of five rectangles carved out of the gallery walls and filled in – stuffed – with terrycloth dipped in concrete. The work is suggestive of an ad hoc effort at dampening sound, which is then undermined through the use of concrete. The once absorbent material is rendered not only useless for soundproofing, but actually more reverberant than the drywall in which it's embedded. Rather than

reinforce the system, further insulating the space from the outside world, these “rests,” puncture the walls only to create a further logistical problem for an exhibition already working against LACE’s single large gallery, its round walls and recessed ceiling.

The work is not, then, a sincere attempt at functional soundproofing but, rather, memorializing, making concrete, literally, small-scale, accessible gestures toward reinforcing protective boundaries. Rather than resting on pedestals to perform as venerated art-objects, the *Three-Dimensional Rests* carve a space for themselves inside the institutional architecture. No longer a vertical plinth but a literal frame, the wall is opened, infiltrated then occupied by icons to the makeshift and the provisional, the humble and the resourceful.

Where for Sharon Hayes the dissolution of boundaries enables a chain of interdependence, for Rasheed, Khan and Gale boundaries are built and reinforced as a means of undermining or subverting the exclusionary tactics of a state, a culture overtly hostile to the Black and Brown female body. Covert, protective spaces are vital, necessary. For Gale and Khan, the materiality of sound-proofing marks a protective boundary around the self, forging a space within which quietude and privacy are safe from both outside noise and ears. For Rasheed that boundary is enacted within language and representation. In each case, the distinction between inside and outside is not only delineated, but made overt, visible. These silences are to be known, though not necessarily to be understood, by those on the outside. The fact of the marked space is the subversion itself. But it’s not that the space isn’t permeable, it’s that the boundaries are in the control of their makers.

Many of these tactics come together in **Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s** *Rubber Coated Steel* (2016), where silence is both harrowing and honorific. The 20-minute video, installed in an all-black room, makes public the transcript and exhibits of an evidentiary hearing in the trial of an Israeli border police officer accused in the shooting deaths of two unarmed Palestinian teenagers, Nadeem Nawara and Mohammad Abu Daher. Set in an enclosed shooting range – gouges where bullets have struck the sound insulation visible along the walls – Abu Hamdan, who was the forensic audio analyst in the case, juxtaposes the transcript of his own testimony against audio-ballistic visualizations suspended on target retrievers.

The trial testimony and evidence come to reveal a number of ways Israeli soldiers weaponize sound and silence against Palestinians, including deafening sound bombs and the Ruger Rifle, whose bullets travel below the speed of sound, generating a ricochet but no gunshot. In the deaths of Nawara and Abu Daher, audio captured by CNN cameras is visualized, exposing the Israeli Defense Force’s use of rifles outfitted with rubber-bullet adapters to disguise the sounds of live ammunition. Because the

tactic exploits the physiological and neurological limitations of the human ear and brain (“Defence: I hear no difference in the sound of the two gunshots”), Abu Hamdan’s forensic analysis bypasses the problem altogether, suspending the sounds of individual gunshots in time and space as visual evidence. As such, the disguise is undermined, revealing another breach: that of the US-Israeli Arms Agreement.

Aside from an introductory statement and the video credits (both of which are typically written, but in this case are spoken), the sounds of the shooting range – a continuous, high pitched whirr, the soft scraping whoosh as images emerge from and retreat back into darkness, and the thud as they reach the back wall – are the video’s only audio component. All the evidence, whether text or image, is visualized, requiring quiet, sustained attention. Like the audio-ballistic images that allow for study and analysis, the choice to use only visualized evidence suggests that the video paused on any frame would not forfeit information but allow for more intense scrutiny of it.

But silence here has another function, one that is, as Lauren Berlant suggests, sentimental, loving. Sitting in silent attention on a bench in a dark room, watching, studying the evidence as it sweeps in and out of view is an act of mourning, of reverence, for the young Nawara and Abu Daher. While Abu Hamdan’s forensic analysis brings about the sort of justice that resides in legal systems and international tribunals, it is the simple act of allowing the silence to stand that embodies recognition of the young men whose lives were taken, whose silences sit in stark contrast against the institutional sounds of the firing range. In making the evidence public, the work does not speak for or over them. That they cannot speak for themselves is never obscured.

SOUND OFF: Silence + Resistance is not simply a collection of works centered on a theme. It is a proposal, a study of silence as a rich, active state; a vast and expansive space; a complex mode of engagement, participation and performance. And, like any other tool, wielded, it presents an opportunity for intervention into, as James Baldwin suggests, the “beats” of the systems that make us. It is both the state of quietude that makes careful listening possible, and the spaces between that give shape to, punctuate, the structure. It is moments of pause, of rest, made and taken; a shrouded hand pressing against that of ideology; a deep stare and an attentive gaze; communication and concealment; withholding and release. It is expectation undermined, desire rejected, and intention directed. Silence is yet to be. And that is certainly not nothing.

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