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ARTICLE

In Museums, There is No Hearing Subject

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INTRODUCTION

In idealistic terms, people frequently speak of museums as spaces to do work on subjects: the exhibition becomes a moment for edification, cultural expansion, exposure to old or foreign cultures or new ideas, or even cultural exchange. Rather than imagining a unified clientele, audience, or public, this paper considers the ways in which museums do not operate to produce a single hearing subject. Exhibitions cannot be designed to take advantage of how "we" hear because "we" always contains a multiplicity of acoustic perspectives. Rather than address a unified subject of audition, museum professionals can and should address *multiple* auditory subjects and subject positions in their work.

SSSSH! CURATORS AT WORK

In a short essay on sound in museums, Bubaris notes the existence of a longstanding belief in the silence of museums: "the silent visitor standing still in front of an exhibition and gazing intently has been a representative image of the museum experience" (2014, 391). Yet this older model, along with the image of silent contemplation, has been displaced by conceptions of museological practice animated by ideas such as "participation, playfulness, excitement, creativity, sociability, memorability, and branding" (393). Bubaris goes on to offer an interesting catalogue of sound-design practices for exhibitions, drawing from audioguides (and their radical appropriation by artists like Janet Cardiff) to the distortion of sounds in the Holocaust Tower in Berlin, to the use of sound and silence in museum tours.

From Bubaris' approach, we can extrapolate a theoretical truism that is apparent to any hearing subject who enters a large, urban modern museum on a summer weekday: museums are often noisy and cacophonous places. The noise can convey conviviality, excitement, or interactivity, as with the mixture of children yelling, adults talking, and various speakers pushing sound out of exhibits. Or it can convey confusion, chaos, overcrowding, and a sabotaging of contemplation and dialogue.

One of the authors of this paper, (Sterne) experienced this type of acoustic experience at the Documenta Halle in Kassel, Germany on one of the last weekends of the Documenta 14 festival (September 2017). The Halle was one of several large buildings used to house a diverse range of artworks from around the world,

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organized somewhat thematically. Spanning multiple floors and with wide open spaces, the Halle has the typical acoustic problems of large art museums, but with the added crush of a crowd larger than it can accommodate. Here, the temptation is to continue the tradition of inveighing against bad acoustic design (or no attention to it) in acoustic ecology: acoustics is often not taught in architecture schools; and acoustic concerns are often afterthoughts to museum designs and exhibition plans. Even small efforts and relatively unobtrusive changes, like absorption and diffusion on ceilings, non-parallel walls and ceilings, bass traps, and varying the acoustics from one part of the museum or exhibit to another, make good sense. Ideally, these would be features of the museum itself, but if not, they can be laid out in exhibition plans (See Everrett's 2019 essay published simultaneously with this paper).

As more curatorial projects include sound, or make demands on the acoustics of museum spaces, these kinds of concerns will gain greater prominence. In their absence, we can say that museums address *no* subject of audition, and *many* subjects of audition at once. By *subject of audition*, we reference the large literature in the humanities that treats experience as the product of social, cultural, ideological, and institutional processes: a human subject is not just a biological consciousness or a result of cognitive processes, but rather something produced by and through cultural mechanisms.

Bennett's (2017) work is an example of applying this way of thinking to museums, as spaces for subject formation through visual modes of spectatorship. But he has relatively little to say about sound. While museums do produce certain kinds of hegemonic subjects in the realms of visuality or cultural memory, there is at least one good result that emerges from a practice that might be called bad design in other contexts: museums do not have the same legacies of hegemonic hearing subjects that one finds in concert halls or even office spaces (Johnson 1995; Thompson 2002). They begin from multiplicity.

DESIGN FOR SONIC MULTIPLICITIES

Several traditions of museum criticism have considered them as spaces for subject formation or subjective transformation. Bennett's concept of the exhibitionary complex treats the museum as an apparatus for producing subjects, power and knowledge, through the orientation of the gaze, via movement through space, and through the arrangement of materials. More recent approaches orient subject formation to a more pluralistic ideological project, through developing new modes of address, giving the subjects within them (in the case of anthropological, historical, or natural-historical museums) some agency in how they are represented, or in reconceiving their clienteles or publics as including the people who were once represented in them for someone else's gaze (Bennett 2017, 190, 193).

The auditory subject of a museum is something else entirely. If most museum spaces are not designed with particular acoustic effects in mind (or if those effects are dealt with after the fact); if acoustic technologies are understood primarily as agents of "interactivity" or added value rather than the substance of exhibits, one might imagine that the hearing subject is neglected or ignored. By turning our attention to audioguides, which *should* be an excellent technology of access for blind and low-vision visitors, we understand the opposite problem: the construction of a single, unified hearing subject. It might seem that museums address a *single* kind of hearing subject, a "we" who hears, who must be addressed individually through headphones or directional sound, or whose sonic experience of the museum will be a

cacophony punctuated by curated audio. Audioguides rarely include basic accessibility features like audio-description, and the interfaces we have reviewed usually privilege a sighted user based on controls and selection screens that do not offer auditory or tactile options for control.

Closed captioning, curb cuts, and other technologies designed for difference and disability open up possibilities for a whole range of subjects and actions beyond the users for whom those technologies were originally designed, or, more precisely, they can and do address multiple kinds of users and use cases (Ellcessor 2016; Kafer 2013; Pullin 2009). Universal design features developed for a blind visitor may also be useful to other visitors as well. Friedner and Helmreich (2012) provide a short catalog of ways that deaf and hearing epistemologies might learn from one another, arguing that Deaf Studies' traditional focus on the visual erases d/Deaf experiences of sound, while Sound Studies' conceptions of hearing subject (or a subject that hears at all) all too often leads to audist assumptions about a unity of hearing experience (2012, 81). Audism is the ethnocentrism of those who hear, often characterized by an assumption that everyone hears in the same way. By extrapolating this thesis through the lens of curatorial practice, we contend that sonic design in museums should not address a universal hearing subject. If universal design theory teaches us that subjects use a diverse range of techniques to access sound and sound technologies, then curators would to well to draw on that theory, rather than universalistic or psychologistic theories of hearing.

WHEN INSTITUTIONS SPEAK (IN THE SETTLER COLONIES)

One curious place where museums have turned to sonic practice is in the land acknowledgment, which is often a politically and culturally fraught vocal and auditory interaction. Land acknowledgements are a separate and distinct practice from welcoming addresses and ceremonies made by Indigenous Elders and community members. Who is doing the addressing is a critical distinction: in one case, it is a representative of a settler institution speaking for that institution; in the latter case, Indigenous speakers observe protocols that vary in terms of their specific relationship to the lands occupied by the institution.

To varying degrees, land acknowledgements of Indigenous territories performed by cultural workers have become common within the settler colonial institutions of Canada, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Taiwan in recent years (Friedler 2018; Vartanian 2018), and are beginning to be used in the United States and elsewhere. Although these practices are less likely to be present in European institutions, this simply means that European institutions are dealing in other ways – or more likely, failing to adequately deal – with their embeddedness in histories of racism and colonialism. Debates about the efficacy of such statements, as either consciousness raising and progress toward reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, or new wily settler techniques for shoring up claims to innocence continue (Tuck and Wayne Yang 2012, The New Red Order 2018). Within the context of the United States, however, land or territorial acknowledgements are still highly unusual within mainstream museums and galleries. The contrast in these national practices is in spite of a great deal of shared history. For example, the border between the U.S. and Canada cuts directly through the Haudenosaunee Confederacy lands, nations who shared a system of shared governance that "played a critical role in the formation of concepts of democracy in the

emergence of the United States and today are leaders in the forum on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" (Rickard 2011, 466).

In general, however, land acknowledgements are short statements read aloud at the beginning of an event that acknowledge the site on which one is convening as the "traditional" lands of Indigenous "custodians" or "stewards." These statements can often feel rushed and socially awkward, full of mispronunciations and off-script vocalizations, and are given relatively little time compared to the events at which they happen (Asher, Curnow, and Davis 2018, 324). These situations are politically awkward, in some cases seeming to acknowledge treaty territory while being complicit in situations that directly contradict or fail to uphold treaty promises. In other cases, land acknowledgments may correctly note that the museum is located on unceded land, but the museum hosting the event that they are called upon to frame remains complicit with the harms that come from colonization.

Our sound studies approach here is intended as a first step toward an analysis of this increasingly commonplace practice of land acknowledgement as a sonic event whereby these pronouncements are frequently – and for varying and often understandable reasons – stumbled or rushed. The New Red Order's concept of an "endless acknowledgement" is a significant critique/revision/proposition/thought experiment: it reorganizes the land acknowledgment. Rather than a preface to an event, an "endless acknowledgement" unfolds over the duration of an extended sonic event to produce a structural demand.

On 13 June 2018, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City acknowledged the museum's site as "unceded Indigenous lands, specifically the territory of the Lenape," via a performance program produced by The New Red Order. Indigenous artists' approach to land acknowledgments in museum spaces like the Whitney help us understand the ways in which traditional museum layouts promote certain kinds of subjective practice at the expense of others. This is also a particularly clear example of how challenges to and innovations within institutions of contemporary art are consistently artist led. Inside the Whitney's level three theatre, The New Red Order presented *The Savage Philosophy of Endless Acknowledgements* for around ninety minutes. The event comprised a cabaret-style format of music, performance, and video, interjected among a longer narrative performed by Jim Fletcher and Kate Valk, of The Wooster Group, in the roles of white settler "reformed native impersonators" and tasked with acting as proxies for Indigenous informants. Within the evening's program, Oglala Lakota performance artist Kite debuted a two-part lecture, *Brighter Than The Brightest Star*, in which audience members were "taught" Lakota phrases, only to learn that they had pronounced the Lakota word for murder – Thiwíčhaktepi. Kite then cycled through a revelation in which five variations of "Murder! I heard you say it. Didn't I hear you? You let me put them on your tongues. I heard you myself. You promised to never say her name again. You said, it made you sick." building momentum as she seemed to be making herself physically sick on stage (Kite 2018).

The Savage Philosophy of Endless Acknowledgements refuses the temporal and linguistic conventions of institutionalized land acknowledgements whereby this recent sonic practice is, unfortunately, often situated within the broader remit of event housekeeping. Neither The New Red Order's proxies – who stood in place of the Indigenous "informants" – nor the artists that they programmed "fit" into the traditional

protocols of the Whitney. The evening of sound and performance art took place in the extra-museum space of a classic shoebox theatre designed, perhaps, to remedy white cube galleries' inhospitality to live art. And the institution was represented by the Director of Public Programs and Public Engagement, rather than by a curator. "At some point there is a we, and we will most likely have to work together," is part of the thesis presented within *The Savage Philosophy of Endless Acknowledgements* on the distinction between accomplices and allies (Indigenous Action Media, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Perhaps there *is* a "sonic we," but it is a collectivity forged in difference. As museum professionals imagine and pre-audit museum spaces for their projects, they would do well to address the range of subjects who might move through museum spaces and who might have moved through them before they were museum spaces, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because attention to the positionality of traditionally marginalized audiences and populations will be beneficial to all visitors, in ways that can only be hazily predicted ahead of time. **END**

NOTES

1. The New Red Order are a public secret society "enlisting a rotating and expanding cast of Informants including Ashley Byler, Jim Fletcher, Tali Keren, Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil, Kite, Erica Lord, Noelle Mason, Del Montgomery, Laura Ortman, Tony Oursler, Jeremy Pheiffer, Jackson Polys, and Kate Valk," with the Khalils and Polys as core members. (The New Red Order, 2018).[2]
2. The Wooster Group is an experimental theater company based in New York City.

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