



ArtSeen

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WEBEXCLUSIVE

Sexing Sound: Aural Archives and Feminist Scores

by Karlynn Ejercito

To the extent that sound art has assumed its own category, its definition has long been contingent on its place between sound and art. However commonplace sound practices may be within art and art practices within music, the question of sound's identity within art institutions—independent from performance and music—nonetheless played a dominant key in the criticism following the recent *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* exhibition at the MoMA. Between Branden Joseph's conclusion of the exhibition as providing “a hinge between the two realms (sound and art) opening out to the complex histories of the visual and the acoustic in multiple directions” and Justin Davidson's distinction between sound art and music being however “many minutes as you're content to give,” the defining characteristics of sound art remained altogether elusive. In lieu of a coherent identity, the low-key exhibition *Sexing Sound: Aural Archives and Feminist Scores* at the CUNY Graduate Center recasts the relationship between sound and art under the banner of “Sexing Sound.”

Conceived as two interdependent parts, *Sexing Sound* welds together an exhibition gathering aural archives and feminist scores to a symposium centering on music cultures, audio practices, and contemporary art. Whereas the symposium animates and informs much of the exhibition, the exhibition fixes the symposium into a circumscribed space and time—thus complicating any effort to read the exhibition on its own terms in good faith. Yet for all the challenges it sets forth, *Sexing Sound* presents an overall solid exploration into the relationship between archives and feminist scores. Curated by Katherine Carl, Valerie Tevere, and Siona Wilson, *Sexing Sound* features archival materials from ABC No Rio, the Fales Library and Special Collections at N.Y.U., Franklin Furnace, Interference Archive, and MoMA, with digital collections from Her Noise and UbuWeb hosted online. While no one physical archive is given priority over the other, more

room is tellingly allocated to Her Noise and UbuWeb. As primary focal points in the exhibition, these digital archives invite us to consider their role not only in view of the overarching theme, but also with respect to their physical counterparts.

Unlike the other archives, Her Noise is sectioned off into its own corner room. Inside, there is a small desk for browsing their website on a computer while “Her Noise: The Making of” plays on a large flat screen from an adjacent wall. This monitor is flanked by speakers projecting its audio recordings of live performances and the personal testimonies of its protagonists at a low volume. Established in 2001 as an offshoot to an eponymous exhibition, the London-based archive collects interviews, writings, and recorded performances from “artists who use sound to investigate social relations, inspire action, or uncover hidden soundscapes” in relation to gender. Part exhibition within an exhibition, part foil to the surrounding exhibition, the Her Noise room foregrounds *Sexing Sound*'s more or less unstated objective to form a stateside groundwork for thinking about music herstory and potential forms to come, unencumbered by questions of accessibility or duration.

As a virtual counterpoint to Her Noise, Ubu Web occupies a similarly privileged space at the center of the exhibition thereby offsetting some of the burden on Her Noise as a representative for the digital archive. Though its inclusion may not be entirely superfluous, its position in the midst of the physical archives imposes an oddly anachronistic center-periphery relationship whereby Ubu Web and facsimiles of a print culture are the center around which the physical archives orbit.

A relatively quiet assortment of photographs, flyers, magazine inserts, 'zines, albums, and posters line designated locations along the perimeter of the gallery. Between them, a pair of video monitors on pedestals loop selected MEN videos and Virginia Moser's 2011 documentary, “Grrrl Love and Revolution: Riot Grrrl N.Y.C.” to listen to on headphones. Among these items, feminist scores function as a parallel to the aural archive insofar as they are the second object of the exhibition. Reproductions of these scores are appended to the walls, showing compressed pieces of texts against blank off-colored page. Several of these scores from women including Simone Forti and Pauline Oliveros are pulled from *Women's Work*, a 1975 book edited by Alison Knowles and Anna [later Annea] Lockwood that brings together textual scores by women who use them as an “instructional” form in which to enable anti-hierarchical, conceptual acts or performances. Documentation of these scores in their original context is scarcely present in the exhibition, offering a nice—if somewhat deceptive—counterpoint to the other records on view, in the immediate, commanding tone of their form.

Sexing Sound could be interpreted as an attempt to conceive of sexual difference in terms of sound—in terms of the so-called “grain of the voice” that transcends the referentiality of

language. But instead of transcendence, the exhibition confronts us with an unassailably material impenetrability. The curators insist that their show is not “an exhibition of women’s ‘sound art’ nor a comprehensive historical survey,” but rather a “kind of research laboratory” where a visitor might “look, listen, dance, and hang out in the space.” While the tools for research are present, the exhibition’s display inhibits the mode of experimentation the curators have in mind. By separating the objects according to provenance and encasing them in vitrines, their display compromises “the provisional, ‘wild’ (incomplete and *disordered*) structure of the archive” they allegedly deploy.

More importantly, the cautious display of materials in such an anodyne layout undermines the show’s radical herstorical project, more readily apparent in the symposium but embodied all the same in its provocative pairing of scores by feminist cultural producers from the 1960s – 1980s with the D.I.Y. ephemera and zines bequeathed by the grassroots feminisms of the 1990s and early 2000s. In pairing these works, the curators suggest, perhaps inadvertently, the improvisational, D.I.Y. nature of feminist cultural production in the last two decades as an affective enactment of the feminist scores from preceding decades.

Whether or not the Riot Grrl Manifesto of 1991 accomplishes Alison Knowles’s 1963 instructions in “Giveaway Construction” to “Find something you like in the street and give it away, or find a variety of things, make something of them, and give it away,” it’s clear that *Sexing Sound* as a whole far exceeds its premise to ostensibly sex sound in spite of its flaws. By providing an occasion to think a little past sexual difference and historical divisions and past the differences between sound and art, in the end the exhibition offers a rich precedent for future conversations to come.

CONTRIBUTOR

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