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# *LOUD silence:* Turning Up the Volume on Deaf Voice

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**ABSTRACT:** From 2014 to 2015, I curated an exhibition entitled *LOUD silence*, which was held in two different venues in California: Grand Central Arts Center at California State University Fullerton, followed by gallery@Calit2 at the University of California, San Diego. The exhibition offered the opportunity for viewers to consider definitions of sound, voice, and notions of silence at the intersection of both deaf and hearing experiences. The exhibition displayed prints, drawings, sculptures, videos, and several film installations, and featured work by four artists who have different relationships to deafness and hearing, including Shary Boyle, Christine Sun Kim, Darrin Martin and Alison O’Daniel. These four artists explored how the binary of loudness and silence might be transformed in politicized ways through their own specificities, similarities and differences in relationship to communication and language. The stereotypical view of the deaf experience is that they live a life of total silence, where they retain little to no concept of sound. But on

the contrary, deaf studies scholars Carol Padden and Tom Humphries state that deaf people actually know a lot about sound, and sound informs and inhabits their world just as much as the next person (Padden and Humphries 1998: 91). Through these artworks, the artists aimed to loudly explode the myth of a silent deaf world, and they troubled just how “inaudible” sound really is through their own visceral experiences of it. Ultimately, I argue that the work in *LOUD silence* offers an avenue for eradicating deaf oppression.

KEYWORDS: deaf/hearing exhibitions, sound and silence, disability art, deaf voice

### Introduction



What is called for are more ethnographies of the places where the objects and subjects of Sound and Deaf Studies meet, domains in which...we can stir from our everyday senses of social relations. (Friedner and Helmreich 2012)

From 2014 to 2015, I curated an exhibition entitled *LOUD silence*, which was held in two different venues in California: Grand Central Arts Center at California State University Fullerton, followed by gallery@Calit2 at the University of California, San Diego. The exhibition offered the opportunity for viewers to consider definitions of sound, voice, and notions of silence at the intersection of both deaf and hearing experiences. In working on this exhibition as someone who does not intimately experience deafness, but who is part of deaf community given my knowledge of American Sign Language and as someone who also self-identifies as disabled, I wanted to share how perceptions of sound from deaf and hearing perspectives were being creatively explored by contemporary artists, and to bring greater attention to deaf politics within a contemporary art context. Curators have infrequently turned their attention to the deaf experience, and even less so toward experiences of sound from both deaf and hearing artists, so I saw this as an exciting opportunity to explore new terrain.<sup>1</sup>

I suggest that this exhibition meets the very call, outlined above, that scholars Michele Friedner and Stan Helmreich express in the conclusion of their seminal paper, “Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies.” While my analysis here is not quite an ethnographic one, it is a space for thinking about objects (art as material) and subjects (the artists as makers of the objects) that offers critical perspectives on audist assumptions that might enter into the domains and definitions of “Sound” and “Deaf.” This is because the works were exe-

cuted by four artists who have different relationships and modalities to deafness and hearing. The spectrum of deafness and hearing that is inhabited by the bodies of the artists in this exhibition ranges from one who was born deaf (Kim), one who was born hard of hearing and uses hearing aids (O'Daniel), one who was born hearing then acquired deafness and also uses a hearing aid (Martin), and one who was born hearing and is part of deaf community through her knowledge of American Sign Language (Boyle). These corporeal axes of deafness and hearing and everything in-between are important to distinguish from the outset, as the themes and arrangements exemplified in the works by the artists are shaped by the artist's hearing, seeing, sensing, and feeling abilities. Consequently, their views toward deafness in relation to sound and silence are also shaped by their unique capacities. They each explore how the binary of loudness and silence might be transformed in politicized ways through their own specificities, similarities and differences in relationship to communication and language. Comprising of prints, drawings, sculptures, videos, and several film installations, the works also possess multiple sensorial qualities. The goal of the project was to disrupt our preconceived ideas of "everyday senses of social relations," in particular, the stereotypical view of the deaf experience, which outlines that they live a life of total silence, where they retain little to no concept of sound. On the contrary, deaf studies scholars Carol Padden and Tom Humphries state that deaf people actually know a lot about sound, and sound informs and inhabits their world just as much as the next person (Padden and Humphries 1998: 91). Through these artworks, the artists aimed to loudly explode the myth of a silent deaf world, and they troubled just how "inaudible" sound really is through their own visceral experiences of it. They mobilized a type of trespass within the territory of sound, given they re-imagine the agentic capacity of those not normally "permitted" equal access to it.

The title of the exhibition, *LOUD silence*, can be interpreted in a number of ways. For instance, the work of Boyle, Kim, Martin and O'Daniel might give new weight to the term, "The silence is deafening." This very common idiom means that any silence or lack of response in an exchange between people is usually inappropriately construed as disapproval or lack of enthusiasm etc. Disability studies scholar Lennard Davis talks about how "the economy of the body is involved in our own metaphors about language and knowledge" (Davis 1995: 884). So the deafened moment, then, through this idiom, is one that suggests deviancy: the purposeful inability to follow the text of the conversation, the breath, the voice, the presence, as what was heard was not agreeable. Deafness then, is equated with ignorance, muteness and lack of communicative response or exchange. Davis also talks about other common significations for silence that seem to embrace binary positions, such as being either punitive or transgressive. He says, "we say that people who are silent are unfriendly,

hostile, or passively aggressive, although silence can signal intimacy, but only because intimacy removes the public ban on silence” (Davis 1995: 888). The artists in this exhibition employ silence in its most powerful transgressive mode, and thus silence and deafness are completely unhinged, shattering the “silence is deafening” idiom into many new dangerous and equally exciting directions. Through the work in this exhibition, it was thus my objective to give nuance and scope to the vocabulary of silence, loudness, voice, and otherness. Silence becomes physical, conceptual, visual, metaphoric, synaesthetic, tactile, inaccessible and accessible, inclusive and exclusive, captioned and not captioned, and more. Whether listening is about seeing, feeling, movement, silence or loudness, within the practices of Boyle, Kim, Martin and O’Daniel, we are provided with alternatives to “normal” listening. It also struck me, when thinking about these artists’ works, how I could simultaneously attempt to undo all preconceived notions of the acts of listening and hearing while also establishing how the artists’ unique experiences with sound and/or silence can provide valuable extensions and multiplications to our world’s more typical ceaseless flow of noise as political form. I argue that the work in *LOUD silence* offers an avenue for eradicating deaf oppression.

The inspiration for this oxymoronic title of the exhibition was, in fact, one of Christine Sun Kim’s drawings of the same name, not included in the original exhibition. In *loud silence* (2013), the artist inserted two subtle degrees of music dynamics: mezzoforte (mf) and mezzopiano (mp), which references a stylistic or functional mode of executing a musical score. In the case of these particular dynamics, mezzoforte translates to moderately loud, and mezzopiano indicates moderate softness. The “moderate” is a key word, because the dynamics are relative and do not indicate specific volume levels. Kim has described her rendition of moderately loud as “annoying like a loud motherfucker” while her moderately soft is “soft enough to pass as loud silence.” Just as the dynamics of music are open to interpretation – they are not absolute, so is Kim’s creative descriptions around her experience with such terms. Kim’s experiences of these sounds as a person who was born deaf further widens the possibilities of what this nuance of sound and silence could be. In other words, how can sound be determined within multiple modalities, as an instrument for altering our particular modes of perception and reception of it? How can Kim’s “annoying like a loud motherfucker” and “soft enough to be loud silence” send sound and silence in new directions? Kim’s work offers a new spectrum for experiencing sound, where it is visual, physical, conceptual, existential, spatial, hyper, and itinerant.

I also made particular use of italics and upper case letters in this title. When I asked the participating artists what they thought of this, Shary Boyle said:

“LOUD silence” – I interpret it to mean full and rich and insistent and big: those ideas inside of silence make perfect sense to me. So of course there’s all of that, an insistence of the complexity, of what other people think of as flat or non-existent somehow. Silence can be misinterpreted as something not happening, but this has a political edge – you cannot ignore this, like a shout (Boyle 2014).

Indeed, the title *is* a shout, and it is a political statement and orientation that calls for a new perception of deafness and the deaf experience. It plays equally with the idea of whispering (lower case, italics) and shouting (big uppercase letters, leaning forward, insistent). As Christine Sun Kim states, “It’s nice to see the irony of silence, especially that ‘loud’ is placed before that term” (Kim 2014). It is this irony that I seek to explore more fully in this article, through a close analysis of the artists’ works from this exhibition.

Including artists in my exhibition who have these vastly different experiences with deafness and hearing is intentional, as I felt it was important that visitors create new perceptions of silence from multiple aural positionalities, from both deaf and hearing cultures. I also wanted to complicate our ideas around who can speak of the deaf experience. The artists carve out a space using voice in various manifestations in which to be heard on their own terms, and they politically recuperate “voice” from the common assumption that not only must deaf people’s worlds be completely silent, but that they are also “mute” and so unable to communicate at all, or unable to reason (Davidson 2011: 81). The artists’ voices are then a form of cultural transmission turned on its head, and voice becomes an empowering agency. Voice as used by deaf and non-deaf artists calls into question the “natural” or “self-evident” the nature of speech-based communication model (Davidson 2011: 81). Thus, while the politics of the exhibition elicit an the eradication of deaf oppression, turning up the volume on the ostensible ironic “deaf voice” as the title spells out, an underlying politics of the exhibition was in the very curatorial act of bringing together such a disparity of voices that had not previously been heard collectively under one protest banner. Thus, I reinforce how I seek to trouble the legitimacy of one’s voice and who is excluded or included in this exchange, against a backdrop of a long history of disability and deaf oppression.

With this in mind, how might the artists’ new ways of listening, hearing, and exploring silence and voice contribute to disability studies politics? Music theorist Joseph N. Straus has discussed how the concept of “deaf hearing” may seem like an oxymoron (Straus 2011b: 167). He says, “hearing does not necessarily involve a one-to-one mapping of sense perceptions onto a single sensory organ; rather, hearing can be a much more multi-sensory experience” (Straus 2011b: 167). The distinction between the deaf person and the hearing person in their relationship to sound is the extent to

which deaf people use senses other than the auditory to understand what they are hearing. Sound is felt and sound is seen. Indeed, the artists' "deaf hearing" in this exhibition often involves sensory input from a variety of sources, and is not simply confined to the ears. Straus has emphasized how music cognition traditionally reinforces "normal hearing" and how they make sense of music. But the scholar proposes a new model: what he calls "disablist hearing" (Straus 2011: 158). How might people whose atypical bodily, psychological or cognitive abilities make sense of music instead? This new model offers an alternative to "normal hearing" that usually prevails over all other types of musical perception. What is particularly ground-breaking about what Straus articulates is the possibility of a generative intersection or exchange between what he calls "normal hearing" and "deaf hearing" across various subjects, which is in keeping with what Friedner and Helmreich suggest. In other words, a deaf listener can learn to hear 'normally' just as much as a hearing listener can learn "deaf hearing." The key is that hearing is about *apprehending* and not an essential attribute to bodies (Straus 2011: 169). Similarly, both sign language and the spoken word are about articulations, which operate in much the same way that a work of art does – they are all expressions offered in different mediums and formats and each mode and each subject has something to offer the other.

For example, several artists in this exhibition, namely Alison O'Daniel and Christine Sun Kim, share with their audience how a sound composition can be reconstituted through the visual form, as both drawings and sculptures. Similarly, the four artists in *LOUD silence* prove how a so-called universal experience of silence can actually be manipulated by the atypical hearing experience. What the artists' brings to silence is a deepened connection through a counter-standardization, which might be akin to one of the central projects in disability studies that attempts to counter narrow definitions of normativity. According to Friedner and Helmreich, they suggest that there is "something of a divide between hearing and seeing." (Friedner and Helmreich 2012) and this binary is what sustains the very scholarship behind Deaf Studies and Sound Studies. The scholars elaborate by saying that there is also a crisp line drawn between hearing and deafness, and thus they allude to the idea that perhaps there are more shades, tones, and timbres that meets they eye or the ear. Just as much as disability studies seeks to undo narrow definitions around "normality" and the "normal body" I also suggest that the artists are demonstrating that there is no such ideal "seeing," "hearing" or "vibrating." Through the artwork, we cannot assume that there is a universal listener. It is the majority of those who have the capacity to hear that must learn to hear in ways that challenge the frameworks in which we have been trained to listen. Straus surmises that "it's about what disability can provide to the listener, not what the listener can do despite disability" (Straus 2011:

180). In this way, the binary between normal and abnormal hearing is a fiction, and the range of human hearing is much wider than previously imagined.

### **Ambulatory Scores and Existential Silence**

Splitting her time between New York and Berlin, Christine Sun Kim has been interested in turning sound into a physical medium through tactile experiences since 2008, after being inspired by the rising sound art scene in Berlin during an initial artist residency there. Since then, Kim's practice has evolved into an intersection of performance, works on paper, and sound installations. Kim eventually partially turned away from relying too heavily on tactility to translate her experience of sound, especially through vibration, given she feels that it has become somewhat of a cliché in the deaf and hearing world. Rather, the artist is now more interested in the concept of borrowing people's voices, or leasing other people's voices through dynamic collaborative exchanges with other artists, musicians and composers in a bid to expand her own voice. The artist is very transparent about how much she relies on others who can mediate her voice into accessible forms, especially when much of the hearing world in which she communicates does not share an understanding of American Sign Language. While Kim has a strong sense of her own voice inside her body, she also intuitively understands how she must manage it. Padden and Humphries make reference to this idea, where they say that voice is a technology and an object for cultivation (Padden and Humphries 2005). Through a complex constellation of sound transmission via technology, instruments, and other voices, Kim is able to identify and articulate her own voice, sharing her experiences and vision.

For *LOUD silence*, Kim contributed four new drawings, entitled *Rehabilitating Silence* (2013), *Slur Version of Piano* (2013), *As Mezzo As Possible* (2013) and *A Noise Without Character* (2013). The drawings are an expression of Kim's interest in capturing the spatiality and movement of American Sign Language that she says is often overlapped with other grammar structures like English (Kim 2014). Kim also considers her drawings as manifestations of how information is being processed inside her head. She has executed the drawings, or what she calls scores or transcript drawings, which combine musical symbols and puns. While the artist has tried to capture the spatiality of ASL on paper, she also likens it to the challenge of trying to entirely capture a musical note on paper, which is often impossible. Of the drawing in Figure 1, *As Mezzo As Possible* (2013), Kim says, "This is my partial definition of silence. I'm still figuring out what it is exactly" (Kim 2014).

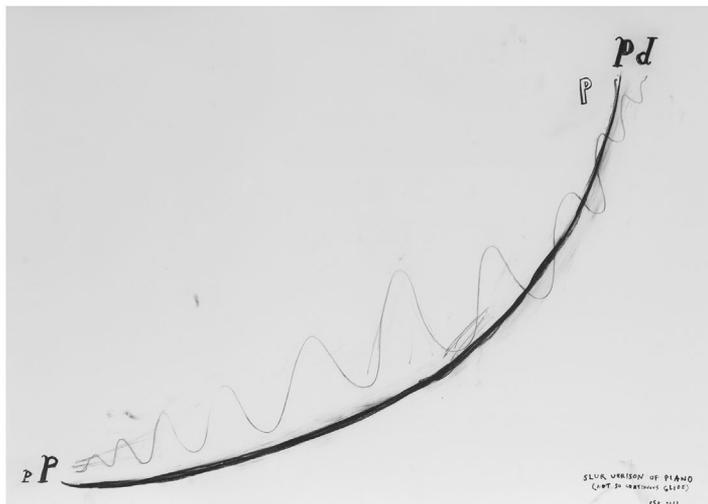
In the drawing, the letter p glides along the top of the paper, appearing very small at first on the left-hand side, and then as it repeats and moves along the paper as indicated by the more than/

**Figure 1**

Christine Sun Kim, *As Mezzo As Possible*, 2013, score drawing, 30" x 44."



less than symbols, which offer signs of direction, it grows larger and larger, and eventually doubles and then triples once it hits the edge of the right-hand side of the sheet. The letter p is the musical notation for quiet dynamics, as P means “piano” and it directs a performer to tone it down, and thus we might guess that as the p moves along in scale, it grows louder and louder in its silence. This reading might disrupt our usual associations between scale and loudness, where uppercase, large and bold letters could typically indicate a higher integer of sound, as opposed to smaller letters being quieter, softer, or indeed, toned down. Kim’s reversal of this association is in keeping with the title of the exhibition itself, which also grammatically enunciates a particular politics through the ironic play on words. But it also points to Kim’s exploration of a tactile (in the act of drawing and making), visual, spatial and mobile sense of silence that is akin to the idea of capturing the spatiality of sign language on paper. As the artist has said, she is still trying to determine what silence could mean from her unique point of view, given that she was raised with the hearing world’s definition of silence, which she does not identify with. This of course already debunks many of the hearing world myths that equates a deaf world to a silent world, given Kim’s ostensible silent world is actually full of her experience of noise. Kim’s drawings then offer us a rich semiotics of silence through the visual form, where it is the mark of a crayon creating renderings on the surface of a paper that becomes the artist’s voice in this instance, but here, silence is also very much conceptual as

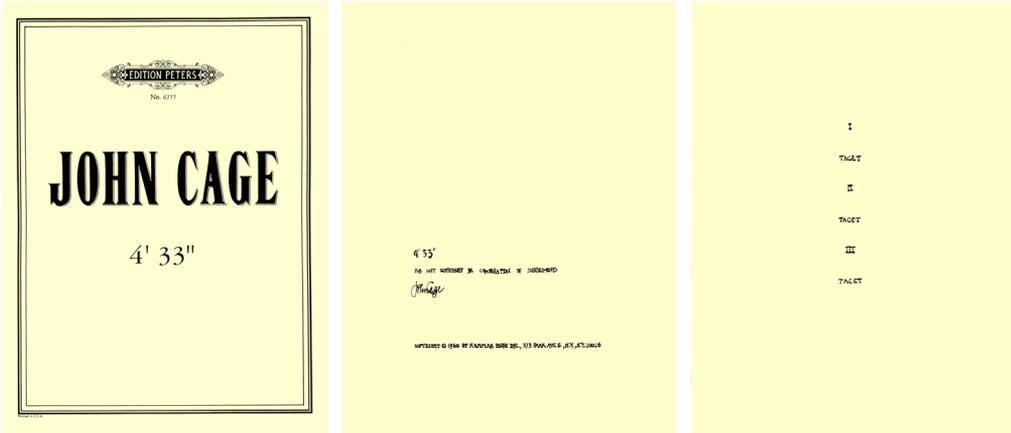


**Figure 2**  
Christine Sun Kim, *Slur Version of Piano*, 2013,  
score drawing, 30" x 44."

it is existential. It is a thing that moves from one side of the page to the other, it has lively form and shape, despite its two-dimensionality.

Silence also glides and silence slides down the page, as can be seen in her drawing, *Slur Version of Piano* (2013; see Figure 2). Of this work, she says, "Slur is a note sliding or transforming into a different note without separation, like passing over. I thought a lot about all different kinds of silences, like a P sliding or transforming into another P" (Kim 2014). Another important aspect of the drawings is how Kim tries to capture not only the spatiality of the hands moving in American Sign Language, but also facial expression. While the language of hand-shapes is very important in ASL, so is what is being expressed on the face, and through the body itself. Kim tries to capture these emotions by matching them with piano metaphors. For instance, Kim says, "each grammatical/syntactical element correlates to a key: placement, facial expression, handshape, repetition, and so on. Taken together, these aspects form a word or concept" (Kim 2014). Kim puts emphasis on the importance of studying her own vocalization because she enjoys the idea that her voice is coming from an internal space. In looking at the same drawing once again, *Slur Version of Piano*, we might then imagine two simultaneous actions: that of the physical gesture of hands moving, to convey ASL, but also that of a throat or a mouth (internal and external), where a wavy line might offer the undulations of tone or frequency (sound) or movement of voice box or lips.

Ultimately, the artist believes that sound and music will open up into unknown spaces if we think about sound as exempt from the signifiers, as independent of cultural references, such as those that we find in musical scores. Everything that has previously been learned, must be unlearned, as is the case in her own practice where she overthrows all conventions around sound etiquette from



Figures 3–5

The score from John Cage's *4'33"*, copyright ©1960 by Henmar Press, Inc. Used by permission of C.F. Peters Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

her childhood that so imposed and controlled her, in order to subvert such restrictions.

### Vacillating Sound and the Politics of Balance

Using a collaborative, cross-platform process, the Los Angeles-based artist Alison O'Daniel makes her work in narrative cinema shot on film and video, sculpture, and sound. *LOUD silences* how caused a new scene entitled *Hearing 4'33"* from O'Daniel's film *The Tuba Thieves* (2014), still in production. The film's title is a response to a string of tuba thefts occurring from L.A. area high schools for the past several years. *Hearing 4'33"* is part recreation of the premier of experimental composer John Cage's seminal "silent" music composition *4 minutes and 33 seconds (4'33")*, which altered the history of music. The scene is also very much about time – how time is slipping out of sync, or being contained. One of the most important elements is that the process of writing the film mirrors O'Daniel's own experience of hearing. The artist uses hearing aids and lip reads. As a toddler, she was constantly frustrated – screaming, pinching, kicking. Her parents moved to a two-story house and she began falling down the stairs, alerting them to balance issues associated with her inner ears. At the age of three, she was fitted with hearing aids and her communication frustrations calmed down, but subtly lingered and took different forms. For the artist, information is interpreted, misinterpreted, gleaned, and confused, all in an attempt to prioritize the act of listening. This is what the artist attempts to communicate through her process and artistic outcomes. Straus talks of instances where balance is lost and regained in music, and how inversional symmetry and balance could very easily compare to the experience

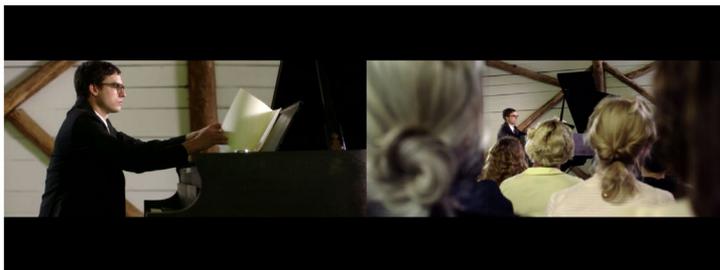
of hearing for a deaf body, and how both have come to be pathologized (Straus 2011a: 72). Inversional symmetry and balance may be characterized by deviation and disruption, and indeed, we might equate this to O'Daniel's own visceral experience of hearing, which has been vacillating through fits, starts, gaps and spontaneous interpretations. Thus, I'd like to examine how the artist demonstrates this through *Hearing 4'33"*.

The premier of the original *4'33"* took place in Woodstock, NY in 1952 at The Maverick Concert Hall. Sound becomes a character in *The Tuba Thieves* as the main characters' stories unfold through a sequence of stolen instruments, purposeful silence, and alternative communication, all bridging the gulf between Sign Language and speech. The original *4'33"* was composed for any instrument and the score instructs the performer(s) not to play any of the instruments for the entire 4 minutes and 33 seconds duration of the piece. The piece consists of the sounds of the ambient environment that the listeners hear while it is performed, although the work is commonly known as *4'33"* of silence, even though Cage rejected such a reading, saying that there is no such thing as silence. Sounds like the wind stirring outside, raindrops pattering on the roof and noises that accompanied talking, rustling, and adjusting of audience members during the performance all became more important. Cage was interested in how the artist and composer had no control over the ambient or accidental sounds that audience would hear during the performance, nor did they have any influence or impact on the work itself. Even the sounds of the restless audience waiting for the music to unfold during the debut of *4'33"* were part of this work.

Apart from O'Daniel's interest in "silence" as sound as famously developed by Cage, what is important about this reprised scene is two-fold: first, that the artist chose to record very little sound within the work itself, and second, she also chose to leave out captions of any dialogue or ambient sound. The only access both hearing and deaf visitors were privy to regarding the sound to emerge from her film was via the text that appeared on the wall next to the projection. It listed the sounds in chronological order: audience applause, ticking of the stopwatch, piano lid being lifted and closed, and the sound of the score pages turning. Finally, there is the sound of buzzing insects and the crunch of a man's footsteps in the forest as he walks over brown, orange and yellow leaves as residue from the fall season. The artist spent a long time carefully thinking about these choices. O'Daniel chose to include more obvious sounds, such as the ticking of the stopwatch, but to remove the audio that remains anecdotally famous from *4'33"*, namely the sounds from the audience as they reacted to the performance. The artist decided to instead try to ambitiously capture any missing sound through other devices in her film-making process. In essence, O'Daniel has attempted to substitute sound with other filmic[AQ9] devices, where the sense of hearing has been displaced, and our ability to see sound is required

**Figure 6**

Alison O'Daniel, *Hearing 4'33"*, scene from *The Tuba Thieves*, 2014, film, 9:00.



instead. Thus, while at first it might seem that O'Daniel was making choices that continue to privilege a hearing audience by her minimal inclusion of sound, heightened by the lack of captions that appear to exclude a deaf audience (the text on the wall comes across as afterthought, perhaps), in fact the artist edited the piece so as to emphasize camera movement as a stand-in for the soundtrack. She says:

Soundtracks provide an emotional guide for cinema. The music often largely stays in the back, but tells the audience how to feel about what they see. I have been trying to figure out how to follow similar tactics...and extend [sound] into other elements of the visual aspect of filmmaking....How can cinematography and camera movement or lighting operate on a similar level that sound and music does? Can it? Can swooping camera movement occupy the same emotional and physical register as a soundtrack would? Can audiences see that kind of camera movement and can they imagine what the soundtrack should be when all you hear is room tone or silence during that movement? How do you not simplify the experience of listening to music in order to express a similar feeling or understanding of what is aurally happening? (O'Daniel 2014).

O'Daniel then powerfully transfers her auditory experience into moving images. The larger narrative has been developed through a format of call and response, like a game of telephone that prioritizes gaps of information and subjective interpretations of information, a process similar to O'Daniel's experience of hearing, in which she is constantly compensating for lost information. One very noticeable way that the artist achieves this effect is how her film offers a split screen to her audience, where we are watching a scene from two different perspectives at all times.

This strategy offers the viewer more visual information than one normally receives from watching a single-channel installation, as, for instance, we will see the architecture of the building where the performance was held from two different angles, where the camera slides up and along the side of the building, and then up and over

the roof, both in close-up, and then in long-range. Or we will see the view of the performer on stage, perched in front of the piano. We see a close-up of him, but we also get to see him at a distance, behind the heads of other audience members all focusing intently ahead on what is about to happen. Indeed, instead of hearing the famous Cagean silence from 4'33", we see it through hand and body movement and very literally various points of view. I'd like to suggest that while there is ostensibly lost information occurring here – such as the sound of music sheets as they are being turned by the performer, or the sound of silence itself, at the same time, the artist also gives us these rapid, simultaneous and different views of each object, each action, and so on, within each scene. She offers a different mode of access that might replicate her own daily experience of being in the world. Rather than perceiving this strategy as a compensation for what is "lost," I am more interested in the idea of alternate realities and what is, in fact, gained, in line with the rhetoric of deaf gain. This is the advantage produced by occupying a different acoustic sensorium, and disability studies and literary scholar Michael Davidson suggests that "deaf gain makes possible new aesthetic possibilities and offers a different optic on the ear" or in O'Daniel's case, on the eye as well (Davidson 2015: 39).

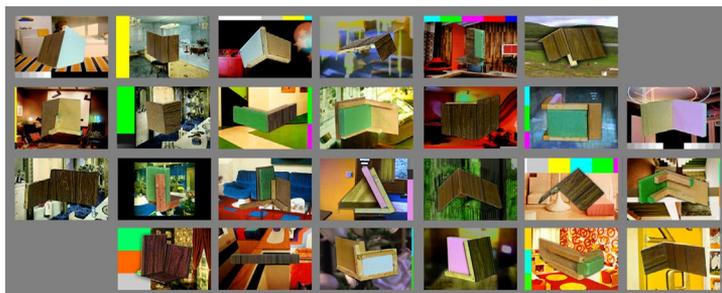
### **Synaesthetic Corner Frequencies, Blurred Vision, and a Soundproof Room**

Darrin Martin is an artist based in San Francisco, who makes video, sculpture, paintings, works on paper, sound installation, and photography. His hearing loss came later in his life. He first started having hearing issues in his late twenties, where he lost the hearing in his right ear and acquired severe tinnitus after his operation went wrong when he was 31. Tinnitus is a continual ringing in the ear and a phantom auditory perception. He wears a Bone Anchor Hearing Aid (BAHA) which is an amplifier that is attached to a screw embedded into his skull. The BAHA takes advantage of the idea that vibrations travel through matter by using the resonance of his skull to send sound vibrations to his healthy inner ear on opposite side of his head. Martin is interested in trying to connect the visual with the verbal and with the sonic, and how those things are approached through the use of various technologies becomes generatively complicated by the artist's negotiated ability with sound.

For example, Martin's *Monograph in Stereo* (2005) employs documentary strategies and synaesthetics to convey his struggle with his hearing loss. The work was made just four years after Martin's hearing began to be affected. He has used his own experience of hearing loss from a damaged eardrum (and the surgery which attempts to improve his hearing) as a jumping off point for this artistic exploration. The work also stems from research upon the interdependency of the senses with an emphasis on the balance ascertained from

binaural hearing and stereoscopic vision and the imbalance caused by their uneven degradation. In the video, images move amongst poetic reverberations of landscapes, interiors and audiological exam rooms. The complex sound-score mixes tones from a hearing test, electronic music, ordinary sounds such as birdsong, and a computer-generated voice reading texts about hearing and perception. The film is divided into several short sections with titles such as *Diagnostic* and *Corner Frequencies*. Martin succeeds in evoking the altered state caused by an abnormality in one's perception, but he also succeeds in using his unusual experiences as a catalyst for creating his own visual/sound compositions (Martin 2013). The artist says that he was also interested in bringing language into the mix, where he could think metaphorically about how fragments of sound build meaning, but that can also simultaneously be broken down to open up an experience that slips between definitions in similar ways that music or poetry may have the power to do (Martin 2014).

What is especially provocative about the video is the repetitious nature of the artist's core signifier, the floating corner device, or leit-motif. Random poorly handcrafted corner structures made of wood or veneer flash across each frame of the video, lit up in bright colors. The colors characterize the synaesthetic aspect to the work, given that it is within the physical, architectural space of the corner in a room where the artist finds an advantageous hearing position, as it offers an enclave of sorts, where sound can be trapped. Given the benefit corners provide in terms of acoustic access, we might imagine that the colors that fill out the corner structures in Martin's video symbolize a sound. As the color flashes, so the sound transmits, filters or vibrates. This movement of color might then be a metaphor for the positive receiving of sound through the artist's BAHA. Given that sound inhabits a transitory, ephemeral and temporal quality, according to media scholar Douglas Khan, this may also explain why Martin's corners float over seemingly unconnected backgrounds filled with random rural fields, domestic interiors, floating cows, and an occasional pair of male naked legs. Sounds are passing through all manner of landscape and place, although these particular places and bodies also point to both the locations from the artist's childhood, growing up in a rural area, in addition to his identity as a gay man. Similar to O'Daniel's experience as one who is hard of hearing and uses hearing aids, Martin's hearing world is one that often incorporates gaps and distortion. Martin, too, has attempted to visually create this experience through the video, where a distorted image illustrates the interrupted access his body has with sound. For example, as we watch Martin's captioned video (where both dialogue and sound are described in great detail by the artist), one frame shows the artist in a medical room undertaking a diagnostic hearing test with a doctor, followed by a quick succession of frames that present the floating corners, cows littering a grassy landscape and pairs of legs. This very disruption of any logical and



**Figure 7**  
Darrin Martin, *Monograph in Stereo*, photographs capturing stills from the video, 2005.

continuous visual narrative then resembles the acoustic disturbance that is part of Martin's daily reality. We see the artist raising his hand during the exam, to indicate to his doctor that he can hear a particular pitch or tone, and Martin has manipulated the image so as to blur the image with static. As Davidson says, "this visual static interrupts easy viewing and replicates the sensory shorting of neural transmission" (Davidson 2015: 40).

In addition to employing these synaesthetic strategies, the artist also gives us a clue as to how texture and the tactile world offer alternative modes of sensorial communication. For instance, some of the more abstract frames of *Monograph in Stereo* show odd landscapes made of the kind of bumpy foam rubber often used for soundproofing. While the rubber is meant to block out noise within an environment where sound is not desired by a hearing majority, the material of the rubber is actually quite appealing to the artist, not only for how pleasurable it might feel under the surface of one's fingertips, but also for how it can also transmit information that he is unable to decipher through the BAHA. The use of the material as a landscape is also provocatively suggestive of the artist's own world of sound inside the landscape of his head - the interior of his head is literally soundproofed, thus his full spectrum of hearing is blocked off. Through Martin's unique soundproofed BAHA room, we are provided with an opportunity to explore consciousness and perception through the power of imbalance and disruption.

### **Oppressed Voice and the Politics of Access and Audience**

Toronto-based, mixed-media artist Shary Boyle was born hearing, and the first time she saw American Sign Language, she was in art college. She was 18, and there was a deaf student in one of her classes who had a translator. She said this was the beginning of her compulsion around language, and she became particularly interested in gesture and expression. Specifically, Boyle felt that ASL was a language where people had to be honest with their emotions. Grammar happens on the face, and if you don't have "face," people

won't always understand you clearly. It is this quality of ASL that Boyle chose to especially focus on in the production of her film, *Silent Dedication* (2013). This two minutes and forty-five seconds 16 mm film was originally commissioned as part of a larger installation for the Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013. The film was written and art directed by Boyle, and was translated and performed by Beth Hutchison, a deaf woman who is the ASL and LSQ Translation Services Coordinator at the Canadian Hearing Society in Toronto, in addition to being the Director of Community Services for the Deaf at Silent Voice Canada Inc. In the black and white high contrast film, which Boyle intentionally made in the style and aesthetics of the "silent" film era, we see an older woman (Hutchison) communicating in American Sign Language. She wears a long white wig and her face is painted white, with bold black make-up outlining her features, which Boyle wanted to emphasize given her interest in what is being communicated on the face during ASL. With the exception of the white gloves, the performer is dressed in all black against a black background. The deaf woman's expressive face, hair, and speaking hands are all that is visible.

There are a number of important issues at stake in this work. First, the performer is translating Boyle's "dedication text," which Boyle describes as a "manifesto of sorts" (Drouin-Brisebois and Boyle 2013: 103). In this work, the artist has grappled with a full spectrum of meanings and attributes attached to the word "silence" and how it can be taken as a binary, between positive and negative traits when contextualized within different situations or communities. She says she would rather that we consider silence as a space of richness rather than a void or a vacuum where nothing happens. But she is especially interested in issues around marginalization, and how sometimes certain people's voices are not listened to, or respected, both historically and in the contemporary moment. Boyle believes that in silence we can communicate regardless of language opportunities. This is what forms the crux of the manifesto that Boyle had Hutchison perform in the film. Boyle says, "silence obscures the reality of the marginal and oppressed. I have imagined, with hope, that art could offer a language of equality between strangers" (Drouin-Brisebois and Boyle 2013: 103). To this end, Boyle was most pleased to have her work included in the context of the *LOUD silence* exhibition. Not only was it the first time that the film has been presented in an exhibition outside of Venice, it was also the first occasion in which Boyle showcased her work to an audience, including possibly a deaf audience, where the ASL being used by Hutchinson may actually be understood. This also heightened the possibilities for her new audience to appreciate the nuances of her gestures toward silence and deaf voice.

Boyle admitted there was some irony to originally showing her work about a minority culture during a very elitist art event in Italy. Despite Boyle's pointed act in trying to bring attention to margin-



**Figures 8–10**

*Silent Dedication*, 2013 16mm black and white looped film, 2:45 min. Script, art direction, direction by Shary Boyle. Translated into ASL and performed by Beth Hutchison. Filmed and hand-processed by John Price. Film still photography by John Jones. Original English-language text available as a limited Risograph edition.

alized groups, she acknowledged the challenges with her ideas, beginning with the fact that American Sign Language is very different to Italian Sign Language (LIS – *Lingua dei Segni Italiana*) so even deaf local Venetian visitors would likely have found her work inaccessible. Boyle also said she didn't really know if deaf people actually saw her work in the end, as this was impossible for her to track given her limited presence on the site, and while Hutchison was able to circulate the news of Boyle's Venice installation through her own networks in Toronto, the news of Boyle's work circulating within the deaf community in Italy and even internationally had its limitations.

Furthermore, the content of what Hutchison is signing was not captioned, and this was a deliberate act on Boyle's part. The only access provided to the manifesto being signed by Hutchison was through a wall label in the form of a written translation in English. Boyle wanted to destabilize or turn the tables on access, and she said that she liked the idea that if there was someone who knew ASL that came to see her show, they would be privy to understanding Hutchison's signing before the hearing and speaking visitors were. During Boyle's original installation in Venice, even though the translation was made available in the brochure and at the front desk, some visitors still expressed disappointment that the subtitles were absent from the film, and they neglected to question why Boyle made the choice not to do so. For Boyle, this was a specific, somewhat aggressive or retaliating action, very similar to some of O'Daniel's choices, where access was about catering to both a deaf and hearing audience, but especially a deaf one. Boyle wanted her hearing

visitors to get an “othered” and alienated feeling, of being excluded. She says, “this was part of the texture of consideration for others that don’t have a ‘voice’” (Boyle 2014).

Within the context of the exhibition when it was staged at both venues in California, I witnessed many deaf people engaging directly with the work at the opening receptions. At the second opening reception at gallery@Calit2 at UCSD, approximately 200 people attended, most of who identified as deaf. Christine Sun Kim staged a performance and several ASL interpreters were provided. It was a highly successful event. What remains difficult to assess is the reaction and impact Boyle’s work had on the individual deaf audience members. The ASL was certainly understood, but was the content of the piece troubling? Boyle used a deaf surrogate to sign a manifesto about the silent voice of the deaf community, which continues to be a sensitive subject. Perhaps Boyle was validating that sound still oppresses the deaf minority, leaving little room for acknowledging the strides achieved within deaf activism and “deaf gain.” However, Davidson says that at the same time, Boyle’s own voice in this exhibition contributes to the overall “complexity of regarding deafness as a unitary category” (Davidson 2015: 41). This is not only because of how much insight Boyle does or does not actually possess about the contemporary politics of deaf experience, but especially because of her work is coming from a hearing experience, a position that is still considered privileged and powerful by many. As mentioned previously, whilst the action of juxtaposing a full spectrum of deafness and hearing within this exhibition was a deliberate and political choice, this decision was also a risky one given the history of deaf marginalization, and especially the irony in attempting to give the deaf subject voice as communicated through hearing agents (including myself as non-deaf curator). What is critical, though, is that Boyle acknowledges that she might be perceived as an outsider, and that she is aware that she is making comment on someone else’s culture whilst not necessarily being a full part of it. The most valuable thing she can do is put the work into a context like this one, and ask the audience, “what do you think, is this OK?” (Boyle 2014). The point is that this exhibition creates a safe space for asking this question, encouraging a dialogue between two previously divided worlds, regarding the critical issues at stake.

### **A New Aurality**

This essay has demonstrated how the work by the four contemporary artists in *LOUD silence* offer four critical perspectives regarding audist assumptions, where they expand sensorial significations around silence and sound through both deaf and hearing experiences. Within their work, we understand that sound and silence can be quiet and loud, physical, conceptual, visual, metaphoric, synaesthetic, tactile, inaccessible and accessible, inclusive and exclusive, captioned and

not captioned, and more. Just as Cage's revolutionary, experimental music revealed the limitations of how we listen and what we construe as sound, these artists reveals the limitations to knowing sound solely through the ear or associating silence only through emptiness or quietness. The ear is not the only receptacle for channeling sound, speech, and language. The artists remind us that sound should also not be discounted or disregarded in the hearing experience of one who is deaf or hearing impaired, thus elements of sound can still be traced throughout some of the installations. An absence of hearing does not equate to a void relationship with sound. The artists provocatively ask, "what happens when one cannot hear silence or sound through traditional channels? Can silence and/or sound be visual?" Sound can indeed be experienced through multiple non-hierarchical channels and modalities. The oppositional aesthetics that might be gleaned in this exhibition serve a reorientation of perception toward the experience of sound, silence and scores within the lingua franca of contemporary sound-based practices. Ultimately, the work in this exhibition incorporates more diverse en-fleshments that are embedded with auralities spanning tones, myriad inflections and multi-modal sensations to give nuanced complexity to "loud silence," voice, and agency. This project also offers one generative template for how we might begin to examine objects and subjects in the same room together, across the spectrum of deafness and hearing, as Friedner, Helmreich, and Straus describe. The artists successfully rattle any normative comprehension of everyday senses of social relations as they offer a fuller spectrum of human experience.

## Note

1. An exception to this is an exhibition entitled *Gesture Sign Art: Deaf Culture/Hearing Culture*, curated by Wolfgang Müller and An Paenhuysen for Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, November 10, 2012 – January 13, 2013. On a broader level, the work in this exhibition belongs within the lingua franca of the sonic turn in contemporary art, which places these four artists squarely in the center of other visual artists, sound artists, performance artists and musicians who are working with experimental sounds in new formats. Critic, curator, and associate professor Jim Drobnick says that sound art has proliferated over the last quarter century so that it could now justifiably merit being its own discipline, or at the least, a sub-discipline within larger fields (Drobnick 2004). The work in this exhibition can also be placed in the tradition of work by other contemporary artists such as Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Ann Hamilton, Susan Hiller, Wendy Jacob, Cristian Marclay and Chistof Migone. There are also other deaf artists whose experiment with the versatility of sound as a representation of the visual, or sound as sound, even when you cannot necessarily hear it, such as Joseph Grigely and Aaron Williamson.

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