

Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire School of Creative Arts

**The Voice of the Spectre in Contemporary Art Practice:  
Susan Hiller, Janet Cardiff, George Bures Miller and  
Susan Philipsz**

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## **Declaration of Originality**

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Visual Arts Practice. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

Belief in Ghosts or Spectres in the twenty-first century is considered an anachronism, yet the trope of spectrality enjoys a powerful currency in language and thinking in contemporary art practice. Spectres invoke a sense of uncertainty about the believability of an event or experience in the material world – how do artists who engage the spectre negotiate the line between intent, ambiguity and disbelief?

Sound technology has created two distinct phenomena; the disembodied voice and the ‘exosomatic enhancement’ of the ear, or simply put, the extension of hearing beyond the ear’s normal capacity. Susan Hiller, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller and Susan Philipsz are four artists who incorporate sound technology to present a spectral figure through the use of the spectral voice. The voice is something of a trace of another, when it is detached from the corporeal body it lends itself to a state of ambiguity, indeterminacy and multiplicity. For what purpose do these artists employ the disembodied voice, and what are the implications for this kind of practice?

The spectre’s displacement from any one particular time creates a duality of something and nothingness, even its entropic ‘character’ exposes a sense of insubstantiality. The need for ‘something’ to balance the ‘nothingness’ of the spectre is the purpose of this thesis. This thesis is conducted to test the substantiality and rigour of the spectre in these four artistic practices to see whether the aura of the spectre holds up in the harsh light of critical analysis.

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## **Introduction**

The four artists in this thesis draw from a cultural vernacular that is familiar to us, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller make use of cinema, theatre and literature, Susan Philipsz uses popular and folk song and Susan Hiller uses historical records. They similarly incorporate, to varying degrees, Time in thematic form; memory and the past, consciousness and the present and the future as a metaphorical sense of the inevitable. The artists' work incorporates storytelling, which I define not as narrative but storytelling as seeing, experiencing and making in time. The most significant element in all the artists' work is the presence of the spectre either metaphorically or concretely through the use of the spectral voice. Ghosts invoke a sense of disbelief, thus bringing into question the issue of integrity. Their displacement from any one particular time creates a duality of something and nothingness. Even the ghost's entropic 'character' exposes a sense of insubstantiality. The need for 'something' to balance the 'nothingness' of the spectre is the purpose of this thesis. This thesis is conducted to test the substantiality<sup>1</sup> and rigour of the spectre in these artistic practices, to see whether the aura of the spectre holds up in the harsh light of critical analysis.

All the examples of artwork discussed here are installations which carry a particularly significant aural element. The way in which installation art structures a

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Audi (Ed), The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999. According to Descartes mind and matter constitute the two kinds of finite substance:226. Others have defined substance as material (Hobbes):387 or mental (Lotze):519, as static (Parmenides):646 or dynamic (Heraclitus):376, as knowable (Aristotle):49 or unknowable (Hume/Locke):399/508 or omnipresent (Spinoza):870. In Buddhism truly existing experience, substance is considered un-findable:105. For this project I see the need to theorise the spectre, in other words, to treat it as a graspable, knowable entity.



relationship between the viewer and the artwork requires first-hand experience. Where I have not been able to experience the work first hand I have relied on the observations of others. The examples included in this thesis are therefore a combination of installations that I have experienced first-hand or those works that have become the focus of strong or interesting critical attention. Critical analysis is conducted through personal experience of the artwork where possible, and with careful reference to the broader cultural and critical context in which the artists' work is received.

### Chapter One: The Spectral Voice In the Political and Poetic Work of Susan Hiller

During the course of this study I have come to believe that all writing has a ghostly or haunting quality to it since the act of reading produces a voice inside the head that I cannot lay claim to; they are not my words or my thoughts, but those of the author. When a person engages in debating or critiquing the writing of a deceased author then one is, in a sense, communing with the dead. The oeuvre of Susan Hiller has consistently engaged in this practice. In Chapter One the spectres of Freud and Derrida appear, mediated through Susan Hiller's engagement with the unconscious and her deconstructive approach to collective memory through the memorial and the archival record.

The memorial and the archive hold significant cultural and social value since they provide a linear teleology, a purpose and direction for mankind, and at a psychological level they operate to negate death. In Chapter One I shall show how Hiller's employment of the spectre works to disrupt these fundamental ideas.

## Chapter Two: The Ghost in the Machine

The Ghost in the machine makes its presence felt in Chapter Two when we look at the technically elaborate installation art of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Sound technology has created two distinct phenomena; the disembodied voice and the ‘exosomatic enhancement’ of the ear, or simply put, the extension of hearing beyond the ear’s normal capacity. Cardiff’s aural walks deals with multiple subjective realities in which she supplants the listener’s consciousness. By using binaural recording Cardiff manages to map herself onto the listener’s psychological image of his own body that results in a kind of possession whereby the viewer is rendered un-present in themselves. This subversion of one’s consciousness is an act closely linked to Edmund Husserl’s notion of intersubjectivity which will be discussed in the course of the chapter. I contend the re-occurring strategy of location and dislocation found in Cardiff and Miller’s work is strongly associated with the condition of ‘unheimlich’<sup>2</sup> or the idea of haunting.

## Chapter Three: Woman as Spectre

In Chapter Three I identify some of the problematics associated with the spectral voice. Susan Philipsz disembodied voice creates an uneasy contradiction of prominence and invisibility of a female artist in contemporary art practice. I support my argument with references to historic and cultural negative associations of the female voice and feminist theory that suggests the female (and her voice) act as a recovery strategy for male symbolic castration. There is also a very strong argument for the notion that Philipsz’ work exceeds bodily encumbrance of such things as

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<sup>2</sup> Unheimlich is German and it means unhomey. Sigmund Freud used unheimlich to describe a sense of dislocation from the familiar (heimlich). The polemic unheimlich/heimlich experience and its relevance to haunting are discussed in greater detail in the main body of the thesis.

gender and should be read as a transcendental experience. I examine some of the difficulties the artist creates by simultaneously asserting her authorship, (there is no ambiguity concerning authorship) but at the same time removes herself from ownership of the work, insofar that she remains detached and, offering no real insights or explanation beyond generalities, prefers to let others decide the work's significance. Detachment in fact may be read as an assertion of her authorship. There are precedents to this strategy, Cindy Sherman's late 1970s *Untitled Film Stills* are a case in point. Sherman's work retains currency because the artist has avoided applying meaning of her work and this has resulted in mountainous literature in which Sherman has been simultaneously rescued and silenced by theory.<sup>3</sup> In a poststructuralist climate I do not expect to win an argument that insists on an assertion of authority over ambiguity particularly when the artist chooses a spectral persona. In this chapter the subjectivity of the female voice, the woman and the artist and the problem of the very notion of subjectivity come to the fore.

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<sup>3</sup> James Guimond makes two interesting observations, firstly that a narrative from Sherman might put her images in a context relevant to her as an artist and woman rather than illustrations of someone else's 'formulated phrases' from post-structuralist theory. Secondly, that Sherman is 'rescued' from political and ethical incorrectness by postmodernist theorizing. James Guimond, "Auteurs as Autobiographers: Images of Jo Spence and Cindy Sherman", Modern Fiction Studies 40.3, 1994, pg 587

## **Chapter One**

### **The Spectral Voice in the Poetic and Political Work of Susan Hiller**

## **The Spectral Voice In the Political and Poetic Work of Susan Hiller**

### Introduction

It is perhaps easier to tackle the Political in art, than it is to approach the Poetic. With the Poetic we are talking of perceptual and sensual affects, and the ‘how’ of representation, how semiotics are used to produce meaning.<sup>4</sup> Politics is concerned with the effects and consequences of representation, how language and representation produce meaning, but more importantly how these connect with power to construct identities and subjectivities. At a political level Susan Hiller’s uses a method of critiquing “cultural artefacts”<sup>5</sup> to address the construction of traditions that operates to exclude other ideas or beliefs. By subtle subversion Hiller’s representation of a cultural artefact points to how certain traditions are promulgated through the population. Throughout Hiller’s career her work has placed an emphasis on the historical specificity of a particular form or regime of representation. For this project we focus on Hiller’s critique of ‘collective memory’ using the corroborating, dissenting voice of the spectre.

In Hiller’s work I see the spectral voice as sometimes overt in *Monument*(1980-81), and *The Last Silent Movie*(2007) and sometimes used as a metaphor in *What Every Gardener Knows*(2003) and *The J Street Project*(2005). Certain characteristics attributed to the spectre or ghost are important tropes for Postmodernity; ambiguity, indeterminacy and multiplicity. Ghosts still invoke uncertainty about the

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, “Introduction”, Stuart Hall, (Ed), Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices, London/Thousand Oaks, California, Sage in association with the Open University, 1997:6.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Hiller interviewed by Francis Morris, Senior Curator Tate Modern, Susan Hiller: Artist’s Talk June 2006. Sourced through Tate on-line events, [www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/susan\\_hiller/default.jsp](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/susan_hiller/default.jsp). [Accessed 2/10/2008]

believability or authenticity of an event or experience in the material world. They produce a problem for historicism because they “disrupt our sense of a linear teleology”.<sup>6</sup> For artists using a time-based practice ghosts bring an interesting and perhaps obvious dichotomy; an appearance of something in a time in which they (the ghost) do not belong. Most importantly for Hiller ghosts do not just represent reminders of the past, they often demand something of the future.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Buse, Andrew Scott, “Introduction”, Peter Buse, Andrew Scott (Eds), Ghosts: Deconstruction Psychoanalysis History, Macmillan Press, Great Britain, St. Martin’s Press Inc, United State of America, 1999:3

### Monument (1980-81) British Version<sup>7</sup>

In *Monument*(1980-81) (Figure 1) Hiller has woven together fragments of popular consciousness in a parody of ‘official’ history, the individual memorial plaques echoing the official monument. *Monument* is an exploration of the production of consciousness and memory on both a personal and communal level. Drawing attention to what society makes memorable or not, is a key thematic concern of the artist. She shows how the ‘collective memory’ subordinates individual memory and creates prioritization of concerns that are not individual but collective.

*Monument* pioneers a number of installation strategies and techniques, for example Hiller incorporated 2D, 3D and 4D elements and engaged the audience on a personal level by offering the viewers participatory and non-participatory roles. *Monument* comprises of 41 photographs of memorial plaques on a wall in a cruciform arrangement. In front of the photographs but facing away from them is a park bench. On the park bench there is a tape recorder and a set of headphones. The viewer may sit down and listen to the recording and (unwittingly) become a participant by responding to Hiller’s directives and being observed by other visitors. Through the headphones they hear Hiller giving a meditation on heroism, death, memorial and remembrance. Hiller says that the recording is an ‘optional’ element that the viewer can choose to listen to or ignore, just as one can choose to look at the plaques or walk past them.<sup>8</sup> Hiller’s comment is not made in a self-deprecating act but to

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<sup>7</sup> Hiller made three versions of *Monument*, the one discussed here is the original version, subtitled *British Version*. Hiller, Susan, [Susan Hiller: Tate Gallery Liverpool](#), The Gallery, Liverpool, 1996:78

<sup>8</sup> Susan Hiller, Public interview with Francis Morris, Senior Curator Tate Modern, 13 June 2006. <[www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/susan\\_hiller/default.jsp](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/susan_hiller/default.jsp)> [Accessed 17/11/2008]

reinforce one of the main tenets of the work, our consciousness or attention, individually and collectively, to the things around us.

The memorial plaques do in themselves make compelling viewing, their subject matter fascinating though equally morbid. The Victorian memorial plaques list the heroes and victims (where possible) names, ages, relationship of the victim and rescuer and the way in which they both meet their death. The heroic acts are eulogised in the vernacular of the day. The sheer number of plaques, each signifying an awful event, work to soften the contemplation of the viewer and instead bring to the fore a realisation of the subsequent entropy that enters a memorial irrespective of the significance and reverence it once held. What memorials do, according to Jean Fisher is “renarrate a reassuring coherent subjectivity or negate the possibility of one’s own death.”<sup>9</sup> Hiller uses her voice as a kind of a paradoxical memorial;

Hiller’s monologue begins,

You are sitting as I have imagined you with your back to the monument, the monument is behind you, the monument is in your past. Do the dead speak through us? This is my voice unrolling in your present, my past, I’m an audible ... voice from the hereafter...<sup>10</sup>

To reiterate the contradictory comment made by Hiller of the ‘optional’ monologue, the work while accessible, is not complete in its constituent parts. Without the monologue *Monument* would be little more than a meditation on the arbitrary nature of death. Hiller’s spectral monologue plays a crucial role as it opens up the work to a

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Fisher, Susan Hiller, *The Revenants of Time*, Matt’s Gallery, London/Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield/ Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1990:24

<sup>10</sup> Susan Hiller, Public interview with Francis Morris, Senior Curator Tate Modern, 13 June 2006. <[www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/susan\\_hiller/default.jsp](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/susan_hiller/default.jsp)> [Accessed 17/11/2008]



number of layers and critiques. The role of the public monument includes the role of the museum in forming an historical record or ‘collective memory’. The cruciform layout and use of the word “hereafter” make direct reference to the Christian doctrine of self-sacrifice. She reflects on her own mortality by selecting forty-one plaques to coincide with her own age. The idea of celebrity and representations outlasting one’s own mortality is an irony not lost on the artist. This reflexiveness shows the artist’s critical self-awareness since though she is questioning the institution, the centrality of the museum as a projected outcome and subsequent archive of her own practice is acknowledged. In its own ghostly way the work playfully circumvents the past, present and the future and creates an anachronistic event presenting a number of elements that will never belong in the period they appear, then, now or in the future. It also signals the artist’s own critical position to the notion of the historical record.

### The Archive

Archives as understood in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory* are “a complex of structures, processes, and epistemologies situated at a critical point of intersection between scholarship, cultural practices, politics, and technologies”.<sup>11</sup> This makes rich ground for artists like Hiller who usually begins with a ‘cultural artefact’ and who is interested in questioning the structures that create social memory. Archives and the use of the spectral are part of Hiller’s ongoing dialogue with the human sciences; anthropology, phenomenology and psychoanalysis.

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Taws, “On the Record”, History Workshop Journal, Issue 64, Autumn 2007:440

Sigmund Freud, was a rationalist thinker and did not believe in ghosts but his concepts concerning the unconscious are regularly read as ‘hauntings’. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott point out Freud’s paper *Repression* 1915 falls prey to ghostly tropology as Freud struggles to articulate a psychical mechanism present in repression. In the paper he begins by proposing a seemingly illogical concept “It is not easy in theory to deduce the possibility of such a thing as repression...”<sup>12</sup> and continues to describe repression as an event which is usually mobile and re-occurring and without finality. Buse and Stott point out that a defining feature of the ghost is its capacity to return. Some of Freud’s concepts have found new post-structuralist meaning in the writing of Jacques Derrida.

Jacques Derrida consulted psychoanalytic concepts in his attempt to understand the drive for collection and conservation of human record. He asserts the historic record is a negotiation between two Freudian principles, the Death Drive and the Pleasure Principle. The Death Drive is the urge to destroy, “...the annihilation of memory. . . but also. . . the eradication. . . of. . . the archive, consignment, the documentary or monumental apparatus”.<sup>13</sup> The Pleasure Principle is seen in the desire to conserve records as an affirmation of the past, present and future “...[it] preserves records of the past and it embodies the promise of the present to the future”.<sup>14</sup> Viewed through Derrida’s account the historical record is a temporal operation in constant tension and at risk of revision or even obliteration. Susan Hiller draws on anthropological systems and cataloguing to bring to light repressed cultural dimensions in *The Last*

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, “Introduction: A Future for Haunting” in Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, (Ed) Ghosts, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History, MacMillan Press Ltd/St. Martin’s Press, Inc, Great Britain/United States of America, 1999:10

<sup>13</sup> Derrida quoted by Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archives Across the Disciplines”, Libraries and the Academy Volume 4, No. 1, January 2004:11

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, in Manoff:11

*Silent Movie* (2007), shown at the Neue National Gallerie during the Berlin Biennale 2008.

## The Last Silent Movie

*The Last Silent Movie* (2007) (Figure 2) comprises an audio/video with text and a series of prints. The 20-minute audio is played against a black video screen with subtitles translating the audio into English below and a description of where and when the recording was made appearing at the top of the screen. There are twenty-five extinct or endangered indigenous languages played over the audio, all drawn from sound archives. The text on the screen informs us they were recorded between the periods 1938 to 1990. The recordings vary greatly in quality and grain. To close your eyes and listen to the voices you sense, by the strangeness of the language and the crackled aging of the tape, that these voices are out of time and out of place. To open your eyes and read the translation to attend to the meaning of what is being said brings a melancholic sense of loss not just for the language as a unique cadence but as language underpins culture, for a way of life and cultural diversity. It seems to ask, do we metaphorically close our eyes and ears to the assimilation and subsequent loss of indigenous languages to a meta-language?

Hiller has been quoted saying that “when we hear a voice, even as a recording we are being touched by an actual emanation from the speaker’s body”.<sup>15</sup> The artist is even more explicit in a blurb found on her website,

They are not silent because someone is listening. The work sets free some of the ghosts and spectres haunting the unacknowledged *unheimlich* of sound recording [which] allows us to hear the words and voices of people mostly now dead. In *The Last Silent Movie*, some of them sing, some tell stories, some recite vocabulary

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Suchin, “Susan Hiller: The Last Silent Movie”, Art Monthly, September 2008:28

lists and some of them, directly or indirectly, accuse us, the listeners, of injustice.<sup>16</sup>

Hiller's use of the spectral engages in an uneasy relationship with the power structures that underpin the formation of collective 'history'. In this example she points accusingly to the demise of cultures through colonization and at the power struggles inherent. However by appropriating the voice of another and their identity this work also contains political and ethical implications for the artist's own subjectivity.

According to Monique Plaza culturally 'difference' works as a double movement: assigning one term as the norm (the one) and casting the other into the negative (the other).<sup>17</sup> How does the socio-political position of the artist compromise the conceptual intention of the work when artists make representations or speak for the 'other'? The Dadaists made noise music poetry and sound poetry under the term Bruitism. They incorporated motifs of war and the primitive "informed by the sounds, languages, and social position of 'others'".<sup>18</sup> Douglas Kahn noted the artists viewed themselves on the margins of society and used 'primitive noise' to signify their 'otherness' but instead their actions served to show how power relations are heard in a way that contains the other and marginalises him further. When Hiller took existing sound archives and moulded them to her own personality she entered into a condition of repetition that is close to appropriation. But rather than another

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Hiller, *The Last Silent Movie* 2007, <http://www.susanhillier.org/Info/artworks/artworks-lastsilentmovie.html> [Accessed 20/10/2008]

<sup>17</sup> Monique Plaza, Quoted by Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror – The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988:143

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, The Mit Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England, 2001:67

form of colonization, this repetition when read in psychoanalytic terms resists the need to possess and operates as a means of liberating the other to himself. Hiller trained for a time as an anthropologist and advocates for the protection of cultural diversity, evident in works such as *What Every Gardener Knows* and *The J Street Project*. This perhaps allows her to escape the type of criticism made about Dada Brutism.

There are a number of etchings that accompany *The Last Silent Movie*, each one is a sound graph of the individual voices and illustrate vividly the unique cadence of each language. These visually arresting prints however seem to direct one away from the main concern of the work that of the ‘unheimlich’ or ghostly nature of sound archives.

Freud described heimlich as ‘homely’, a sense of being in one’s place. Unheimlich therefore meant ‘unhomely’ or to feel out-of-place. But Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs suggest that a sense of ‘unheimlich’ occurs most strongly when one feels in-place and out-of-place simultaneously. This happens according to Gelder and Jacobs “...when one is made aware that one has unfinished business with the past... at the moment when one returns as an elemental force to haunt the present day”.<sup>19</sup> In their essay *The Post Colonial Ghost Story* the authors build an interesting argument around the proposition that Australia’s postcolonial condition is a condition of ‘unheimlich’. The authors contend that settlers in Australia remain ‘un-settled’ due to an inability to escape the ghosts of colonization. Aboriginal claims to sacred sites

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, “The Post-colonial Ghost Story”, Ghosts, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History, Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (eds), MacMillan Press Ltd/St. Martin’s Press, Inc., Great Britain/New York, 1999:181

herald a return of the ghost, making claims upon the present and indicating an “...unsettled-ness [that] folds into otherwise taken-for-granted mode of occupation”. One binary structure at work for the modern-day Australian the authors contend is one of innocence or guilt. Innocence in the fact that modern-day Australians did not personally participate with the horrors of colonization and guilt because irrespective of their date of arrival to Australia the modern-day Australian continues to inherit the mis(fortunes) of colonization.<sup>20</sup> As a condition of post colonialism two opposing forces are experienced simultaneously: one of innocent and guilt; in place and out-of-place; a state of ‘unheimlich’.

Hiller’s *The Last Silent Movie* is also a double manoeuvre; it works on the apparatus of ‘unheimlich’ placing the viewers in a position where they themselves, along with the voices of the unseen are simultaneously in-place and out-of-place. Dislocation that sound technology causes to the human body’s relation to the voice in time and space is seen (and experienced) in the case of the disembodied voices. A sense of ‘unheimlich’ occurs to the viewer through any number of disjunctions in the installation. Hiller uses text as image to produce text-paintings, she includes translations with the sound track so one has to choose whether to listen to the grain of the voice or attend to the meaning of what is said by examining the text. The installation is neither a movie nor silent, it carries references to painting, radio, documentary film and sound art but cannot be completely inscribed to one. It engages in the issues of 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistics such as the difference between writing and speech (Jacques Derrida)<sup>21</sup> and authorship (Roland Barthes)<sup>22</sup> that raise questions of

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<sup>20</sup> Gelder and Jacobs:181

<sup>21</sup> Jacques, Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing”, Writing and Difference, Routledge, London, 2001:246-291

authorship such as intent and authenticity and implications for ambiguity and disbelief. Peter Suchin in a review of *The Last Silent Movie* said; “Supposed certainties are always open to revision when the past is allowed to enter the present.”<sup>23</sup> I think Hiller embraces this notion fully and with the spectre, an antithesis of rationality, critiques the processes of exclusion performed by Enlightenment practices to chart a history of otherwise neglected, overlooked or silenced voices.

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<sup>22</sup> Barthes:142-148

<sup>23</sup> Suchin:28



## **Chapter Two**

### **The Ghost in the Machine**

**Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller**

## **The Ghost in the Machine**

**Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller**

### Introduction

The ear was described by German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach as “the organ of fear”<sup>24</sup> and stressed the important role of hearing in human development as an early warning system against enemies and danger. The introduction of listening and amplification devices such as the stethoscope, amplifier or the loudspeaker has allowed humans to extend the limited range of the ear from microscopic to macroscopic dimensions. It follows that these devices cause a change in the natural positioning of one body in relation to another for purposes of audibility. The range of meaning and sensations hearing offers is explored by the artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller through work that engages in sound technology to focus on acoustic perceptions of every kind. This chapter is an examination of the exosomatic<sup>25</sup> enhancement of the ear/voice and the implications and uses in Cardiff and Miller’s art making practices. We shall consider the spatial and psychological relationship between the listener and the artist when the artist’s voice is literally inside the head of the listener.

### The Stethoscope and Reconstructed Consciousness

The invention of the stethoscope created a different sonic engagement between the doctor and patient. Instead of listening to the patient’s explanation of symptoms the

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<sup>24</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach quoted by Ralf Beil and Manuel J. Borja-Villel, “Foreword and Acknowledgments” Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller. The Killing Machine and Other Stories 1995-2007, Ralf Beil and Bartomeu Marí, (Eds), Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona and Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, 2007:6

<sup>25</sup> Exosomatic – Something extra, outside of the body that extends the function of the human organ beyond its normal capacity. An early example of exosomatic memory is writing.

doctor could listen to the internal sounds of the patient's body as a diagnostic strategy. This ability to focus, isolate and intensify the internal sounds of the body elevated the value of sound in medicine<sup>26</sup>. Listening to the interior of the body or 'auscultation' dates back into antiquity, however the stethoscope according to Charles Steinkieveh allowed a strikingly different phenomenon, "a reconstruction of the doctor's psychological image of his own body and his resulting consciousness"<sup>27</sup>. Steinkieveh asserts there occurs a remapping of the Doctor's body when his cranial space coincides with his patient's heart chamber. Audio walks created by Janet Cardiff in the 1990s did not consciously start out as an attempt to map her body onto that of the listeners as described above but to create a different spatio-temporal reality to the one the listener was in.

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26 Laura Siisiainen, "From the Empire of the Gaze to Noisy Bodies: Foucault, Audition and Medical Power", *Theory and Event*, Volume 11, Issue 1, 2008:45

<sup>27</sup> Charles Stankieveh, "From Stethoscopes to Headphones: An Acoustic Spatialization of Subjectivity", *Leonardo Music Journal*, Volume 17, 2007:56

### Janet Cardiff: Audio Walks

Cardiff has said that one day while outside recording she accidentally left her recorder on and when she replayed her machine she was excited to discover a collection of ambient sounds that described a very different acoustic space and time to the one she was physically in. This led her to develop a series of audio walks whereby the listener was directed or guided by the artist around a particular route that included landmarks for the listener to orientate themselves while Cardiff conveyed information to them via the headphones that were both real and fictitious. The audio also included pre-recorded ambient sounds from an earlier visit. The result according to one listener was “You move into a completely different world... [a] kind of waking dream you could become addicted to.”<sup>28</sup> Similar statements have been made by others suggesting a seductive and cinematic element to Cardiff’s walks. The vividness of Cardiff’s individual audio walks results from binaural recording technology. (Figure 3)

Binaural recording involves placing microphones on an object that mimics the spatial divide between the ears in a human-being to create a split second interval between the reception of the two microphones. This produces a recording that accurately records sound as we would naturally hear it. It is this time differential that humans use to locate the direction and distance of sounds and of course to locate oneself through sound.

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<sup>28</sup> Matthias Lilienthal, “Playing Roulette with Reality Ghost Machine in the Hebbel-Theatre, Berlin”, [www.CardiffMiller.com](http://www.CardiffMiller.com), 2005, [http://www.cardiffmiller.com/press/texts/ghostmachine\\_en.pdf](http://www.cardiffmiller.com/press/texts/ghostmachine_en.pdf). [Accessed 4/11/2008]

According to Claire Bishop when critics and writers have written about Cardiff's walks they often describe the sensations the work evokes as 'eerie, erotic, creepy' and so forth but not the theme or structure except to make reference to cinematic strategies.<sup>29</sup> Writing about installation art's objective to activate the participant, Bishop criticised Cardiff's work for its aural engulfment in which 'mesmerized', the listeners are rendered powerless, and unable to get critical distance, are literally unable to think for themselves.<sup>30</sup> The issue Bishop raises is due to what I consider intersubjective strategies pertinent to Cardiff's work. Intersubjective experience, a term originating from Edmund Husserl, plays a fundamental role in our constitution of both ourselves as "objectively existing subjects, other experiencing subjects, and the objective spatio-temporal world".<sup>31</sup> Much of Cardiff's work deals with multiple subjective realities in which she supplants the listener's consciousness. This is a consistently re-occurring strategy of location and disorientation apparent in the Cardiff's methodology. *Unheimlich*, the idea of being simultaneously in-place and out-of-place has associations, as explored in Chapter One, with the idea of haunting, 'when one has unfinished business with the past'<sup>32</sup>. I contend that Cardiff and Miller's installations evoke a sense of the uncanny to question the fictitious nature of the present as experienced in real-time, and the unbelievable of memory as recalled experience.

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<sup>29</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art, A Critical History*, Tate Publishing, London, 2005:99

<sup>30</sup> Bishop:99

<sup>31</sup> Beyer, Christian, "Edmund Husserl", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/husserl/>. [Accessed 9/11/2008]

<sup>32</sup> Gelder and Jacobs:181

### Opera for A Small Room

*Opera for A Small Room* (Figure 4) is a wooden cube made of plywood sheets about the size of a single room. It sits in the middle of the gallery floor. It has glassless windows and gaps to allow the viewer to peer in from every side but the room remains inaccessible. From the exterior the cube looks like an abandoned make-do cabin in the process of disintegration. It is almost completely filled with turntables and 2000 or so vinyl records, there are a few pieces of old furniture and on the shelves amongst the records sit a 1/2 empty whiskey bottle and a blue plastic glass. These two objects are the only real evidence of previous occupation. All the surfaces in the room are dusty except for the grooves on the records where the record stylus runs over them hundreds of times a day. Their black shiny rings stand stark against an interior whose colours are muted by layers of dust. The lighting is provided by a chandelier, some battered-looking, improvised lamps and theatre spots surrounding the interior walls. These lights perform in synchronisation with the music/narrative as expertly as a concert or theatre production flickering, flashing and trembling with the rhythm of the Opera.

The hundreds of wires, the amplifiers and automated switches needed for the elaborate show are not instantly recognisable against the clutter but once one's eyes adjust to the visual cacophony it is interesting to see the juxtapositional play of the props and the technology that operate them. The artists do not attempt to camouflage or hide the technology behind their elaborate shows and this is a deliberate choice. One of their primary concerns is to retain an element of unbelievable, inviting the viewer to suspend their disbelief. It makes an unstated agreement, I think, between the artists, the artwork and the viewer and is perhaps why viewers use the term

‘seduced’. They enter the hypnotic installations (or events) as willing as one must be to undergo hypnosis.

### The Spectre of the Artist

At the start of *Opera for A Small Room* an unseen crowd murmur and shuffle in anticipation of the show. A chair is scraped across a wooden floor and a man’s voice is heard, coughing first, breathing noisily with effort or discomfort, then in a firm tone calls into the microphone, ‘testing, testing’. He begins his monologue, “In the middle of the stage, a man sits alone in a room, surrounded by speakers, turntables, and records...” The invisible narrator is narrating his story, a melodrama of his own making that he interjects with a selection of musical accompaniment. His voice is deep, thick and tired but the amplified power of it reverberates around the room. It is almost possible to see this ghostly figure especially when automated record players start up of their own accord, their arms swinging across the records to settle into the groove, a hissing, crackling sound authenticating the movement.

It’s a dark opera played out at every tempo from the lethargic beginning to high vaulted arias to a hard hitting rock ballad complete with light show. Its about the pain and longing of an outcast who has lost something very dear to him. In a grandiose manner the tragic character concludes, “The music doesn’t really change anything, but it helps him in some way... its an opera after all, everyone dies in the end”.

But the music changes everything, the listener is manipulated and lead through a complex sensory experience, quickly and without stopping, so caught up, if you allow it, that before you’ve identified the origin of one sensory experience you’ve entered another. As Christy Lange confesses, “Induced into the kind of solitary state

I would experience if I were listening to far-off voices and unknown rock epics emanating from my radio late at night, I let the sounds transport me”.<sup>33</sup> Lange’s reference to radio infers that he was able to project his own fantasies while listening to the sound track. The theatrical setting has elements too with a ‘plot’ function, the lighting for example, flashes across the room as a train passes by. The whiskey bottle hidden between record covers reveals a secretive, solitary drinker. The lighting, the props and the sound play a vital role in enticing the viewer from one piece of the narrative to another.

How critical can one be? Perhaps this question is answered by Husserl, “...it becomes evident that every experience in the stream which our reflexion can lay hold on has its own essence open to intuition”.<sup>34</sup> Is the subject able to contemplate or reflect on the experience? In my own experience, I watched the performance several times from different angles, then listened only to the soundtrack, attentively making notes. The first experience of the installation was highly sensorial but I could only recollect fragments of images and fragments of the audio. Powerful images stay in the mind like the invisible hand that moves the stylus across the record or the intimate moment when the protagonist falls under a hypnotic trance and calls across an empty space, “I’m falling...”. Intuition is to understand a situation without the need to reason, it is possible to intuit the passion and desperation and poignancy of the performance but it is not possible to contemplate the experience while

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<sup>33</sup> Christy Lange, “The Impossibilists”, Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller. The Killing Machine and Other Stories 1995-2007, Ralf Beil and Bartomeu Marí, (eds), Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona and Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, 2007:177

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Husserl, quoted by Toril Moi, “Revolution in Poetic Language”, Toril Moi (Ed), The Kristeva Reader, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford UK/Cambridge USA, 1986:123



experiencing it. Instead of enabling critical analysis this situation engenders something more like empathy. A point at which intersubjectivity comes into play.

In the course of putting oneself in another's shoes, or empathising, we are undergoing acts of intersubjectivity according to Edmund Husserl and his PhD student Elizabeth Stein<sup>35</sup>. It was their belief that, we believe another being who behaves and looks more or less like ourselves will generally perceive things from the same viewpoint as our own. Husserl called this an 'egocentric viewpoint' and in this sense we too would look upon things that he does "if I were in his shoes and perceived them from his perspective"<sup>36</sup>. When one perceives an event from another's perspective is it possible for the person to remain present in themselves? What effects would occur if the person was not present in themselves? Those who have written of their experience of the artists' installations have often said they feel as though they were hypnotised or in a waking dream and that they discovered later they were unable to recall large tracts of the event. Claire Bishop found Cardiff's immersive strategies problematic for 'the idea of subjectivity as centred and stable', she considered the viewer's sense of presence to be 'consumed by affect' and thus the viewing subject is rendered powerless.<sup>37</sup> While the idea of submission appeals to many viewers it obviously frustrates others.

To suspend one's belief is to observe the technical brilliance of work. The elaborate system that controls the choreography extends beyond the 'cabin' and includes a

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<sup>35</sup> Beyer, Christian, "Edmund Husserl", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/husserl/>. [Accessed 9/11/2008]

<sup>36</sup> Beyer, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/husserl/#EmpIntLif>, [Accessed 9/11/2008]

<sup>37</sup> Bishop:101

surround sound system on the gallery walls that gives peripheral sounds, the crowd applauding, the rain and thunder and a train passing by. As the lights come on and the viewers blink themselves back into the present a sudden sensation of self-consciousness is felt. The extended rapturous applause makes the viewer feel very much like an unwitting member of an otherwise invisible cast.

The voice emanating from the work unfolded the narrative and in turn manipulates and complicates the experience of it. Depending on the willingness of each viewer you can believe the ghost of the character was there and spoke to you, or that the artists themselves arranged the songs, the script and the voice and acted out the drama from within an unseen control box. Behind each layer of artifice lies another, everything resting tentatively on something that is not there. Derrida's spectre has everything to do with 'non-present presence'.<sup>38</sup> In *Opera For A Small Room* the artist's non-present presence is palpable in the small details that choreographs the performance, details like the long, thin finger-like, automated switches that dart out to click the turntables on and off; the mass of wires that spill over and lay on the floor before twisting off to connect with a synthesizer or the red lights of the multiflex adaptors that stay distractingly on irrespective of the rest of the light show.

Bartomeu Mari argued that Cardiff and Miller's work is an art that is at the crossroads of film and theatre, their oeuvre at polar opposites of the one problem; the event under the conditions of ritual and architectural separation (film) and the unique unrepeatable performance put on for us, spectators/actors, when the show (theatre)

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, "Anachrony and Anotopia: Spectres of Marx, Derrida and Gothic Fiction", *Ghosts Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (Eds), MacMillan Press Ltd/St. Martin's Press, Inc., Great Britain/New York, 1999:128

begins. Sound is a major component in their theatrical performances, particularly the voice which they use to “create virtual characters and forge relationships with the audience”.<sup>39</sup> Through the use of exosomatic enhancement of the ear and voice Cardiff and Miller create a “conceptual space of imagined fictions”<sup>40</sup> unsettling the presence of the spectator, altering his/her perception of time and space, and initiating an experience of being simultaneously in-place and out-of-place.

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<sup>39</sup> Bartomeu Mari, “Janet Cardiff, George Bures Miller and other stories, Introduction” Ralf Beil and Bartomeu Mari(eds) Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller The Killing Machine and other stories 1995-2007, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Germany, 2007:14-15

<sup>40</sup> Mari:19

## **Chapter Three**

### **Woman As Spectre**

**Susan Philipsz**

## Woman As Spectre

### Susan Philipsz

#### Introduction

Susan Philipsz' art practice almost exclusively deals with sound. The artist performs songs drawn from popular or folk music and sings them in 'a capella'<sup>41</sup> style. Pre-recorded, the song is then played through speakers into the exhibition space. Philipsz' sound installations are sometimes accompanied by a visual element and they are often site specific.

In 2008 Susan Philipsz appeared at the 16<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney, The Aspen Art Museum and the Folkstone Triennial show. She has also appeared in the exhibition *God and Goods* at SpaceVilla Manin, the Centro d'arte Contemporanea, Codroipo; the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City; the Marres Centre for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Carnegie International exhibition, Pittsburgh. In 2008 she also had two solo shows, one in Amsterdam and the other in Birmingham, England. I have not experienced any of Philipsz' work firsthand but instead have had to rely on audio recordings and video reproduction of the work, photographs, catalogues, reviews and second-hand impressions provided to me by those who have experienced her work. It is pertinent then to say why I think Susan Philipsz would make a valuable contribution to this thesis.

Ghosts invoke a sense of uncertainty about the believability of an event or experience in the material world – through their intangible form and their absence from any particular time, they are a contrary combination of visibility and

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<sup>41</sup> a capella means to sing unaccompanied.

invisibility, substance and insubstantiality. Susan Philipsz' disembodied voice floats in an impossible space located simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Her work is the epitome of the dematerialised art object that Lucy Lippard and others championed in the 1960s and 70s. It seems that not only the art is dematerialized, so too is the artist. Unlike Hiller, Cardiff and Miller, Philipsz's voice (art) does not appear to contain her subjective political or personal ideas, nor does it contain any projection of her own fantasies but gives itself over for others to inhabit which I will explain further on. As we have seen in the work of Hiller, actively engaging in a critical discourse surrounding the spectre elucidates and substantiates the strategy of Hiller's practice. In the case of Cardiff and Miller the relationship between haunting and intersubjectivity reveals an inner logic reaching beyond simple effect, they realise the material (sound) of their practice fully and again elucidate and substantiate their spectral presence under critical analysis. Philipsz was initially perceived by this author as a paradox of female prominence in contemporary art. Her inclusion in numerous international exhibitions as seen above was perceived as successful, but serious questions arose during the research process as there appeared a lack of critical engagement or debate surrounding her practice. A practice that clearly provides rich ground for debate on the aesthetic, cultural, historical and political implications of the artist's method and strategy. None of which appear to be taken up by the artist, her curators, interviewers or the critics who (with the exception of Peio Aguirre) have written about her work.

### The Female Voice

The voice is a powerful carrier of signs; in particular the female voice historically carries the weight of patriarchal positioning to that of symbolic lack. A quick survey

of mythology reveals unflattering traits of inertia, frivolity, malice and suspicion associated with the female voice. Echo's 'incessant chatter' infuriated a matriarchal Goddess who cursed Echo never to speak again except for the utterances of others. Echo became an ear and transmitter receiving and communicating messages but only as superficial imitation not as the producer or origin of meaning.<sup>42</sup> The sirens are temptresses of the sea who used lullaby to lure unsuspecting sailors to their death, thus implicating their sexuality and its signifier, the voice, as murderous weapons. In the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, Eurydice was rendered mute, a sign of complicity and passiveness. The Sibyls were Seers whose 'frenzied' ravings revealed messages from God. Even in this example where a woman is held in a high position and afforded communal respect, her role as prophet or wise woman is carefully prescribed as a transmitter not an originator and the revelations she makes are made only in exceptional and extraordinary moments when she is seen to be under possession of another.

In contemporary media representation a similar depreciation of the female voice and usurpation of its creative potential is found. Kaja Silverman's reading of the relationship between "symbolic castration-and the traumatic discovery anatomized by Freud"<sup>43</sup> argues that cinema's representation of female characters whether body or voice is arranged in juxtaposition to the male to signify lack; be that authority, of control or of physicality and so on. This lack posited as sexual difference allows the (male) viewer a sense of partial recovery from symbolic castration. The consequences are different for the female assuming identification is made according

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Fisher, A Vampire in the Text, Narratives of Contemporary Art, Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), United Kingdom, 2003:183

<sup>43</sup> Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror – The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988:1

to gender.

Theories of female subjectivity were instrumental in challenging the modernist notion of stable identities in relation to a fixed subject (white, male, middleclass). The autonomous, centred art object, identified with patriarchal positioning was also challenged and practices gave way to a diversity of media and approaches to art, which Philipsz is participating in. In the not-too-distant past women actively challenged patriarchal structures in all areas of society, the workplace, in education and political forums for increased visibility of women across the spectrum. What then does it mean when a female artist chooses to adopt a spectral role and literally to disappear? I do not refer to Philipsz's decision to remain unseen, but refer to the fact that her art does not contain her subjective political or personal ideas, nor does it contain any projection of her own fantasies beside trying to illicit a response in the listener.

My work deals with the spatial properties of sound and with the relationship between sound and architecture. I'm interested in the emotive and psychological properties of sound and how it can be used as a device to alter individual consciousness. I have used sound, and more recently song, as a medium in public spaces to interject through the ambient noises of the everyday. Using my own voice I attempt to trigger an awareness in the listener, to temporarily alter their perception of themselves in a particular place and time.<sup>44</sup>

The above statement is one that is often reiterated in promotion material and interviews, it is a general overarching statement that describes the artist's interest and her engagement with the material and thematic elements of her practice. It states

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<sup>44</sup> Susan Philipsz quoted in exhibition promotional blurb, Past Exhibitions, Susan Philipsz, KW Institute of Contemporary Art website. <[http://www.kw-berlin.de/english/program\\_frameset.htm](http://www.kw-berlin.de/english/program_frameset.htm)>. [Accessed 12/1/2009]



clearly that she is trying to provoke a response in the viewer to raise awareness of themselves in a particular place and time.

## The Internationale

One of the frequently referenced earlier works by Philipsz is the a capella performance of the socialist call-to-arms song *The Internationale* (1999) at Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, 21 June - 8 July 2000. The curators of the exhibition chose to concentrate on geopolitical and psychological borders, evident in the title Manifesta 3: "Borderline Syndrome: Energies of Defence." A reference to Otto F. Kernberg's theories of borderline personality disorder<sup>45</sup> and used as a metaphor for the transformative processes underway in the Balkan and former Eastern Bloc countries.

Philipsz' aural intervention in a pedestrian under-pass seems appropriate and well placed, subverting a former call-to-action song by singing it in an understated, 'unselfconscious' way for unsuspecting passers-by to discover. The work seems to fit the curatorial framework of rupture and displacement very well. In another presentation of *The Internationale*, this time at the Friedrichstrabe Station, Berlin, the Kunst-Werke Gallery suggest "the former call-to-action of rebellious masses worldwide, has nowadays lost its original power and aggressiveness" and "Philipsz melancholic version echoes the contrast between the former and present significance of the site".<sup>46</sup> The curatorial concerns and its placement again seem appropriate given the history of the site, although the fact that the song is sung in English surely loses effect on listeners for whom the words have little or no meaning.

*The Internationale* has appeared at less appropriately themed exhibitions such as

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<sup>45</sup> Susan Snodgrass, "Manifesta 3: Diagnosing Europe", *Art in America* 88.11 (Nov 2000):53

<sup>46</sup> "Past Exhibitions, Susan Philipsz", KW Institute of Contemporary Art website, <[http://www.kw-berlin.de/english/program\\_frameset.htm](http://www.kw-berlin.de/english/program_frameset.htm)>. [Accessed 12/1/2009]

“Out of Bounds” at the ICA Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. The exhibition involving a number of contemporary art spaces employ hidden, backstage and non-public sites at the participating institutions, spaces that are already ‘owned’ by the public but which the public cannot usually see<sup>47</sup>. More recently at the 16th Sydney Biennale 2008, Philipsz *The Internationale* was broadcast through a solitary speaker in the Turbine Hall on Cockatoo Island (Figure 5). The government owned island houses a former penitentiary, industrial buildings, a guardhouse and government buildings all constructed using convict labour during the mid 19th century. The island is currently undergoing regeneration and is planned as Australia’s “most unusual urban park”.<sup>48</sup> The 16th Sydney Biennale *Revolutions - Forms that Turn* is billed as a celebration of the defiant spirit. The Artistic Director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev suggests the exhibition is “a space of rotation, confusion, revolt, insubordination, anarchy and disruption of order, a space of ‘revolution’”.<sup>49</sup> The commercial tone that accompanies the Cockatoo Island project creates a different context for Philipsz’ work than its original situation. In this instance *The Internationale* may be read as a signifier for the assertion of (capitalist) economic and political power by the Australian government. Philipsz’ voice acting as Kaja Silverman might imply; a signifier for the symbolic recovery of male castration. However *The Internationale* also displays an unintended subversiveness in light of Australia’s ‘unheimlich’ condition of postcolonialism as described by the authors Gelder and Jacobs,<sup>50</sup> redeeming the subversive nature of the work through suitably

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<sup>47</sup> “Out of Bounds: Susan Philipsz”, Institute of Contemporary Art website, <<http://www.ica.org.uk/Out%20of%20Bounds:%20Susan%20Philipsz+17608.tw1>>. [Accessed 12/1/2009]

<sup>48</sup> <<http://www.cockatooisland.gov.au/>>. [Accessed 20/12/2008]

<sup>49</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “Theme”, *Biennale of Sydney 2008*, <<http://www.bos2008.com/page/theme.html>>. [Accessed 20/12/2008]

<sup>50</sup> Gelder/Jacobs:179

uncanny means.

*The Internationale* has made appearances in the “cloistered confines”<sup>51</sup> of museums and galleries around the world including the Glen Dimplex exhibition in the Irish Museum of Modern Art (2001). There is a certain sense of dissipation and entropy caused by the re-presentation of *The Internationale* in contexts that have a looser curatorial claim to the notions of the work’s original theme of displacement. In a presentation by the artist at the 2008 Nival Silence/Noise Seminar held in Dublin, Philipsz believed her sound installation was well placed in the turbine hall of Cockatoo Island given the site had a history of “strikes and industrial conflict”.<sup>52</sup> I would argue a lack of contextual consideration on the part of the artist given the commercial and political intentions for the site and the ‘showcasing’ motive behind using Cockatoo Island as the venue for the Biennale. The lack of adherence to site-specificity while tying neatly in with the artist’s interest in the evolution of a song and its subsequent altered meaning as seen here, exposes the artwork’s vulnerability to appropriation and contextual reworking and undermines the work’s conceptual rigor. In this example how can Philipsz’ spectral practice be read? Is the work the producer of meaning, is the artist the producer of meaning or simply its passive sign? It is worth noting that sound art can be very flexible in terms of siting and as shown in these examples the agenda of the curator can impose a contextual reworking of the artwork.

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<sup>51</sup> Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, “Susan Philipsz”, in *The Glen Dimplex Artists Award Exhibition 2001* (Irish Museum of Modern Art) catalogue, IMMA, Dublin, 2001: un-paginated

<sup>52</sup> Susan Philipsz, 2008 Nival Noise/Silence Seminar, National College of Art and Design, Dublin, 5 December, 2008.

## Mourning and Loss

Many of the songs that Philipsz has recorded deal with longing and loss. Freud describes mourning as working in conjunction with melancholy although "...in mourning, identification with what is lost is transitory and eventually the libido is free to seek other objects or return to the self",<sup>53</sup> with melancholy the subject experiences chronic loss and is rendered unproductive and inhibited. Kaja Silverman argues that the female enters the Oedipus complex not through desire of the father but through desire of the mother and since desire and identification coexist at the same time female subjectivity is inextricably linked to melancholy. The mother becomes a lost object of love at the point of de-idealization when the lost object becomes relocated at the site of the girl's own subjectivity. Silverman claims this psychic condition is manifested in "the rigorous system of internal surveillance with which the female subject tortures herself ... and ... treat[s] herself as an object to be overseen and overheard".<sup>54</sup> If melancholy is unproductive and inhibiting and mourning is transitional and therefore healing, how do these two conditions operate in Philipsz' work?

Mourning and melancholy act in close proximity with homage, memory and the marking of loss. Mourning is a therapeutic act according to Peio Aguirre and he states further, "It is here that the female voice opens the way to reconsidering an ensemble of subjective operations: projection, negation and rejection, fantasies, longing and loss, melancholy and other 'maladies of the soul'".<sup>55</sup> While this particular

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<sup>53</sup> Sigmund Freud, quoted by Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988:156

<sup>54</sup> Kaja Silverman:157-8

<sup>55</sup> Peio Aguirre, "When The Body Speaks", A Prior Magazine, No. 16, <<http://www.aprior.org/articles/33>>. [Accessed 12/12/2008]

point isn't developed further in his essay it is interesting that, in discussing Philipsz' art Aguirre identifies the 'female voice' not the artist's voice. Philipsz has said that her voice is not a female voice but that it should be read as "any voice".<sup>56</sup> However I am inclined to agree with Aguirre. The role of Philipsz' voice in many examples of her work is culturally very specific, that of a keener. In Celtic tradition, in Ireland and in Scotland where Philipsz originates and in other cultures around the world, the role of the keener (caoineadh – to cry) is traditionally a woman's role. The keener performs a function of lament on behalf of the family of the deceased and for the wider community.<sup>57</sup> There are two points to be made. Firstly I contend it is the symbolic function of the female voice that engenders the profound resonance remarked upon by those who have experienced Philipsz' laments and it correlates to cultural conditioning and possibly to psychic conditions put forward by Freud and others regarding the maternal voice and identification leading to one's (the viewer's) own subjectivity. Philipsz, I believe, understands this dynamic and utilizes it, as demonstrated in re-occurring themes of loss and desire the artist frequently adopts. In consideration of Philipsz' denial of her female voice, I will put forward Luce Irigaray's observation that the process of objectification which enables the woman to describe herself "as if from outside the body" also implicates her in a masculine dynamic that projects the woman as other.<sup>58</sup> Philipsz' detachment from her artwork may be read as a de-politicising ploy thereby projecting (deliberately or not) an

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<sup>56</sup> Susan Philipsz, in discussion with Jackqualyn Gray, 2008 Nival Noise/Silence Seminar, at National College of Art and Design, Dublin, 5 December, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Irish Artist Alannah O'Kelly performed a keening at the burial of Patrick Ireland (1972-2008), held on the grounds of IMMA, Dublin. Patrick Ireland is an alter-ego of the artist and writer Brian O'Doherty who pledged to sign his works Patrick Ireland until British military presence was removed from Northern Island. Jennifer Higgin, "The Burial of Patrick Ireland 1927-2008", *Frieze*, Issue 117, September 2008:52

<sup>58</sup> Irigaray, Luce, quoted by Kaja Silverman:158

ethereal persona. Or perhaps the artist is using a strategy of superficial resemblance of the prescribed functions of the female voice to mimic and thereby critique such cultural understanding? The question remains, does Philipsz perpetuate patriarchal positioning by denying identification of her voice, which we must keep in mind constitutes her art, or does she attempt to transcend political and patriarchal positioning?

### Repetition, Identity and Difference

Repetition in psychoanalysis is related to the acquisition of subjectivity. The mother makes repeated phrases to the infant, thus allowing the infant to learn language and eventually to assert identity and difference through language. The loop, which Philipsz employs in her installations, is a technique of repetition at once asserting both identity and difference. *The Dead*<sup>59</sup> (2000) is a 35mm projection with a song *The Lass of Aughrim* being performed by Philipsz in a capella style. The screen is black with the song looping over and over again. In the darkened theatre room the voice helps to reconcile the spectator with him/herself allowing for introspection to occur, Philipsz hopes "... to ground the listener momentarily in the present, denying the usual escapism of the cinema event".<sup>60</sup> Critic Peio Aguirre who has experienced *The Dead* says, "In the darkness of the cinema, one nevertheless feels authorized to make all possible projections, all identifications".<sup>61</sup>

Intimacy is an important aspect in the production of the song, apparent in more

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<sup>59</sup> *The Dead* is a short story by James Joyce. It was made into a film by John Huston and released posthumously in 1987. Philipsz' performs *The Lass of Aughrim* from the film version.

<sup>60</sup> Philipsz, quoted in Aguirre: <<http://www.aprior.org/articles/33>>. [Accessed 12/12/2008]

<sup>61</sup> Aguirre: <<http://www.aprior.org/articles/33>>. [Accessed 12/12/2008]

‘exposed’ public spaces where Philipsz has smuggled her voice, such as a bus depot and a supermarket and in empty gallery spaces where she has also performed. A sense of intimacy is achieved through Philipsz’ deliberate attempt to remove any artifice or embellishment in her voice. The artist hopes this allows listeners to believe she is singing in an unselfconscious way reminiscent of the solitary crooner. Perhaps the implication for the listener is that they become an eavesdropper. The passing of time is marked by a series of silences between verses when the artist’s breathing can be heard. The blank screen (in *The Dead*) and the spaces between repetitions are likened to a blank page whereby each new rendition of the song is a new story in the telling. According to Aguirre this illuminates the blank spaces for the construction of new subjectivities.<sup>62</sup> Claire Bishop complained of the proximity of Cardiff’s voice and suggested her “breathy, whispering voice” created a femme fatale persona.<sup>63</sup> There are a number of comments by critics that hint at a similar effect in Philipsz’ method; Mac Giolla Léith spoke of ...“an endearingly fallible voice”,<sup>64</sup> Segade, “...like capturing someone in an intimate moment ... or in the shower”.<sup>65</sup> And still, in contrast, others have expressed distain similar to Bishop.

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<sup>62</sup> Aguirre: <<http://www.aprior.org/articles/33>>. [Accessed 12/12/2008]

<sup>63</sup> Bishop:102

<sup>64</sup> Mac Giolla Léith, un-paginated

<sup>65</sup> Segade, Manuel. "Memory trigger: Susan Philipsz talks to Manuel Segade about the emotional and psychological properties of song, and how this became the basis for her art (Interview)." *C: International Contemporary Art* 95 (Fall 2007):28



## Conclusion

In the introduction I said I wanted to substantiate the spectre, to take this elusive occurrence and to identify it and treat it as a tangible, graspable entity. In many respects the task was easy because the artistic practices I selected made it so. In the case of Hiller particularly, there is a wealth of critical writing and experience and a long history of the artist's engagement with the spectral figure. Hiller's own writing offers a clear insight into her interest in the spectre and her objectives and methodology. It is interesting that for someone who uses 'irrationality' to question modernist structures Hiller operates in a cerebral and very rational way. Cardiff and Miller's website was a valuable resource, an archive of reviews, publications and their own writing plus information about their past and current projects. The artists' fascination and engagement with narrative operations such as theatre, cinema and fiction writing and their employment of sound technology made their work highly engaging and entertaining. And it convincingly demonstrated how sound can be used to affect and shape experience. Of the four artists, I found the research process for Philipsz the most problematic and the most challenging. From the early stages I saw a paradoxical situation, a highly visible artist using a tool weighted with powerful symbolic meaning and seemingly a lack of critical engagement or debate surrounding her voice, the female voice. An omission that I believed could provide rich ground for debate on the aesthetic, cultural, historical and political implications of the artist's choice of medium and strategy. For that reason a different approach was used with Philipsz than the approaches used for the other artists in this thesis. While I addressed the artworks of Hiller and Cardiff and Miller, I inclined to address Philipsz' strategy and methodology. The focus however remained firmly on the spectral voice and a number of issues appeared and reappeared throughout the entire

process; which I will now summarise.

### Return and Repetition

Among the persistent hypotheses surrounding the ghost the most reconciled is that it is something that returns deliberately, regularly, and sometimes malignly. It is interesting that rather than being comforted at the thought of a human miraculously surviving bodily death, the living dead are usually feared. Noyes suggests it is fear of reprisal arising from that fact that we may have harbored ill feelings or thoughts toward the deceased while they were alive, and fear the hostility we felt toward them might be reciprocated.<sup>66</sup> Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie* and *Monument* both touch on this common belief. The monument acts as a negating factor (reassuring the living of their corporeality) and as a contract with the dead that in return for being treated with respect, the dead will remain in their own dwelling. Noyes also suggests that persistent in common belief in all societies is "that something in the nature of intelligence and personality survives death"<sup>67</sup>. Counter to Roland Barthes famous assertion<sup>68</sup> I believe this is experienced most tangibly through the writing of deceased authors.

Repetition is a strategy close to appropriation that may run the risk of being understood as another form of colonialism, we asked this question during the

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<sup>66</sup> Ralph Noyes, "The Other Side of Plato's Cave", Ghosts, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History, Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (eds), MacMillan Press Ltd/St. Martin's Press, Inc., Great Britain/New York, 1999:246

<sup>67</sup> Noyes:246

<sup>68</sup> Roland, Barthes, (essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath), Fontana/Collins, Great Britain, 1977, "Death of the Author", Image Music Text, Barthes, "As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.":143

examination of Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie*. Philipsz clearly appropriates folk and popular songs though she uses this form of repetition as a way of measuring delicate differences between similar forms. Where she has installed the same works in different contexts, as noted in my evaluation of *The Internationale*, subtle and significant changes occur in the meaning that may make the work prone to appropriation itself.

Repetition in psychoanalysis is related to the acquisition of subjectivity through differentiation and identification. Repetition has been read in Philipsz work as a tactic to both liberate and return the subject to itself. Cardiff used repetition as a means of subverting the viewer's sense of presence. By leading the viewer around a previously visited route and replacing the acoustic space with an earlier recorded one (or a combination of pre-recorded sounds) Cardiff was able to supplant the viewer's consciousness with her own and cast her viewer into a dream-like or 'possessed' state.

#### Anachronism: A Catalyst for Disruption

Anachronism is time out of joint, an appearance of something from an earlier time that clearly does not belong. Anachronism is most commonly signified or experienced through a relation to technology; consider how quickly technology supersedes and outdates itself.<sup>69</sup> The familiar chain-rattling, shroud-draped ghost has had its day for now but spectrality continues in the omniscient absence-presence of the media, the workings of telecommunications and the disembodying actions

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<sup>69</sup> A good example is Microsoft's Windows platform in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the scramble of related technology companies (and Microsoft's experience of its own difficulties) to improve and develop or be consigned to redundancy.

peculiar to sound technology. Hiller, Cardiff and Miller and Philipsz exemplified how sound technology can be used to initiate an anachronistic experience to disrupt a sense of self.

Hiller reminded us of the tentative grasp we mortals have on life and the structures we build around ourselves in archaic notions of placation (monument) and disavowal (the archive) of the inevitable encounter with death. Hiller showed how the spectre, by its infinite right of reply, is a powerful metaphor for dissent and can be used to represent issues of identity and oppression. Hiller's oeuvre has dealt with themes of pre-cognition, coincidence, collective experiences and 'second sight', often to question the structures and boundaries of 'knowing'. In the examples I have presented here Hiller used the spectre, an antithesis of rationality, to draw attention to the processes of exclusion performed by Enlightenment practices to chart an alternative history of otherwise overlooked or silenced voices.

For Cardiff and Miller the relationship between haunting and intersubjectivity is used to target the audience's sense of presence. As Mari pointed out their art sits at a crossroads between visual arts, film and theatre, a 'conceptual space of imagined fictions'.<sup>70</sup> Cardiff's highly sensorial walks and the couple's installations closed down the distance between the audience, the artwork and the artists. This affected the audience's subjectivity and attracted both praise and criticism for its engulfing qualities. The work however redeems itself by operating beyond simple effect. By realising the material (sound) of their practice fully they elucidated a spectral presence, unsettled the presence of the spectator and altered his/her perception of

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<sup>70</sup> Mari:19

time and space. Through their initiation of the experience of 'unheimlich' the artists force a reconsideration of what being in the 'here and now' actually means. Escapism is certainly read in their work, escapism and the experience of alterity proved alluring to some, but for others a sense of self is grounded in the need to remain present.

The adoption of a spectral persona by Philipsz creates an empty space around her practice that allows her audience to project their fantasies and their subjectivity onto the work. While sound technology creates a disembodiment of the voice from the corporeal body it may be merely a temporary transition of the voice from the corporeal to the imaginary body. As Philipsz' listeners have said or implied, an identification still occurs. I contend it is a necessary function in the acquirement of the listener's own subjectivity. Subjectivity is an internal reality that takes place in a person's mind rather than the world. I have demonstrated my own subjectivity by focussing on the mythologising of Woman by Philipsz (whether the artist is aware or not) as a strategy for art making. Philipsz' stated intention is to bring her audience into an awareness of themselves in a particular place and time, this is read as a strategy to liberate the other to be him/herself. In what seems to be a self-sacrificing act the artist chooses to suspend her own subjectivity in favour of her audience. I therefore see the disruption of a sense of self most strongly exhibited in the artist. Philipsz' decision to remove herself from the voice creates as strong an argument for the artist's liberation or transcendence of the corporeal encumbrance of gender and the psychic encumbrance of ego, as it does for a challenge on the grounds of a practice that adopts certain mythic traits and by denying them, demonstrates the myth of Woman as Spectre.

### The Spectral Voice

The voice is something of a trace of another, when it is detached from the corporeal body it lends itself to a state of ambiguity, indeterminacy and multiplicity: characteristics that are attributed to both ghosts and post-structuralism. Spectrality is very much at home amongst the motifs of post-structuralism. Being neither dead nor alive the spectre stands in defiance of binary oppositions such as presence and absence, past and present, corporeality and spirit. The word spectre contains a web of associations that points quite clearly to its own defiance of binary opposition; In Latin 'Spectare' means to see, 'Spectral' a derivative of spectre designates elements of Newton's rainbow, more often spectre stands in for 'unreal' and the 'insubstantial'.<sup>71</sup> Seeking to substantiate the spectre might on reflection seem naïve and self-defeating yet the artists in this thesis have shown the spectre still manages to make its presence felt, and like air, once thought to be insubstantial, can press upon us with considerable force. The artists Hiller, Cardiff and Miller and Philipsz through their art have shown that the spectral figure is neither effect nor speculation, but substantiated and grounded in the artists' own logic.

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<sup>71</sup> Noyes:248

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