

Sounding Capacities for Co-Creation: Ellen Moffat's Play with Curiosity and Engagement in COMP_OSE, a review by Marie Lovrod

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How might one, two or many attend more deeply to their own and one another's capacities for voice and co-creation? What are the smallest fragments of utterance through which communication and the articulation of community and alterity might take place? How might coercion-resistant interfacial environments encourage a politics of participation and inquisitiveness where difference simultaneously matters, or not, yet always evolves and ultimately enhances? What might a multi-vocal poetics of mutuality enable, when reciprocity is available, but not required? These are among the lines of inquiry that drive Ellen Moffat's work in COMP_OSE, a paired set of installations that involve audience members through deceptively minimalist, multi-sensory play with sound, rhythm, light, touch, movement, expression, access and choice in processes of attunement to the liminal spaces that constitute collectivities and solitudes.

COMP_OSE treats the gallery space as a site of relational consciousness that invites forming and dissolving associations among individuals and groups to break through passive reception of art, with creative, interactive manipulation of two machines: *V-Box*, a multi-track vocal instrument that offers granular and linguistic sounds to approximate language; and *twicescore*, a catalyst for producing and projecting collaborative concrete poetry. The project seeks to establish conditions for new ways of engaging with both art and others, where tentative reluctance, curious play and assertive interventions are all allowed. Through explorations of voice, alterity, subjectivity and possibilities for collectivity, received power dynamics are interrogated and challenged.

V-Box

On the afternoon I arrive, the gallery space opens into a subtly lit and sibilant environment, where a soft shoe dance score of beat box sounds and conversationally toned rhythms invite audience members to take a step closer, turn a knob, push a button, press a slide, see what happens when a room of friends and strangers, or maybe just one or two curious visitors choose to use the multi-stationed vocal instrument positioned diagonally across the room. On the rear wall, a legend maps ways to vary and manipulate the available ranges of sounds along axes of volume, durational elements, tempo and pitch. Some will seek out and consult this guide, while others may miss it entirely as each discerns how s/he wants to approach and take up or observe the possibilities the installation offers.

twicescore

At the far end of the first gallery, a simple corner doorway gives onto a room where visitor voices become the primary sound source in what appears to be a visual and cognitive game. The sound play that characterizes the previous space recedes to a background murmur as one advances into the new setting. On the floor, a brightly lit screen of granular glass beads forms a sand-like square matrix etched with the shadowed impression of footprints and fingers trailed lightly over it. This luminescent surface captures projections generated by a pair of diagonally situated stations, each outfitted with standard computer keyboards, and slider scales and knobs that permit selection of various options in size, color, spacing, font and case of characters and signs. Each mark, symbol, or message emerges into a circular pattern generated by

participants who, individually, or in pairs or groups can shape a concrete poem patterned after “zuverspaetceterandfigurinnennenswert ollos” (1962), by Ferdinand Kriwet.

Participants have the option to complete, title and “save” their poem/s – through a series of agreements made or abandoned – to an archival website that “remembers” and imagines a wider or shared public for their work/play (See: <http://www.twicescore.ellenmoffat.ca/>).

Together, the spaces created by these installations summon notions of de-centered, yet sensuously and place-bound forms of shared consciousness. Moffat often uses the spatialization of sound and the fragmentation of language in multi-media installations in gallery and other public spaces to create intricate interrogative explorations with audience members and to facilitate renegotiated communicative practices and therefore, social relations. In a growing body of work, where she is always searching for localized transformational grammars of connective and disruptive rhythms, here, she draws on her experiences of the cognitive deteriorations precipitated by her father’s loss of language in aging to inquire about basic structures of communication and the creative potentials of chance associations.

Still, while drawing on the personal, this work is not transparently autobiographical; I know about Ellen’s father because I asked. Indeed, audience members bring their own associations to the fragmented possibilities offered, and as I tune in to conversations around me, I hear personal and political meanings emerge as visitors engage with the works. For some, there is a hushed sense of the sacred in the simple suggestion of co-creativity, an association perhaps invited by the soft lighting, the scale of sound and space, though others would find the context entirely secular. The technology here operates in service to a creative technique that is both subtle and powerful; at each

moment that an imagined message is heard or missed, wider social, political and imaginative grammars become visible and audible.

Thus, Moffat extends from the personal to advance play with the possibilities of socio-political realities in art. By breaking communication down into its most elemental phonemes and signs, she disposes of polemic content, and invites practice with the possibilities of subjective expression and relationship. Incompletion is built in. There is no “correct” way to approach, view or engage with the space or other audience members; there is only a matrix of possibilities posited by each machine. The work thus seeks to resist authoritative surveillance, discipline or definition. Instead, sound, vision and movement become nodes of personal exploration and interpersonal connection in spontaneous processes that require decisions about participating or not. Even a refusal to participate, a choice simply to observe, renders the visitor part of the ever-changing field of possibilities each technological tableau constructs. Speculation is invited, yet, this project is not a spectacle. The scale is human, intimate, the questions and potentials posed, perceived, or provoked *in situ*.

Moffat finds linkages between her experiences of gender identity and socially constructed differences through her engagements with public sites of staging voice, in mediated environments where anyone can play. In this case, enunciability is both subjective and shared. There is a mindful sort of anarchy that operates in her project. Even the title of the show, which inserts an interpretive space in a word that might have been more conventionally broken between consonants, resists final decoding. Reduced to its constituent elements or reconfigured to a wider scope of actualizations, the world invites and exceeds our interpretive powers and received frameworks. More is possible than any received system imagines; so Moffat invites us to show up and comp_ose.