

EXHIBITIONS | CENTRAL GALLERY

Rhubarb, rhubarb, peas and carrots

Erin Gee, Marla Hlady, Erika Lincoln, Stephanie Loveless, and Ellen Moffat
Curated by Blair Fornwald, Assistant Curator

JULY 17 TO SEPTEMBER 5, 2015

Marla Hlady Artist Talk: Friday, July 17, 6:00 pm, RPL Film Theatre

Opening Reception: Friday, July 17, 7:00, Central Gallery

Erin Gee and Ellen Moffat: Two Performances: Friday, July 17, 7:30 pm, Central Gallery

Curator Tour: Saturday, July 25, 2:00 pm, Central Gallery

On Language and the Limits of Legibility

by Blair Fornwald

Rhubarb, rhubarb, peas and carrots takes its title from the murmurings of background actors in theatre and film. When repeated by a group of people, phrases like “rhubarb, rhubarb,” “peas and carrots,” “watermelon, cantaloupe,” or the nonsensical “walla, walla,” “natter, natter,” or “grommish, grommish” mimic the natural cadence and tone of indistinct chatter. It is an instance where language does not signify, where our eyes and ears are simultaneously fooled into thinking that the nonsensical, meaningless, and surreal is normal and intelligible conversation. Here, the phrase serves to unite the works of five artists whose practices explore language, highlighting discrepancies between what is said, meant, heard, and understood.

Regina-born, Montreal-based artist and composer Erin Gee’s *Larynx* series is comprised of four vector drawings, taken from endoscopic photographs of the



human larynx, the organ that houses the vocal cords and controls one's pitch and volume. These digitally-rendered line drawings resemble topographical maps, or perhaps, architectural blueprints, mapping out the terrain of the cartilage, muscles and nerves that surround the trachea. Along the perimeters of these images, Gee found what appeared to be abstract musical notation, which she then translated into legible scores, four compositions for voice, found within the digital noise from borders of these voiceless throats. There is a poetic arbitrariness in these compositions, and in the images from which they emerge. Maps, blueprints, and scores, like language, are legible to those literate in their vocabularies. However, Gee's exercise points to the subjectivity of these vocabularies, to the ways that language (musical or otherwise) relies on our capacity to make meaning of the meaningless, to build a vocabulary from all possible vocalizations, and to represent this vocabulary drawing from an equally vast range of potential symbols and means of notation.

she i ber, an interdisciplinary artwork by Saskatoon artist Ellen Moffat, also makes use of the slippage and shifts that occur during translation. Moffat produced a text, which she refers to as "a poem in four movements," responding to the rhythms of her body, senses, and mind as she walked through Parisian streets, taking cues from the writings of three writers: Virginia Woolf, who wrote from an (at the time) uniquely female perspective, Gertrude Stein, whose difficult, abstract poetry is often cited as an example of automatic or subconscious writing, and Hélène Cixous, who argued that women's writing ought to reflect her embodied, gendered, perspective, *l'écriture féminine*. It was also based on the experience of walking as a kind of Situationist *dérive* (translated as "drift"). The *dérive* is a spatializing exercise, designed to re-engage individuals with the city as it exists beyond its capitalist spectacle. To practice it, one

allows the trajectory of their walking path to be guided by the invisible but perceptible forces that attract or repel. In doing so, one maps terrain with the body and its desires.

Moffat's written text is simultaneously present and absent in this exhibition – she has subjected it to a series of translatory turns aligned with the *dérive* and *l'écriture féminine*. She processed spoken word recordings of her text using audio software commercially used for pitch correction, producing a graphical score, with each word transcribed as wavering line or glyph, indicating a variation in audible frequencies. The score has been interpreted and performed by two musicians: vocalist Lia Pas and double bassist David Grosse. Their interpretation further altered the score, and Moffat's accompanying digital video animation synchronizes the glyphs to the recorded audio. In a subsequent iteration, the glyphs have been laser-cut into white paper, elegantly minimalist and calligraphic compositions that hint at their performative potential. An open-ended work, *she i ber* could, in theory, be endlessly translated, drifting further and further from its originary source. At what point would it cease to be language?

Challenging anthropomorphic assumptions about language, Montréal/New York artist Stephanie Loveless endeavors to speak in the voices of non-human species. In *Therianthropy*, her subjects are crickets, wolves and birds. The word “therianthropy” refers to the mythological ability to shapeshift, specifically for humans to become other animals. By giving her work this title, Loveless suggests a goal beyond mere imitation, a becoming of sorts, achieved by empathetic engagement via vocal embodiment. These efforts are evident in the vocalizations as well – Loveless' voice often approaches becoming-bird, vacillates between wolf and human, attempts the sounds of the stridulations of a cricket's forewings with an entirely different physiological

mechanism, but never do they feel like onomatopoeic shorthand or generic mimicry. She approaches a multiplicity as well, not merely singing the songs of a single cricket, bird, and wolf, but letting her voice become the collective voice of the orchestra, the flock, and the pack. These voices emanate from deliberately humble handmade paper cup speakers, each paired with a small screen which loops a video of the species' imagined point of view. This delicate arrangement is a tacit invitation to hold a cup up to your ear, as if it were an antique telephone receiver or a conch shell, to engage in active, performative listening.

Toronto artist Marla Hlady's *A Case for Sound* (Nina) is comprised of collection of glossy wooden boxes, outfitted with handles, metal clasps, and circular holes housing speakers, with dimensions similar to portable record players or album carrying cases. Each case contains a different looping audio segment, taken from a recording of Nina Simone's 1976 performance at the Montreux Jazz Festival, where she covers Loulou Gasté's "Feelings." Rather than focusing on the song that Simone sings, Hlady's chosen audio segments focus primarily on the performer's interjections and banter with her reserved Swiss audience. Simone's comments variously critique the sentimentality of the song's lyrics, add emotional gravitas, and reinforce the important role of the audience in live performance: "God damn... What a shame to have to write a song like that," she mutters. Then later: "C'mon, clap, damnit, what's wrong with you?"

Hlady's work also encourages participation: each case must be handled in order to activate the audio – if it is tilted, a motion switch inside the case interrupts the audio signal, allowing it to be played like musical instruments. The listener/performer's experience will always be unique, depending how many cases are engaged, where

they are carried in the space, and how they are handled – if repeatedly tilted, for instance, they will produce sound like a skipping record.

Noting and researching the ways that urban birds respond to their largely human-built and technologically mediated landscapes, *The Singing Condition II* is part of larger body of sculptural electronic works by Winnipeg artist Erika Lincoln. Three motorized wool-winding machines respond to visitors' movement through the gallery. When motion sensors within the space are triggered, the machines are animated and spin nests, wrapping yarn and string around zip tie and wire armatures. Over the course of the exhibition, the nests will accumulate, becoming a visual archive of visitor activity. Although the nests are relatively similar in form, each is unique, its slack or tension determined by the random behavior of the viewer, its colour and texture dependent on the artists' choice of materials, its fullness and diameter subject to decisions made by gallery staff, responsible for removing "finished" nests from their machines and setting them on their shelves. The work subtly suggests dialogue, drawing a visual metaphor between urban birds who resourcefully incorporate manufactured materials into their nests, and viewer's engagement with artwork, which unfolds like a conversation, incorporating unique perspectives, knowledge, and experience to form a subjective account of its meaning.

In order for language – be it spoken, written, visual, musical, or bodily – to function, there must be some degree of uniformity, some adherence to complex systems of communication that allow it to function. But a dialogue will nonetheless meander and spread, not always adhering to the conventions set in place. It will chart its own trajectory.