Where Does the Caged Bird Sing? On Louise Lawler’s Bird Calls and its Critical Afterlives

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Bird Calls (1972, recorded in 1981) by Louise Lawler is a six-minute roll call in which the artist squawks, chirps, and warbles the names of twenty-eight of the leading artists of the time—not coincidentally, all men. Each name is subject to distortion and diction as it is transformed into an individual call. This powerful (and powerfully funny) piece, the artist’s only audio work, may seem anomalous in relation to the subtly acerbic photographs and ephemeral multiples for which she is now known. Yet the work, in its explicit irony and eschewal of the visual, represents not only a turning point in 1970s feminist production, but a critical model that resituated a queer-feminist occupation of public radio space for the biennial PERFORMA09, BROADSIDE’s program envisioned as a discourse. She uses Jonathan Culler’s definition: “Context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of context is determined by events.” The events of BROADSIDE’s program, disembodied and hybrid, produced a radio context that acted not as a monumental site but as a satellite to PERFORMA. This notion of a fluid inhabitation, a temporary occupation of an existing (yet ephemeral) space by a curatorial sensibility, was reflected in the non-visual works chosen for presentation.

For my contribution to BROADSIDE’s program, I paired Lawler’s Bird Calls with two contemporary aural bodies of work (Unlke Muller’s Herstory Inventory, 2009, and various live tracks by the Glasgow-based group Muscles of Joy). These works, like our program, do not rely on modernist notions of site-specificity. Rather, initiated through an agitation or prompt, they manifest themselves through alternative channels of inhabitation. This type of transient production is defined by Irit Rogoff as “smuggling,” the touchstone of what she calls the “embodied criticality” of curatorial knowledge production, a flexible operation that disregards boundaries in favor of the cross-disciplinary and imagined.

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By Juli Carson in her essay “On Discourse as Monument: the radio platform into a metaleptic discursive space, defined by Irit Rogoff as ‘smuggling,’ the touchstone of what she calls the ‘embodied criticality’ of curatorial knowledge production, a flexible operation that disregards boundaries in favor of the cross-disciplinary and imagined.

She continues:

“Within this movement the identity of the objects themselves are obscured [sic]. They function very much like concepts and ideas that inhabit space in a quasi-legitimate way. They are not really at home within a given structure of knowledge and thrive in the movement between things and do not settle into a legitimating frame or environment.”

Problematizing the visual and deploying unexpected humor, these audio works by Lawler, Muller, and the Muscles of Joy exemplify an adaptable, collaborative legacy in feminist production that challenges the constraints of traditional...
The underlying question for Lawler and Levine was the question of being against the institution: we are the institutional critique. For BROADSIDE, the format of the radio, unhinged from a bodily encounter with the works, brought to the foreground not only the question of ‘why,’ but also ‘where’ the caged bird sings. This resistance to authorship and structures of institutional legitimation is reflected throughout Lawler’s practice, particularly in relation to her attitudes toward feminist collaboration. From 1981 until 1982, Lawler collaborated with fellow artist Sherrine Levine under the name A Picture is No Substitute for Anything to create events and multiples independent of a commercial gallery. The various lectures, souvenirs, and events (such as Invitation to Swan Lake, 1981, where they invited art world personae to attend a scheduled performance of the ballet at Lincoln Center) critiqued the manner in which art institutions colonize and co-opt radical gestures, including trends such as Pop and appropriation, to cultivate their own profile or brand. In an interview, Levine described their project: “Declaring our own gallery was also a way of showing that a gallery isn’t just a showcase; it’s also what’s on display.” A Picture is No Substitute for Anything recognized that art, whatever form it may take, is always already framed by its inescapable conditions of reception. Fraser added the following rejoinder in her 2005 analysis of the legacy of institutional critique: “It’s not a question of being against the institution: we are the institution.” The underlying question for Lawler and Levine was to cultivate their own profile or brand. 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images of women will directly impact and benefit women's societal position) but instead signaled a paradigm shift related to the question of aesthetic re-presentation. This paradigm shift, which sought to frame, analyze, and deconstruct the underlying conditions of patriarchal oppression, ignited a firestorm of confusion about how to produce a feminist discourse around imagery coded and consumed through the laws of patriarchy and its institutions, including art history. Artists of Lawler's generation responded to this issue by adopting anti-visual strategies such as text-based practices, appropriation, and sound-based work. However, in Lawler's practice and that of her feminist inheritors, the negation of the visual was not an endgame strategy. Rather, it opened up possibilities for thinking about the contingencies of visuality as not an endgame strategy. Rather, it opened up possibilities for thinking about the contingencies of visuality, for which the origi-

Herstory Inventory poignantly addresses the marginalization of early “essentialist” feminist (and pointedly lesbian) imagery within contemporary visual culture, particularly in the artwork once psychoanalytic feminism became the dominant mode of theoretical inquiry. With the ensuing theoretical vogue of identity politics and gender performativity, this imagery is ripe for re-investigation. Removing the visual, the voices in Mul ler’s work create a space within the viewer’s mind for a mnemonic creation of the visual imagery, for which the origi-

in her 1979 work, A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture, where she rented the Aeró Theatre in Santa Monica to screen only the soundreel to the film. The Misfits, an emo-

Yet what drives Müller’s project is not nostalgia for an essen-

tialist era or the desire to codify lesbian imagery into a single, unified aesthetic. Rather, Herstory Inventory is meant to reflect the openness and diversity of lesbian and queer imagery, a polymorphous pervertivity that encompasses everything from the “coffee-shop lesbians” to ACT-UP slogans to S&M imagery. Like Bird Calls, which imports artists’ names (that stand themselves as modernist monoliths) into a self-consciously humorous form in order to lampoon them, Herstory Inventory allows descriptions of various clichéd imagery to butt up against one another in such a form that acts equally as homage and satire. Some examples of the T-shirt descriptions that run the gamut from the organic to the explicitly sexual are:

Abstract design with clitoris in the center.
Profiles of two faces with tongues touching.
Five dykes driving a car.
A woman on a field with a seed sack around her shoulders dropping seeds on the ground.
Abstract design with clitoris in the center.
Profiles of two faces with tongues touching.
Five dykes driving a car.
A woman on a field with a seed sack around her shoulders dropping seeds on the ground.
A pomegranate cut open and a loaf of bread.

Indeed, a resistance to and queering of binaries, both aesthetic and sexual, defines Müller’s and her peers’ work. As an editor of LTTR, a feminist and gender queer artistic collective that produces journals and organizes exhibitions and participa-
tory events, Müller’s practice is informed by a rich feminist history. But LTTR’s modus operandi differs from that of separatist groups of the 1970s, which sought to establish a utopia apart from patriarchal influence exclusively by and for lesbians. Rather, LTTR is defined by what scholar Julia Bryan-Wilson calls a “more permeable, unbounded sense of possible identification” reflected in the shifting acronym, which has stood for everything from “Lesbians To The Rescue” to “Lacan Teaches To Repeat.” That is to say, LTTR is not beholden to an entrenched set of identity politics—through gender (feminist) or sexual orientation (lesbian)—but instead takes up the mantle of constantly reinvented queer perfor-
mativity theorized by feminist writers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. Queer theory takes poststructural linguistics to political ends, asserting the power of linguistic sleight (purposely playful or otherwise) to create constantly shifting and fluid meanings, resulting in new subjectivities.

This shifting site of meaning relates to the struggling inher-

At Issue Project Room, an experimental music venue, where the five women read the T-shirt descriptions aloud from note-
cards. Within the small room, however, the women were positioned among the audience, minimizing the physical and perceptual difference between performer and audience. In its next incarnation, at an event called “Tuesdays on the Terrace” curated by Barbara Schneider of the Dia Art Founda-
tion, the five women’s voices were pre-recorded and played over five different loudspeakers installed in the courtyard of New York’s Hispanic Society. The Hispanic Society, which functions as a temporary exhibition space for the currently “homeless” foundation, features Neoclassical architecture, Herstory Inventory has been presented in a variety of formats, including its broadcast on East Village Radio. It was debuted in May 2009 as a live performance at an event called “Tuesdays on the Terrace” curated by Barbara Schneider of the Dia Art Foundation, where the five women read the T-shirt descriptions aloud from note-
cards. Although within the small room, however, the women were positioned among the audience, minimizing the physical and perceptual difference between performer and audience. In its next incarnation, at an event called “Tuesdays on the Terrace” curated by Barbara Schneider of the Dia Art Foundation, the five women’s voices were pre-recorded and played over five different loudspeakers installed in the courtyard of New York’s Hispanic Society. The Hispanic Society, which functions as a temporary exhibition space for the currently “homeless” foundation, features Neoclassical architecture,
and memorial statues of historical figures on horseback, against which Herstory Inventory formed an oppositional sonic intervention. The sculptures performed clichéd images of masculinity, while Herstory Inventory chanted in myriad humorous examples of feminist essentialist imagery, offering an alternative reading of the space in line with queer-feminist practice. In addition, Müller distributed ten solid-color T-shirts in the colors of the rainbow, hand-lettered with the T-shirt descriptions projected via loudspeaker. Worn by friends and supporters in the audience, they embodied a visual analogue to the printed / punk political literature that is associated to what was being broadcast over the loudspeaker. BROADSIDE’s presentation of the piece, providing and performing a “hint” to what was to follow after my interview with Barbara Schröder, prefaced by my interview with Barbara Schröder, formed an oppositional aesthetic trend of contemporary queer and feminist art production. These performance techniques were analyzed not only by the artists and queer theorists in the audience but also by the Muscles of Joy, however, threatened to turn riot grrl into a simple fashion trend, forcing the most radical members to impose a “media blackout” in order to restrict production and dissemination to underground forms and channels. Today, artists like the Muscles of Joy take up many of these punk techniques and present them in a variety of contemporary art contexts, inhabiting this “historical” form with critical acumen. Expanding the notion of the female voice as a subversive creative tool, the Muscles of Joy are an eight-woman collective of visual artists (Anne-Marie Copestake, Ariki Porteous, Charlotte Procter, Jenny O’Boyle, Kate Dove, Leigh Ferguson, Sophie Macpherson, and Victoria Morton) that have been using DIY strategies to build musical compositions since October 2008. Utilizing simple or pre-voicenote, basic harmony, found’text, and improvised hand-made instruments as musical building blocks, the Muscles of Joy artists are admittedly amateur musicians. Instead of relying on virtuosic instrumental skills characteristic of rock music performance, the members ground their compositions in vocal improvisation honed through participation in amateur women’s choirs.

Like 1970s performers, the Muscles of Joy challenge the notion of hierarchal performance structures in musical groups. Switching instruments after every song and seating themselves in semi-circular arrangements facing one another, their lack of regard for traditional audience identification disrupts expectations of musical performance. This precarious balance between an internal, communal dynamic in performance and a constructed external critical reception of the Muscles of Joy’s practice with Lawler’s and Müller’s—that, of course, is the site of new material and meaning for these contexts’bear out in the discourse of “smuggling” and inhabitation that categorizes both contemporary feminist practice and contemporary sites of curatorial knowledge production. This project is rooted in the politics of anti-visibility that ground Bird Calls within a specific theoretical discourse about psychoanalytic feminism and institutional critique. But these works also reflect a moment of criticality, tethered from the physical site of the institution, that reflects not only the feminist call for a paradigm shift but for a reconsideration of visibility as such. BROADSIDE’s presentation, which takes radio format as a space with an “invisible” audience and a long tradition, generated new material and meaning for these contexts within a paradigm that is that that bears out in the discourse of “smuggling” and inhabitation that categorizes both contemporary feminist practice and contemporary sites of curatorial knowledge production. This project is rooted in the politics of anti-visibility that ground Bird Calls within a specific theoretical discourse about psychoanalytic feminism and institutional critique. But these works also reflect a moment of criticality, tethered from the physical site of the institution, that reflects not only the feminist call for a paradigm shift but for a reconsideration of visibility as such. BROADSIDE’s presentation, which takes radio format as a space with an “invisible” audience and a long tradition, generated new material and meaning for these contexts within a paradigm that is
that more closely mirrors the ephemeral, shape-shifting way that information is commonly (virtually) received today. This flexibility, emphasizing ideas over objects, reflects the ways that information is received by such institutions today. (Blackwell: Malden, Mass.; Oxford; Victoria, 2007), 192–195.


Louise Lawler, in conversation with Douglas Crimp, “Prominence Given, Authority Taken,” Grey Room (Summer 2001): 79.

Andrea Fraser, “From a Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” Artforum (September 2005): 263.

Lawler, quoted in Crimp, 80. Documenta VII, curated by Rudi Fuchs, was taken to task by critics such as Benjamin Buchloh for its curatorial modus operandi to reinscribe the myth of autonomous art production by promoting a system whereby the art itself is the product and the curator is merely a facilitator. Buchloh, “Documenta 7: A Dictionary of Afterall (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 438.

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Brody and Leonard are two original members of the queer collective Fierce Femmes. The speakers are artists Ulrike Müller, Emma Hedditch, Nancy Brooks Brody, Zoe Leonard, and Megan Palermo who also have what Müller calls an existing relationship toward the material in the Lesbian Herstory Archive. The names of twenty-eight artists who appear in Lawler’s “Prominence Given, Recognition Taken,” see Benjamin Buchloh, “Documenta 7: A Dictionary of Afterall (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 438.

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