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Drone of Invisible Ink: Susan Silton's "In everything there is the trace," and the Collective Typing of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* BY SEAN GRIFFIN

It is easy to imagine ourselves through literature. It speaks to us like a voice in our heads, showing us things and directing our thoughts as it proceeds. It is equally easy to imagine ourselves through drone music because it occupies the periphery of our minds with a receding, unnerving sameness that alters the way we hear. Sculptures and installations can evoke spatial languages both real and imaginary through the material and social contexts in which they exist; however, not many artists engage and orchestrate all of these dimensional relationships into effective, sustained counterpoint.

How often do we see a good installation accompanied by some badly executed loudspeaker situation, or overly simple, multi-channel sound? Some element or reference will seem pixilated, too oblique to parse and thereby submerged into a surreal, pop media cliché or anonymously mixed into the general media din of its sonic desktop. We are spectators of these sounds; we are rarely, if ever, impelled to engage with our active audio imagination. There is simply too much processing of sound as an uninflected, semantic importation of someone else's pre-existing music recordings.

Susan Silton's installation "In everything there is the trace,"¹ presented as part of the Fisher Museum of Art's "Drawn To Language" exhibition, brings together performance, sculpture, literature, as well as socially and sonically conscious forms into a taught, poetic geometry. Her social constructions are panoramic in their attention to relational, interdisciplinary details. The sonic

¹ Editor's note: a short video documenting the work is viewable here - <https://vimeo.com/83804388#at=0>

aspect of her work is just as compelling as the sculptural because it transmits its message from a socially-embedded, pedestrian construction. For a full hour, twice a week, her installation becomes a wall of vintage typing machine sound that seems to manually electrify and animate the air as it echoes into the surrounding galleries, halls, and office spaces. This deceptively complex installation blows through that drafty, cavernous, blank, “culture-free” space of arch-minimalism and conceptual art with something like an echo of a call to historical communitarian action.

Volunteers are invited to retype a section from John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and when the collective performance starts, it is like a sudden rain of hail in crisp metal slapping on paper that lasts for a full hour without any change. Sounding throughout the galleries and halls, it is strangely reminiscent of the granularity of Iannis Xenakis’s delicate entrance/exit musique concrète piece for the Philips Pavilion *Concret PH* (1958). But Silton’s sonic construction is sparsely accented by end-of-the-line dings from the ten, oddly tuned, high-pitched metal bells inside the machines, and that unmistakable muted, rotary-gear, roll-clap of the carriage return mechanisms. In movies, a room full of typing noise like this evokes something like old-fashioned, unstoppable, American progress.

Over the course of the installation, a seemingly endless line of volunteers (that included many well-known artists) filed in and retyped a section of the book on old, handsomely designed vintage manual typewriters with no ink in them. The metal letters imprint a faint textured surface that you can still read if you look close enough and catch the embossed text in shadowed relief. Examples of it hang along the walls in vitrines like specimens. These examples are not Steinbeck’s depictions of abject poverty which the volunteers have typed, but instead working-class poems embossed on million-dollar art appraisals transgressing the arbitrarily bloated and impoverished economies of visual art.

In performance, conceptually terse minimalism can impart very simple gestures with an austere elegance. Any perversely simplistic structure, contrived of basic phenomenon and fixed or frozen in time or space, is engaging because it solicits our perceptual investigations. We must move around or within them to hear them or see them because they are from a radically different type of temporality.

This notion of inspection, receptivity and basic phenomenon relates directly to the Derrida quote that Silton includes in the actual title of her installation performance, “In everything there is the trace,”

In everything there is the trace, the experience of a return to something else of being returned to another past, present, future, a different type of temporality that’s even older than the past and that is beyond the future.²

Encountering this reference after experiencing the performance of the work, I began thinking about duration, labor, and value as associated with minimalist performance. Discussions of these works are often louder and more interdisciplinary than the pieces themselves. They form implied narratives disavowed by their reductionist, anti-narrative techniques. This seems especially true with Cage’s *4’33”* which is, like Silton’s seemingly blank pages typed up in an hour, nothing but an arbitrary duration.

I struggle with my feelings about avant-garde master works that seek to somehow obscure their own cultural embeddedness. Even though I have no problem with meditation and the physical experience of long durations or deep listening, I admit that sometimes I get twitchy during performances of John Cage’s silent *4’33”* (1952) and some other works like it.

4’33” can alternately feel like a breath of fresh air, in which there always appears a magical moment of silence that produces sonic epiphanies through an intensified sensitivity to ambience, but it can also resemble a forced prayer. This particular blank, arbitrary duration demonstrates something important that not much of Cage’s other works seem to address in the same way; there is always a “somethingness” in art.

Listening in social space with this kind of anticipation is a loaded, unique, and very often philosophical experience. Indeterminacy feels like an inaccurate label for this. Appreciating art, especially art music, requires something akin to devotion. Living Art that starts and does not change much until it ends is compositionally and poetically like a territorial inundation, a saturation of singularity that fills a narrow bandwidth. Simultaneously, its polarity can be manifest as evacuation or cancellation. It can be an awe-inspiring experience

² The quote is taken from an outtake of the 2002 documentary film, *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, as translated into an English subtitle from its original French

because of the simple fact that if you listen or look at anything intently for a long duration, the way that you hear or see it changes drastically.

Some artists have associated this with political sentiments. It crosses a wide bridge from art to dance, performance, sculpture and film. For instance, if a group of dancers stands totally still for an extended duration, let us say, four and a half minutes, their subtle breathing movements become larger-than-life gestures. An artist can sit in a chair doing nothing, but by means of sheer duration, appear to fill people's heads with answers to their unasked questions.

The confounding pleasure of these, primarily modernist works is the basic, realist, material fact that we "find" ourselves and the other people around us as being deeply, viscerally present within these empty structures. They bring us into a different set of spatial rhythms. This anomaly is something the work of Pauline Oliveros has addressed for decades. Like composer Julius Eastman's political minimalism, Silton "peoples" abstract, extended durations with complex ideas about very real issues that are artistically expressed, in part, by the compelling granularity of its live sound.

Because she coats the entire gallery in Yves Klein's signature hue, I must mention a similar experience found in his *Symphony Monotone* (1947-9). Much like this cobalt blue, radioactive pigment he claims as his "International Klein Blue" with which he covered surfaces, objects, and women, Silton's collective typing manifests as a drone-like, monochromatic field that draws our attention to other contours. *Symphony Monotone* predates both La Monte Young's infamous sustained drones and Cage's structured-silence just as Kasimir Malevitch predates those blank, white, Black Mountain College canvasses. These kinds of pieces employ the shifting sensations we feel, and the inevitable, pressing questions about value we ask ourselves when presented with nothing but a blank sameness as an expensive, classical, fine arts, object in time or space.

In contrast to Cage and Young, Klein's work is a single, intense sonic event that is perceptually defined by its sudden, equal absence. We hear 587.3 Hz played fortissimo by an orchestra for 20 minutes and then we are plunged into the blank space of its afterglow for another full 20 minutes. If Cage and Young intend to impregnate our expectations of silence and sameness with optimistic discovery; with Klein, we are experiencing an alarming, sonic death

of a sound that we've grown into, and somehow this shrill sense of absence is how it manages to retain a vestige of its social dissonance. It's like an imprint burned onto our perceptual retina that we only see when the lights are suddenly turned out.

Silton's installation occupies this kind of conceptual single inundation, but it pivots via its interdisciplinarity into something more poetic. A constellation of interdependent references to performative action, social sculpture, textuality, and austere formality, impart this work with a self-reflective, historical contemplation that classical minimalism seems, in contrast, to vacate, or label indeterminate.

While her work is not authored as a musical form at all, it is much like Cage, Young, or Klein in that its vibrant sonic life is secondary to its taught conceptual social poetry. Employing a literary consciousness by evoking American Social Realism, labor tropes, poetic futility, and durational minimalism, a musical statement resonates from the social structure of the piece as a whole. Each element in the work, from the historical references to its hexagonal desk-sculpture seems to deflect the other in a transfigured light that coalesces into a suite of puzzle-piece references.

The show is dimly lit with soft spotlighting that contours the International Klein Blue walls which seem to recede from us. Normally, this expensive paint is over-lit to exploit its signature ultramarine, mineral under-glow, but here, the color seems to absorb light away from the space. At the center is a ten-seated hexagonal sculpture of interwoven, three-legged desks that both provide and borrow support for their missing fourth leg from their neighbor, like an inward-facing buffalo stance. It is surrounded on adjacent walls by the metal framed works holding examples of the "un-typed" poetry on painfully obvious, inflated Phillips de Pury art auction estimates.

Typing these texts onto value-confirming documents defaces these appraisals with a free poem. This resonates with the Steinbeck reference and gives form to a textual pivot. Carol Steinbeck came up with the title, *Grapes of Wrath*. It derives from a biblical passage in the apocalypse of the Book of Revelations. An archangel wielding a sickle scoops up hoards of people as the harvest of god's human vineyard, and casts them into the "great winepress of the wrath of God" squeezing blood, like grape juice, from their bodies (Moloch!). In Steinbeck's novel, this image is evoked as a labor

metaphor in relation to the practice of artificially inflating the cost of food goods by means of crop destruction quotas in order to secure a desperate, hungry labor base for profitable exploitation.

Because there is no ink, participants are typing some kind of invisible, white painting of their own. The redundant labor of untyping a book about American poverty and exploitation underscores its political allegory in nostalgic futility. The process is a veneration of the text, but refracted through a poetic of loss and forgetting. The inescapable nostalgia of the actual transcribing of this stark, depression era, overly punctuated, vernacular text, creates an interdisciplinary feedback loop that leads us reluctantly back into the present moment.

This communitarian project began with a solo piece. Her inkless typing of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2006) was a protest against George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, drawing a bold, anti-colonialist line straight through the concept. The typewriters reminded me of many things that are no longer here but continue to resonate in the present. I think of early, cosmopolitan feminism, capitalist absolutism, Social Realism, Socialist Realism, Social Darwinists, labor struggles, the Depression, western droughts, transience, questions of authorship and relentless journalism.

The experience instrumentalizes a complex of sentimentalities about vintage technology and culture. Plenty of art, especially sound art, fetishizes the pedigree of its machines. Audio production is a tantalizing intersection between the economies of sound production and commercial and professional design. Sometimes, an "in the know" one-upmanship can also give these obsolete-technology-art-works the feeling of decade nostalgia.

Silton's work merges humanitarian literary affinities with classic Social Realism through spatial sound and performance sculpture that reaches out to us to connect with our present in multidimensional ways, confronting us with downward mobility, obsolescence, and unemployment, while invigorating the power of poetry. It is an effective example of well-conceived, publicly engaged social performance because, instead of dramatizing or demonstrating inequity, its inclusive simplicity of gesture gives further dimensions to its complex and compelling message, and we find ourselves parts of an interesting counter public.

Much like an earlier work of hers called, *Who's In a Name?*, Silton poetically hijacks a famous artist's name and power structure. Retooling and animating its premise with searing content, she transforms it into a platform for urgent political questioning. John Baldassari's 100-foot LED light sculpture *Your Name in Lights* was installed on the facade of Sydney's Australian Museum. The public was invited to type their names into a website and those names would be displayed for fifteen seconds, like Warhol's fifteen minutes, but adjusted for inflation.

Silton solicited artist friends to instead register the name of an artist who had committed suicide. These names she culled from a Wikipedia list she'd discovered and been moved by a few years prior. Silton randomly assigned names from the cross-generational, cross-cultural list to artists who agreed to participate. In the process, she converts the ironic, celebratory structure into a temporary act of media subversion permeated with loss. The names of hundreds of artists who, for the most part, suffered in intolerable economic, cultural isolation or depression are shown in lights. Baldassari's work reaches out to the public via its semantic spiral between the public desire, celebrity and access. Silton turns this one-liner in on itself, asking difficult questions that point back to the arts institutions that seem to feed on inequity, exclusivity, art labor, star suicides and celebrity. By concocting thoughtful collisions like this, she liberates vulnerable, softer-spoken voices of lost artists. Her *Who's In a Name* intervention eclipses, but simultaneously invigorates Baldassari's gesture.

When I asked her about performing collective typing, she discussed its refracted, activist sentiments and described how the silence, when the group stops typing, is totally deafening. Data used to be analog and quite loud. As a performing participant, the experience is of a deceptively casual form of social isolation of the kind that anyone working in data entry before the advent of office computing and scanning might have encountered, a form of semi-disposable, primarily female labor, i.e. the steno pool.

I spoke with my grandmother who was a steno pool typist and worked during WWII and through the 1950s about Silton's installation. She described her own steno pools as large, open floor plans of about 10 typewriting women overseen by two or three men in window offices situated one floor above. While typing collectively, we were surrounded by the sound of other people's machines and you would have to speak loudly if you were going to be heard

at all. In this sonic field, any attempt to communicate with your coworkers necessitates a ruckus. It made me think that the silence of computers eventually required the installation of cubicles to preserve this strategic isolation of individuals within a group.

As your eyes scan the typists during the performance, the volunteer whose action you watch appears to emerge as sonically louder through the collective noise because their movements seem to punctuate and accent their sounds. Our eyes and ears work together and create a dimensional experience of shifting spatial relationships that form and separate over a long duration as our attentions dissipate.

The vernacular style of the Steinbeck text requires a lot of fussy punctuation and several of these conventions required one to back up the rotor with an awkward, left-pointing arrow key in order to type twice into the same spot. For instance, an exclamation point required a line, a backspace, and then a period would finish the glyph. This kind of typing requires concentration and commitment that felt like a piano teacher's fingering markings of densely contrapuntal music. It reminded me of the poet Lorine Niedecker's ultra-fussy typing-up of the male Objectivist poets' texts for them, with its complex spacing and odd conjunctions, sometimes from their scribbled shorthand and verbal directions.

I volunteered to type for the piece and was assigned a chapter in which an Oklahoma patriarch, Grandpa Joad, is given final say about the desperate purchase of a family car even though he knows nothing about them. He does not want to vacate his failed farm and so his family drugs him and he dies the next day. I subtly inserted a few words of my own, totally against the premise of the work that implied an erotic tryst between grandpa and the salesman as they inspected the interior of the car while the family waited. I felt liberated to grope the text in this way because I seemed to be typing something away from itself into a permanent void and it felt like white-on-white graffiti. There is something queer about the way so many of Silton's contrapuntal games play out just under the table of an illusory, generalized sameness.

Silton's sounds, sculptures and actions call out to us about America's transient labor history and activates a self-questioning, without forcing meaning, of a set of historically leftist affinities that, like manual technologies,

evaporated into an un-inked, unprinted purgatory but are still embossed on our contemporary, vacated notions of power. However, you do not have to see it this way because it is also just an hour of typing.

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