LOUDER than

FEB 02 to MAY 05, 2019

WORDS
Introduction

Louder than Words features artists who privilege silence, non-linguistic sounds, symbols, or gestures over words as tools of communication. Some, who work within the imposed condition of deafness, reveal the gaps inherent in communication—what is missing, misunderstood, intentionally ignored, or entirely invented. Emphasis on actions over words reveals an opportunity for silent protest, suggesting the possibility of fearlessness in nonverbal expressions. In other artworks, sounds and words are muted, restricted, and undermined. The loss of information is then made palpable, drawing attention to questions of artistic intention and what this absence may mean socially or politically.

This exhibition’s focus on nonverbal forms of communication creates a conundrum when considering how to provide information about the artists and their work. The educational aspect of exhibitions is generally accomplished through label copy, guided tours, and brochures or catalog texts. These efforts all depend on the written or spoken word, so it is important in this context to consider other approaches for Louder than Words. These alternatives include the following:

The label copy has been removed from its customary place on the wall and is instead included in this free brochure available to interested viewers.

In addition to verbally-guided exhibition tours, the ZMA will offer guided experiential tours created by Teaching Artist/Choreographer Nicole Livieratos. Based on movement, this method builds bodily connections as a way to understand the artwork on view. These tours minimize talking to privilege action as a form of engagement.

Teresa Bramlette Reeves, Curator
Louder Than Words:
A Few Words About Words,
Their Absence,
Their Substitutes,
Their Contents, and
Their Discontents

BY JERRY CULLUM

Over the course of the past century, a huge number of words were written and spoken about the many aspects of silence—and part of Louder Than Words illustrates how much can be accomplished by listening to the world and looking without speaking. But human silence exists in a context that has already been made by long periods of talking to ourselves and to one another. And that is why this essay about a multi-media exhibition called Louder Than Words is mostly about words and how we use them, or choose sometimes not to use them.

We—and that little word “we” already involves us in the politics of words and the slippage of definition that is one part of this show about language and silence—have been engaged, for a very long time now, in a fundamental reassessment of how human beings form a sense of meaning, and how human beings communicate meaning. It’s hard enough to find the exact meaning of “meaning” as it is actually used as a word—we have historically insisted that words have defined meanings, and that when we combine words in the correct order, the meaning they communicate is absolutely clear and directly related to a state of affairs in the world. That state of affairs includes an emotional intuition that “the world makes sense”—this is what we call “having a sense of meaning,” that the world itself is “meaningful” in a deeper, a more profound sense than the shallow assertion that a grammatically correct sentence related to some part of the world is “meaningful.”

Starting almost exactly a hundred years ago, philosophers thought it was important to nail down the meaning of “meaning” in language. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus ruled out all sorts of statements as meaningless language—but, significantly, he consigned the topics to which these statements referred to a condition he called “mystical” because it showed itself rather than being something that could be stated in logical propositions. Ethics and aesthetics were two topics that demonstrated their truths in wordless, concrete contexts such as action and objects of art.

Wittgenstein later decided that language could adapt itself to communicate meaningfully about what it meant to act ethically or to have an aesthetic experience. But he was onto something more than he had realized—we start making meaning long before we decide how to put meaning into words.

And that’s part of what Louder Than Words is about—some of the work in this exhibition deals with making us pay attention to the context of the wordless conditions around us (John Cage was a master of the art of doing this). On the other hand, we make sense of many of these wordless conditions by fitting them into the stories we constantly tell ourselves inside our heads—the interior monologue we carry on in which we express our opinions about the world to ourselves—then converting those stories into narratives we can communicate to other people.

Or is that really how it works? How do persons born profoundly deaf form their opinions about the world, or rather, how do they express these inner thoughts to themselves as well as to others? This is another question Louder Than Words asks, and it’s a show-stopping one. One artist in this exhibition, Christine Sun Kim, addresses how her mediated relationship with the sounds of the world that she cannot hear is metaphorically related to the power taken away from persons not privileged with direct access—there are more ways than one of being forced into silence. Terry Adkins expresses this same sociopolitical relationship in a sculpture—the wavelength of a hawk’s song is translated into a three-dimensional representation that relates to language and meaning through a three-step spin that may leave some viewers a little dizzy from the effort of interpretation. (Read the non-wall text elsewhere in this document.)

The case of another artist, James Castle, who knew the gesture-language of American Sign Language, but who may have been otherwise illiterate, makes us think about the relationship between the written and spoken word, or in this case the gestural word that communicates something specific about the world. We think gestures are direct communication until we first learn that different cultures may interpret the same gesture in completely different ways; e.g. some Slavic peoples shake their heads side to side to signify “yes” and nod them up and down to signify “no.” Even within Sign Language there are three major forms as well as variations between regions and cultural groups.

Words also communicate, to some degree, by rhythm, roughness or smoothness of sound, and silences between spoken phrases. Silences can be more eloquent than speech, under the right circumstances. But “the right circumstances” are always open to question, and the relationship between words and their meanings is so unstable that there is a name for the exceptional, infrequent situation in which the sound of a word resembles the condition it is meant to describe—onomatopoeia.

Poets play with what some call “pretty noise,” the purely aural aspects of language, in producing memorable lines of verse, but there was a time in the early twentieth-century when producing words that were nothing but noise was a conscious political act—a wordless declaration that language itself had become so corrupted by the public figures using it that only nonsense would do as a response. But note that this kind of babble only worked after people “got the message”—were able to articulate to themselves in meaningful words what it was that these provocateurs were trying to accomplish.

Books that subvert the conventions of words on the page have also been ways of expressing discontent with how language communicates and what it fails to say, or says deceptively. In forms ranging from texts partly obscured or rearranged to pictorial narratives that dispense with words entirely, experimental books have existed in an interzone between literature and visual art that calls into question the methods by which both genres typically produce meaning.

Language, stretched in this way, becomes trippily “psychical,” already in the second half of the twentieth century ordinary language in dizzying fashion as he tried to describe an undescribable Paradise in the Divine Comedy. Regarding this effort to expand the ordinary meaning of words, George Steiner writes in “Silence and the Post” (an essay in his larger book Language and Silence): “Where the word of the poet ceases, a great light begins. …Language is deliberately extended to the limits. As Wittgenstein famously almost said, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world."” (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 6.56) The quote is misquotation; the verb in the original German is “bedeutet,” not “sein,” and instead of the one thing "being” the limits of the other, the limits of language “signify,” or “mean” the limits of my world—so we’ve come full circle again, to what Wittgenstein and Dante both called the “mystical,” but they meant it in very different senses. That, however, is a topic for another essay, and another exhibition.

Louder Than Words, in other words, is dancing around or leaping around—I use or subvert the metaphor advisedly—a substantial number of issues that have long perplexed the philosophical and political worlds of Europe, the Americas, and the cultures influenced by them, and the dance is not necessarily an easy one to follow. It’s best to get the hang of performing the steps little by little. Whole books have been written about the relationship between written and spoken language, and almost as many about the relationship between speech and silence—for some years after the Second World War, the paradoxical language of such writers as Samuel Beckett led critics to talk or write about a “literature of silence.” Something like an equal number of books have been written about the relationship between concept-laden language and wordless performance, or symbolic acts versus acts that are directly meaningful in themselves. But as we’ve seen—or I have anyway—in the course of this little introductory essay, it isn’t only actions (as in the maxim that birthed this exhibition’s title) that speak louder than words. Silence, and the sounds of the world itself, including the outwardly silent sounds of ourselves thinking, can do the same.

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 7
John Cage
American, 1912-1992
4' 33"

John Cage performed his “4′33″” in 1952. The work is the total silence in minutes and seconds of the performance. At Woodstock, N.Y., August 28, 1952, the total “4′33″” and the three parts were “3′41″, “2′20″, and “4′11″. It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of piano by closing, the endings by opening, the keyboard lid. However, the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalsist and see any length of time.

Water Walk
3-minute sound performance
I’ve Got a Secret

On February 4, 1960, John Cage appeared on the popular game show. I’ve Got a Secret. This CBS program featured a panel of celebrities who were allowed to ask simple yes or no questions to guess a contestant’s “secret.” The series aired from 1952 through 1967.

John Cage presented Water Walk as an example of his work. The performance consisted of various objects related to water—a bathtub, a pitcher, a ice cube, a pressure cooker, a rubber duck—as well as more traditional musical instruments such as a piano.

The score consists of a flow plan showing the placement of the objects, a timeline with descriptions and pictographic notations of the order of use, and a list of notes regarding some of the actions to be made. Like 4′33″, the performance was timed, in this case for 3 minutes. The instructions include the following note: “Start watch and then time actions as closely as possible to their appearance in the score.”

For this exhibition, documentation of Cage’s performance of Water Walk for I’ve Got a Secret is presented on a video monitor. At specified times, a live performance of Water Walk will be presented by percussionist and sound artist Kaley Rose King.

John Cage famously argued that there is no such thing as silence. Ambient noise is present even when no one is actively producing sound. His 4′33″ is just one example. In recalling his 1952 premiere he noted, “You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first minute. During the second, sandbags began to rustle, and during the third people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.”

Cage is included in Lushine et Vradilo to emphasize the nuances inherent in understanding silence, and to draw attention to ambient sounds as vehicles for communicating ideas.

Grigley’s work can also be considered as a visualization of sound. Rather than hearing a conversation, we read, and how it communicates is based on what we see rather than a text-based message, it is lost to us. Thus, the weight of the work and how it communicates is based on what we see rather than what we read.

Ibid.
2

3

Christine Sun Kim
American, born 1980
Close Readings
4-channel video
Courtesy of the artist

East Galleries
1

Christine Sun Kim is a sound artist who has been deaf since birth. She primarily communicates through American Sign Language (ASL), the written word, and visual manifestations (ranging from art to physical gestures and expressions). The aural environment that the hearing world experiences is, for her, mediated by interpreters, subtitles, and written descriptions—all of which filter and limit full knowledge. She writes that “despite the fact that I cannot access sound directly I perceive ideas surrounding the concept of sound...” This has led her to explore ideas of power, authority, access, and limitation in relationship to both actual and interpreted sound.

In Close Readings, Kim compiled a selection of movie clips that focused on the idea of voice, such as the removal of Ariel’s voice in the Disney film, The Little Mermaid. She then invited four deaf friends to provide captions. In the scene referenced above, the caption reads: “sound of voice being extracted.” In the movie, the soundtrack at this point features Ariel singing a wordless melody “ahh ahh ahhhhh.” Her voice is depicted visually as a smoky emanation that streams from her mouth, transforms into a small ball of light, and then is magically drawn into the waiting hands of the powerful Ursula. Ignore for the moment Ariel’s questionable choice to give her voice for a pair of human legs so that she can pursue Prince Eric, and instead return to the caption—“sound of voice being extracted”—and imagine what that might conjure up in the mind of a deaf person, or a hearing person that hasn’t seen the film.

This is just one example of what Close Readings offers in terms of understanding and interpreting the idea of silence.

Christopher Adler
American, born 1972
Katelyn Rose King
American, born 1992

Kalyen Rose King
4-channel video
Voice-Over: Close Readings
Sound by Christoph Utzinger

Kalyen Rose King (b. 1992) is a multimedia artist whose work in performance and installation incorporates a range of audio-visual components such as video, sound, and time. In her role as a collaborator, she has been involved with a variety of projects that engage the importance of silence in a visual and aural context. Using several media, she explores the duality of sound and silence.

James Castle
American, 1893-1949

James Castle was born profoundly deaf. Between the ages of 10 and 15, he received his only formal education at a boarding school in southeastern Idaho, the Gooding School for the Deaf and Blind. While there he was taught an oral method of communication, and though sign language was not a part of the curriculum, it is thought that he had some exposure to it through fellow students. It is unknown whether Castle could read, but he began to draw at a very young age. He also began to explore his environment, making a ritual of collecting paper and substances that could be used in his work. When gifted with art supplies, he mixed them with soot, spit, and other ingredients to extend both his palette and the life of his handheld works. He came to the attention of the art world in the 1950s and was exhibited regularly until his death in 1977. For the following two decades the family denied access to the remaining castings, but in 1998 Castle’s work was re-introduced at the Outsider Art Fair in New York City.

While most of Castle’s work depicts his environment, the sound around him, and the architecture and details of daily life, he also produced a group of drawings that the Castle Foundation divides into five categories: Gifts; Patterns; Geometry; Letters, numbers and symbols; and Words. Four handmade books and four drawings, all featuring some combination of letters, numbers, and words, are included in this exhibition. Not existing the extent of Castle’s ability to read, he can only guess at whether this work is about visual or aural forms of expression, or whether it might have a specific meaning for the artist. If there is an intended text-based message, it is lost to us. Thus, the weight of the work and how it communicates is based on what we see rather than what we read.

A concerto in four movements
Speak/Strike

The weights of the four concerto movements are based on the duration of the original manuscript used for the premiere of this work in 1929. The score “4′33″” and the three parts were “3′41″, “2′20″, and “4′11″. It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of piano by closing, the endings by opening, the keyboard lid. However, the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalsist and see any length of time.

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Ibid.
2

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Joseph Grigley
American, born 1958
What Did I Say? Dialogue on Pip and Ink and graphite on paper; pine Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago purchased with a gift from the Tall Family to the Edris/Newson Art Acquisition Fund on the occasion of the MLA’s 40th Anniversary, 2008.21

Deaf for the majority of his life, Grigley has been involved with his primary tool of communication. He invites people who use sign language into his studio to write a quick note on whatever is handy and then he responds. In the early 1990s, he began to save these exchanges and use them as the basis for a series of installations collectively entitled “Conversations with the Hearing.”

The work in this exhibition, What Did I Say? is an extension of this practice, and reflects both a conversational mode and Grigley’s interest in archiving information. Displaying these written exchanges as art lends a level of importance to what would otherwise be a relatively normal, minor event. He compares his approach to painting a still-life—the elevation of a bowl of fruit to fine art. (The theme of still-life is what) Norman Bryant calls “lyphography”—the reversing of the written words, place value bits of everyday life. The notion is derived from the Greek ὅπως, meaning trival objects, oddts and ends, the sorts of mundane things that, in comparing a still-life painting, compose our lives as human beings. Everyday language is magic if you write every word you spoke in material form—every simple ordinary word. Can you imagine domestic interiors? Tables covered with words, drawers full of sentences, pillows pimped with wrappers. The “Conversations with the Hearing” work is a study of what characterizes a manifestation of everyday life.

Grigley’s work can also be considered as a visualization of sound. Rather than hearing a conversation, visitors see it. But this conversation is incomplete. The artist writes in the “conversations” he has with hearing people. What is missing is the note and gestures are missing, the little bit-read are missing. What’s left is just this mass of fragments.2

Though clearly based on words, this installation addresses gaps in communication and the sense of desire or longing that accompanies this loss.

1

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5
Gestalt any indicators of race, gender, and class. In this protective guise, the body is fully concealed, thus obscuring from twigs and sticks that rattled and made sounds when put in motion. Of Rodney King* in 1991. This initial costume/sculptural suit was made of wood beads that slide on wires arranged in parallel rows within a frame. With the beads shifting from side to side and the buttons jangling against one another, the performer announces his/her presence and every move without saying a word.

* King, an American taxi driver who was stopped for speeding on a Los Angeles freeway, was violently beaten by LAPD officers during the arrest. A video camera captured the incident and this video was subsequently shown by news media around the world. The trial of the four officers was later on charged with excess force. There were totally acquitted and the jury failed to reach a verdict in case of one of the charges for the fourth. The outrage over this conviction led to the Los Angeles riots, a day-long series of events in which 130 people were killed and over 2,500 homes and stores were burned.

The performance and video pay homage to a former punk music venue in San Francisco, The Dead Cat, which was in operation for eighteen months in the late 1970s. Bands such as the Dead Kennedys and Punk Section recorded albums in the club, firmly establishing the space within punk rock history. The name of the club is derived from the fact that the building was a clubhouse for the dead community in the 1930s.

The event in Queens included three bands and four American Sign Language storytellers who performed between sets. They shared stories of personal hardships and the dead world’s relationship with music. One remarked that punk rock is the perfect music for deaf people because it is loud and has strong vibrations. Like Christine Sun Kim, with whom she has worked, O’Daniel explores the loss and translation of the sensory experience of sound. O’Daniel has written that the impulse behind her work is “hypo sensitivity to a lack of information.”

For this installation, Haugard created an environment in which the viewer participates in the work through a physical sensation built into the viewing experience. His goal is to provoke shifts in perception that induce self-reflection and a heightened sense of awareness. The work evokes the experience of quietly sitting on a porch during a warm Southern evening. The viewer is drawn to the bare, glowing lightbulb in the projected video. Moths, attracted to the light, circle the source. It is a small moment in time that many of us have experienced, and as such, it may trigger a specific memory of a place and or time. The sound of the buzzing, the small light in the darkness, and the physical stimulation offers another insight as well—the perception of sound and sensation.

On the opposite wall is the large-screen video by Allison O’Daniel in which bands perform for both a hearing and a non-hearing audience. The deaf can feel the vibration of the music, the beat and the amplified swells of an ensemble. Haugard’s installation provides a similar experience in real time and space.

The six-performance-based works, in which the artist explores a woman’s psychological states through physical gestures, are raw, direct, and immediate. The young Birnbaum appears on camera, alone, as the performer. In the late 1970s she would no longer appear on-screen, although she would often employ female figures as surrogates. The videos introduce themes that recur throughout her later work, particularly the articulation of a feminist subject through the central figure of a woman who is both strong and vulnerable. She investigates the body as a vehicle for intense emotional or psychological manifestations while also foregrounding the relation of the camera to viewer and subject to performer. Although Birnbaum famously broke new ground in video by engaging directly with popular television as subject and source material, these earliest works reveal a link to the Body Art and performance video practices of the generation of artists who immediately preceded her, such as Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, and Bruce Nauman.

Text selected from Electronic Arts Intermix entry.
Cut Piece

Cut Piece is an early performance by Yoko Ono, presented in the form of video documentation. The work follows the experimental focus of the international art movement, Fluxus, prominent in the 1950s and 1970s. Not focused on any one medium, Fluxus emphasized artistic process over the finished product and embraced the new technology of video, as well as noise music and visual poetry. Multi-media artists such as Ono, produced events based on simple scores or sets of instructions, but were otherwise not choreographed or planned. Thus, chance played a prominent role in how the performance unfolded. The instructions for Cut Piece are:

Performer sits on stage with a pair of scissors in front of him. At a time—suggested by an announcement that members of the audience may come on stage—one at a time—to cut a small piece of the performer’s clothing to take with them. Performer remains motionless throughout the piece. Piece ends at the performer’s option.

By inviting viewers to interact with her, they become a part of the work. Ono, as the central figure of engagement, is silent and palpably vulnerable. Her response to the invasions of her space and decorum appears passive, as she does not resist or offer defense. Yet her silence speaks volumes as she enacts the role of the weak and the oppressed, modeling a state of being that reminds viewers of the impacts of aggression and unchecked power.

Yoko Ono

Yoko Ono  Japanese, born 1933

Cut Piece, 1964

Video

Courtesy of the artist and Studio One, New York

Vanessa Yvonne Jagodinsky

American, born 1990

Candidate 23, 2016

Performance, photographic documentation, costume

Courtesy of the artist

Jagodinsky explores identity and displacement in her interdisciplinary work. Candidate 23, performed during the opening reception of this exhibition, is documented through photographs. Initially, the work is represented in the exhibition space by instantaneously made images (such as Polaroid photos) made during the performance. These will be replaced later with one large photograph and the costume worn by the artist. For those who did not witness the live performance, words (somewhat normally within the context of this exhibition) describe what took place. Jagodinsky recognizes the inadequacy of words to provide tangible information about the event and draws our attention instead to “things we cannot see.” Though undefined, there is a suggestion of quantum particles and what physicists call dark energy. Latent, silent, mysterious—there is a gap in what we know and, as a result, in what we can communicate. The artist writes about her work in the statement to the right.

Trevor Reese

American, born 1979

Loafe with me on the grass, loosen the strap from your throat;
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture,
not even the best,
Only the feel of it, your hum of your valved voice, 2018
Receiver, records, record player, speaker

Courtesy of the artist

Reese is an object-maker/poet who is interested in altering the viewer’s understanding or perception of a thing or place. In this installation of a vintage stereo system, the unit is turned on, but it makes minimal sound. Reese describes the intent of this work:

An attentive viewer will notice the audible sound of the speakers turned on. The display lights will also confirm that the unit is turned on. These subtle clues prompt the viewer through a few important feelings:

Anticipation, Potential, Possibility, Absence

He goes on to explain that the viewer may anticipate that sound will emerge, and that about the audio level or the choice of music. They may wonder who owns or owned the stereo and where that person might be. They might draw conclusions about the owner due to the nature of the outdated technology and how it has been maintained.

Loafe with me on the grass, loosen the strap from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture,
not even the best,
Only the feel of it, your hum of your valved voice

All of these conceivable reactions activate the object and inflates it with meaning beyond its relatively silent state within the exhibition.

Peanut’s title is a quote from Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, Section 5: “Song of Myself” (1855-52):

Loafe with me on the grass, 2018

Loafe with me on the grass, loosen the strap from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture,
not even the best,
Only the feel of it, your hum of your valved voice

Here the focus is on a bodily sound, a low vibration in which the words are not distinguished. This rumbling serves as a backdrop to Whitman’s co-mingling of the body and the soul. Within the context of this poem, it emphasizes nonverbal expression, physical projection, and understanding.

Section 5: “Song of Myself” (1891-92):

I hear the grass and water speak
Of the sap and seeds
Of the sun and moon
Of their constant motion
No words are exchanged
No glances, sounds, breaths, and heartbeat
Fear discomfort and comfort appear
Together but separate different but the same
Once it’s all over all the bodies leave all that’s left are their markings and things we cannot see