

FORMAL INCIDENTS

Heather Phillipson

THE CITY RINGS

By Mark Harris

Heather Phillipson's video work initiates a lexicon of withdrawal, although unlike adolescent introspection which ramps up self-consciousness, Phillipson's withdrawal situates herself as a quiescent observer of events she has nudged into motion. She is a self-effacing agent in specific urban or rural settings.

While the video works in this exhibition are all filmed in London, comparison with earlier pieces made in the Welsh countryside suggests a science of observation, inclined to reveal the potentiality of encounters with natural phenomena. Phillipson's work has frequently suggested links between sound and drawing, as if envisioning new ways of scoring the relation between sound and movement. In earlier videos, always with her back to the camera, she plays a symphony with the squeaking taps in the public toilets of the British Library, or plays the violin to a flock of sheep which gradually approaches her, or is seen in the distance walking up and over a mountaintop where the soundtrack is the recording of her progressively strenuous breathing. Much of her work invents premises to generate sounds whose relative ordinariness is estranged by the odd circumstances of their making. Clearly sharing sensibilities with her previous work, these new London videos deal with the unheeded, with subjects that lie beneath the sightlines of the kind of avid gaze typifying exigent urban life.

These interventions of Phillipson's also make a wry address to the life of institutions. 'In the Company of Cordwainers' inventories the terminology of antique shoe-making equipment retained by an atavistic teaching facility, with Phillipson intoning the words from the discoloured printed and handwritten notices hung on machines that are the only images on the video. Choreographing this lifeless locale, the piece examines a baffling interiorized institutional language and turns it outward into a poetry of sounds to accompany a succession of near-still video images.

Phillipson brings an exacting attention to a series of derelict or unattended rooms. In this way the video locations are a step out of time, relishing defunct locations. In the case of the three video pieces titled 'Chelsea Building' the location is the abandoned portion of a college building, bleached gossamer-white from the glow filtering through smashed skylights and windows, its colonizing pigeons unexpectedly exploding into view in clumsy wing-bursts. Given such a blank shell of a subject, the stationary camera loses its tacit invisibility to become a locatable and partial observer, a phenomenon familiar from Andy Warhol's screen tests where indifference achieves an agency far exceeding its apparent passivity.

With the 'Chelsea Building' videos, if we agree to remain engaged, the camera's agency of indifference compels us to assess the sufficiency of subject and content. In terms of contemporary video, as we stare at the uneventful white-out, nothing in the architecture meets our expectation of rapid change. The meagre sounds of avian scratch and flutter only seem chronic annotations to a score consisting of intervals of silence. What these nearly motionless videos define is the duration of extreme change. They evidence the aggregate decay rolling past the camera's visit and on over our lives. The entropic fabric of the institution is their subject. Taken as a proposition concerning the limits of video these 'Chelsea Building' pieces invite reflection on what is adequate for a work. For the medium to convey the density of a particular somatic experience and engage a phenomenology of attentiveness or absorption, here is a proposition that frames an apparent void. However, it may be that only in that kind of motionlessness and silence can we still find inarticulable events for sight and hearing to evaluate. Defining an acoustic ecology where lost sounds might be retrieved from the pollution of industrial noise, R. Murray Shafer imagined that new sound works and listening patterns could transform our physical capacities: "Can silence be heard? Yes, if we could extend our consciousness outward to the universe and to eternity, we could hear silence. Through the practice of contemplation, little by little, the muscles and the mind relax and the whole body opens out to become an ear." Phillipson's patient retrieval of silences and unheard sounds suggests such an evolution.

A poet also, Phillipson speaks of her long engagement with Wallace Stevens' work and how distinctive his manner is of opening onto the world by negotiating an absence from his own verse. His deliberations on self-effacement are explicit in 'The Creations of Sound', whose intuitions Phillipson shares. From the walls, floor and ceiling of the poet's space emanate indefinable tones closer to silence than sound, which form, as if in spite of the author, the poem's material. The restraint of the 'Chelsea Building' videos alongside the recondite nomenclature of 'In the Company of Cordwainers' is explained by Stevens' lines "Tell X that speech is not dirty silence/Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier".

In other works these intersecting durations of world and work receive different treatment. 'Steps' takes the deserted stairwells of that same studio building as settings for tap dancing, whose inherently anachronistic movements seem all the more so here, accompanied by a recording of Fred Astaire. Detached from the original 1951 footage from Royal Wedding where Astaire improvises around equipment in a gym, the attenuated tapping, shuffling and slapping

sounds become abstracted without a secure visual anchor for their shifting sonic effects. They become a haunting of the footage that Phillipson has substituted. Her pink-stockinged legs (no upper torso visible) are filmed running up and down the stairs, forwards and then in reverse, tap dancing on the spot, or passing through swinging doorways, with the video editing synchronizing her movements to the soundtrack. Phillipson's disembodied legs, as if moved involuntarily by the soundtrack, repeatedly traverse the steps like notes on a score, a bright-hued double exclamation mark striking quarter, eighth, and sixteenth beats that bisect horizontal gray bands.

It's plausible that Phillipson is working out how to play her city, in a corresponding fashion to how sound is drawn out of the landscape in her earlier videos. With the urban fabric sometimes allowed simply to play itself as in the 'Chelsea Building' videos, or turned to instrumentation in the cadences of 'Steps' and 'In the Company of Cordwainers', or where photographs of inscribed walls of a silent abandoned space recall Cageian notation, Phillipson finds ludic potential in applying Shafer's sound ecology to the city. It is as if she reflects on Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue's question in *Sonic Experience*, "What is the sonic instrumentarium of urban environments?" Their vision of how this instrument of the city might be performed, and not simply categorized, resonates in Phillipson's pieces. Even the trajectory of a fire lantern across the London night sky in 'Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing' sets up the ambient street sounds far below in relation to this fragile silent vanishing slip of a thing.

Phillipson's self-effacement, noted earlier, really allows an attunement to the unseen and unheard. Only parts of her performing body are on camera. Her face is always out of view as if establishing the city as a performing partner. Her working process recalls Augoyard and Torgue's invitation: "Let us listen to our cities. Is it not the very nature of the urban environment to make us hear, whether we like it or not, this mixing of sounds? Dull murmurs, machine noise, the shifting and familiar acoustic racket created by people – every urban moment has a sound signature, usually composed of many sounds together. Beyond classification, 'the city rings' (or as Schopenhauer said, 'Die Welt klingt')." "

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