

2017

Roundtable: Wild Sounds and Women's Voices

Genevieve Yue
Eugene Lang College, The New School

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/discourse>

Recommended Citation

Yue, Genevieve (2017) "Roundtable: Wild Sounds and Women's Voices," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/discourse/vol39/iss3/4>

Roundtable: Wild Sounds and Women's Voices

Genevieve Yue

This roundtable discussion was conducted on October 19, 2016 with, Chris Stults and Genevieve Yue (myself), the programmers for the fall 2016 Flaherty NYC program “Wild Sounds” during the Colgate/Flaherty Distinguished Global Filmmaker Residency with Sandra Kogut. We were joined by filmmakers Mary Helena Clark, Penny Lane, and Aura Satz. Films by Kogut and Satz were screened in the “Wild Sounds” program.

The transcription work was completed by research assistants Tania Aparicio Morales and Zachary Yanes. As neither was present at the discussion, I provided them notes to help them distinguish the roundtable participants. Realizing that it wouldn't be sufficient to identify people merely by accent, I added other descriptors: their proximity to the microphone, the frequency with which they spoke, the timbre of their voices, and, in the case of Satz, who joined us from London, the occasionally garbled mediation of Skype. While practical, these notes were meant also to address a prominent concern that manifested among the participants in the conversation: the texture of voice, not only what was being said but also the manner in which things were spoken. Because of this, the conversation benefits not only from reading but also *listening* (at least imaginatively) to the intonations, the breaks and occasional laughter, and

the flow of conversation as we worked through a complicated set of issues around voice, sound, and cinema.

“Wild sound” is a technical term for an audio recording done independently of the main shoot. It is recorded without being synchronized to an image, though it may be synchronized later, in postproduction. For our Flaherty NYC program, the notion of a wild sound, with its connotation of autonomy and a relation to an image track that is not necessarily subordinate to it, offered a conceptually rich way of considering the placement and use of women’s voices in film. The series explored the variety of ways in which women are heard in film, drawing on the gendered distinction between women’s voices, closely allied with the body and pre-linguistic sound, and those of men, associated with the making of meaning, as theorized by Michel Chion, Kaja Silverman, and Adriana Cavarero. Against the dominant structures privileging male speech over female sounds, “Wild Sounds” explored the affective, sensorial, and political dimensions of women’s voices.

The notion of wild sound also offered a way of subverting the documentary expectation of sync sound realism and opened the practice to more experimental forms. The filmmakers who joined us for the roundtable, all of whom have used voice and sound in unconventional ways, represent the heterogeneity of documentary form today. Indeed, we chose this group because their innovative uses of sound are very at the heart of their redefinition and expansion of contemporary documentary practice.

Sandra Kogut: I have a question: Is it important that we are all women, that this is a part of the issue? I was just curious.

Penny Lane: Or is it just a coincidence?

Genevieve Yue: Well, the “Wild Sounds” program was about women’s voices, so it ended up being about women filmmakers, but that was a bit of a slippage that happened. It wasn’t intentionally that way.

Chris Stults: Not intentionally, but, and it’s funny, we haven’t talked about this, but the more I talk about the “Wild Sounds” program, the less I think it’s about women’s voices. And that seems so reductive, so I would like for this conversation to be more generally about sound and thinking about using sound as difference.

GY: I was thinking of it in terms of gender and the way gendered voices are heard differently in film, so that ended up being not

wholly intentional but not accidental either. But it made sense that female filmmakers might be exploring female or gendered voices or be more attentive to those issues.

CS: Yeah, “Wild Sounds” for me started in a number of conversations I’d had with women who had narrated their own films and [the] criticism or almost blowback that they’ve gotten from people that they showed them to. There seemed to be an unwillingness to listen to a woman’s voice for an hour and a half. One filmmaker explicitly said to me that somebody once told her, Werner Herzog can get away with that, but nobody wants to listen to your voice for so long.

I kept thinking about that watching so many other films, and as we were talking about this, Genevieve, it started to become more discussed in the media. There were articles about vocal fry and resistance to that, and we had many conversations about gender technology, with the voice of the computer often being a woman because it seems too authoritarian if it’s a man. In assembling this program there were obvious people that we knew right away we needed to include. In thinking about it after the fact, one thing that’s interesting to me has been the idea of authority. I’m thinking about the historical works we’re showing within “Wild Sounds” like *Somos+* [Kollektiv (Pablo Salas/Pedro Chaskel), (1985)], where it’s women claiming authority, or *My Name is Oona* [Gunvor Nelson (1969)], where it’s more an incantation, or a performance, or rehearsal, for authority. In a lot of the newer works, authority is sort of assumed to varying degrees, or with some of the more interesting ones, that’s not even something they’re interested in; they bypass authority entirely and exist in a slippage. And so I think we gravitated towards the slippage. It aligns with what’s happening now politically, whether it’s Black Lives Matter or the election; there are just certain demographics that are so uncomfortable because of the way authority has been taken away, and hopefully that sense of alienation and difference appears in some of the work.

GY: As far as the programming project, I was interested, instead of watching films, to listen to them as a strategy for organizing a program. I was thinking less about women specifically than what kinds of things sound can do in films and how they make meaning in them, beyond this structure of authority or power. I was interested in things like incantatory vocalizations as a different means of expression and different spaces of expression. With a lot of contemporary experimental film, because it draws from the art world where moving image art is installed spatially, there is a

pointed interest in the way things sound in a space. I think there is an attentiveness to the spaces of sound in relation to the image that has been a result of moving image work moving into the gallery. So, that was an exciting prospect for me, to listen as much as I watched. Or try to turn off my visual faculties a bit in organizing the program. I approach sound from a feminist perspective, and I seek out the more subtle or underrecognized work that women's voices do in films and how they signify. So, to look at the field of sound experimentation means engaging with questions of gender for me, and those are actually inseparable questions.

CS: I think we both might have gotten to the point, or at least the program is structured in a way so that it builds to the cacophony of Anne Charlotte Robertson's films [*Five Year Diary, Reel 23: A Breakdown after the Mental Hospital* (1982) and *Five Year Diary, Year 26: First Semester Grad School* (1983)] with her talking over herself, or Cauleen Smith's work [*Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (By Kelly Gabron)* (1992), *Sine at the Canyon, Sine at the Sea (By Kelly Gabron)* (2016), and *Entitled* (2008)], which I think were primary texts for us in thinking about this. So we ended the program with a film that has no voices [*Entitled*], and I think that voices, especially the tyranny of voices, became something to escape from by the end of the program.

SK: It's interesting because you started taking about sound but very quickly moved to voices, and I was here thinking, it's different. Two different things, and it seems you are most often talking about voices, especially about gender, but sound is maybe a more interesting entrance door to this discussion. Because if you think about the film experience as a sensorial experience, hearing is the one, for me, that more quickly takes you to your inner world. If you close your eyes, very quickly you can have the impression that that sound is coming from you, from inside. So if you think about film as a sensorial experience, I think sound is key to allowing this to happen. Then this is not connected so much to the gender part of the discussion, but I think it is an important one if we talk about sound.

The other aspect is that sound in film is clearly the projection space, because when we work with images, we're always struggling with what are you creating in an imaginary space, what are you using as description, how you can go beyond the flat screen. For me, as a filmmaker, this is a real struggle. When I work with a DP [director of photography], I have to communicate that I don't want the image to be descriptive, that I want to be *in* a space. It is always a learning experience to try to create a common language

in film, but sound doesn't have that problem. Sound immediately takes you to the projection space, to the inner space, so it's a very rich tool for filmmaking.

PL: There's no frame around it.

SK: Exactly, and it's an aesthetic place where the person has to bring her own part in it; it's never completely closed.

Aura Satz: I'm really interested in what you are saying, and I totally agree. Just to provide a slight counterargument to that, this last weekend I gave a talk together with a deaf American artist called Christine Sun Kim, and one of the things that came up in our conversation was this idea of thinking of the voice beyond the body and beyond sound. This opens up this idea of voice as being in lots of other areas, away from the larynx. I just wanted to throw that out there because I think we can also talk about the voice in a less literal way and not necessarily contained in relation to this part, in relation to the throat.

SK: Whenever I think about voice in film, the first question I ask—and this also connects with what you were mentioning about space when you talked about installation—is this: Where is this voice? How close, how far is this voice? Because I remember when I started making films, there was a whole group of films where the voice was always speaking, you know, whispering in my ears. And I noticed that I would start to have a certain aversion to this whispering voice because it had become like a genre, a cliché. When I started working with microphones I asked: How am I going to frame this voice? Am I going to zoom into it? Will I record it from far away? What is the texture of the voice? Am I going to use the lavalier [small microphone] that gives you the whispering voice because it's so close [to the actor's body], or am I going to use the voice in space? What quality of voices are we talking about? I think these are fascinating questions that you ask yourself when you're dealing with a recording and that sometimes people take for granted when they're listening to films.

Mary Helena Clark: All the comments about texture and spectrum are applicable to all ranges of sound. It's such a powerful thing, because it's often taken for granted. It's almost a kind of subterfuge for the audience member, a way of tapping into a psychological space or a bodily space, which is I think quite interesting.

PL: But also because people, even quite attentive audiences, aren't paying attention to sound most of the time. There's two things happening with the audience, I think. One is that you don't have any ear lids, so you can't close your ears the same way you can close your eyes. Think about that experience in a horror film where you close your eyes because you don't want to see what's about to happen, but you hear it. You can't make that go away. So I feel like it's an unfair weapon in my hands.

At the same time, people aren't interrogating the sound at all even if they are interrogating what's in the frame, because they learn that now in school. So there is a superability to manipulate, because people aren't even paying attention to the ways that they're being manipulated by sound. They might notice music, but they don't notice when you change the timbre of the voice in the recording, or they don't notice when you spatialize something in a way that creates a certain kind of effect. It's actually incredibly powerful; that is how I talk about it with my students, because, of course, they don't tend to think about sound at all.

SK: Even when you work with film, but before you go into the 5.1 mixing studio and work with the possibilities of the creative sound environment, you have no idea! Even the low sounds, just to give a sense of tension. Maybe it's good that people have no idea. [Laughter]

MHC: I think there's this in-between place to work with sound. Traditional sync sound, in a lot of ways, is just reinforcing the image or underlying what's in the frame. And then contrapuntal sound has a very noticeable editorializing. The place where I try to hit when I'm mixing a sound or making a movie is something that rhymes with the image. It's slightly incongruous but flirts with the synced sound; like [in *Delphi Falls* (2016)], I showed the image of feet dragging on the carpet but with the sound of a cow breath. I try to achieve an auditory and visual relationship that destabilizes the image by complicating it in a way that goes down easy but maybe unsettles you, or informs the image in a less explicit way. When I am mixing a movie—well it happens before that, because I think the making comes with adding the sound, because it is all a construction—it's finding those moments where it's even more so than just about the edit; it's the sound and the image.

CS: Mary Helena and I were talking about her new piece [*Delphi Falls* (2016)] right before this conversation, and I keep thinking about just a little comment you [Mary Helena] made about

[Andrei] Tarkovsky's idea of "the zone" [from *Stalker* (1979)]. You said, in your piece, you use sound as a place, and there's a sense of the uncanny that's not coming from the visuals at all. It's lush scenery, but then there's something about the place and especially the sound that situates you in an environment that's visceral and beautiful but that you want to flee.

MHC: Yeah. For that film, I wanted to move into speculative fiction or science fiction and play with that genre a bit. I used Tarkovsky's use of sound in the zone as a reference, in terms of queering a space through acoustic incongruities. For instance, when they're walking in the forest, you hear massive reverberations that make no sense; you cannot reconcile them with the dimensions of that wooded area. I was also reading Roger Caillois's essay ["Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October* vol. 31 (Winter 1984): 16–32] about the blurring of the distinction between the self and the environment where he describes the seduction of place as a metaphor to schizophrenia, or anxiety, or any dissociative mental condition. So I'm thinking about sound separating from its source and what physical condition that produces, and then how the voice, which comes later from a female character in the film, grafts her interior space onto the landscape.

This is the kind of thing I've been thinking about for the last few years, which is why I was so excited that you guys had put Anne Charlotte Robertson in your program. I feel she does such a wonderful job in embracing these stigmatized mental conditions as a way of engaging with the world, and she uses the voice to recognize multiple temporalities and multiple states of mind. In a more formal way, that's what I'm thinking through with this movie, just down a different path. But I think, to similar ends.

AS: The history of sound and film technology is about dissecting sound and image, sound and source, that's kind of what these technologies did. Marrying the two only comes much later, and that's the moment I'm interested in, when people are learning about how they come together. You can see this in all the jokes about the actress's voice being totally disappointing, or not fitting the body. The idea that there's a good fit of the sound environment to the visual is so rife with possibility.

GY: We started the series with Aura's film, *In and Out of Sync* [2012], which made these relationships between sound and image visible. This is one of the tensions that we wanted to draw out as programmers: the kind of invisibility, subtlety, or take-for-grantedness of

sound and image relationships. So maybe, Aura, you could talk a bit about how that film makes those relationships present but also, as you were saying before, extends into a different domain where the voice is not organic, and it moves away from the body, unsettling some of these assumptions that we have.

AS: I worked together with Lis Rhodes, a filmmaker based in the UK, to devise a text that looked at ideas of voice and destruction or synchronicity. We scripted this text in dialogue and voiced it in dialogue as well. Then I went to Pinewood Studios to use their optical sound camera, a few different models, and shot what you see through the monitor. Even though what I was filming was a very accurate representation of sounds, what ended up manifesting visually were little black and white patterns on the side of the filmstrip that show you the sound waves. These were actually nothing like those strips that appear finally on the filmstrip when it's in the camera. And likewise it's not necessarily easy to correlate the sound and the image in the same way. This distribution to sound and image synchronicity is precisely what was interesting to me: those pauses, gaps, lapses, and visual silences when there is the spoken word. That was really powerful to me, and it opened up to the space between the two voices, because obviously there was no body to latch a voice onto. So the idea of synchronicity moves from sound and image to this idea of two voices somehow weaving in and out of one another, and it becomes about dialogue as subject matter as much as a kind of methodology.

On questions of voice and film, I started off making projects about music, so my interest has always begun with sound. And then with film, I suppose I'm coming at it from a slightly different angle, which is to approach film as a way to hear a sound differently. Chiefly I'm concerned with this idea of testing the sound *against* the image, and seeing what can happen by working with them in some kind of friction. I'm interested in modes of attention: when you come to the cinema, you sit and you look at something and you listen. But even if you're looking at a blank screen, as in [Derek] Jarman's *Blue* [1993], what you're looking at is suddenly affected by what you hear. I think it's quite different from sitting down and listening to a piece of music or going to a concert; there's just a slightly different sensory orientation. That's what's compelling to me: that by adjusting the tension you can open up a different way of apprehending. I seem to be doing that again and again with different subject matter. Sometimes it's very closely related to sound and music, and sometimes it's moving into the ways in which these might have evolved into other technologies.

Sometimes it's gender-specific; to talk about this idea of women's voices, I'm really interested in what's been lesser heard, lesser seen. Partly my practice has been about bringing that to the foreground and making it visible or audible. But in relation to female voices, it's very important to me that their bodies don't really appear. The most you see are their hands. Even when I have used the female voice very deliberately, it's always very unanchored from the body.

SK: About this too-powerful weapon [that Penny mentioned], there is an interesting aspect to the discussion, which is the question of ethics. This is the question of whether documentary films can use Foley [sound effects], which is a real issue, and whether you are pretending that you are sticking to a certain reality. It makes me think of another film called *Récréations* [1993], by Claire Simon. She shot this documentary in a school with kids during recess for many weeks, and the film is basically the games between the kids. At some point there is a drama: whether the little girl is going to jump from the bench or not. At that point of the film, it's the most important thing in the world, and when she does jump, you are crying. It was a very polemical film when it came out in France because the sound was terrible. You can imagine: it was recess, of course, and you couldn't hear anything. So what did [Simon] do? She hired a person to read lips and she transcribed everything that they were saying, and she dubbed it with kids. And she was attacked—like, you can't do this, this is a documentary. So it was a very interesting example of this kind of question of the use of sound, because it is so powerful and so invisible at the same time.

I want to say something else about gender, because it's something I really think a lot about. It was really hard to work with my own voice for a long time, because I have this "voice" [speaks in a drawn-out way; this is followed by laughter]. It's a real issue, because when I started making films I didn't do it in a typical way; like, I was not an assistant that then moved onto something else. I started by directing, and I was very young, age twenty. I remember arriving in places where I had to direct and give orders to crews where everybody was older than me and they were all men. I remember thinking, with my voice, how are they going to respect me? But also, I thought, well, I'm not going to try to speak *like this* [speaks in a lower, more abrupt voice], because I can't be somebody else. I'm just going to do it this way. And I remember people saying, "when she asks with that voice I can't refuse!" [Laughter] That's why they were doing what I wanted, not because I had any

authority. I think it's true that for many women filmmakers, the voice is one of the elements you have to deal with, at least at the beginning when you're not sure about your own power to move people towards what you need. And over time, you learn that the voice is not where the authority is going to come from, it's going to come from something else. Still today I know that many people react to my voice because of the kind of voice I have. Now I just relax; this is the voice I have. But it's an interesting thing when you use your voice in films, because, you know, depending on the way your voice is, you're going to be labeled, or heard, or interpreted in a certain way before anything else you do.

GY: All of you have used your own voices in your films to some extent. What has guided your decision to do so, and what is the relationship of your voice to your body onscreen, if it appears?

PL: The first time I used my own voice as narrator, in any way that worked, was in a film that I made called *The Voyagers* [2010], which was actually made as a love letter to my then-fiancé. It was made as a wedding gift and with an audience in mind of one person only. When I wrote it, I was very apprehensive about recording my voice because I don't think I'm a good voice-over actor, and what ended up working was kind of whispering because it turns out that I speak really loudly. I was explicitly speaking as a lover: "this is me whispering to Brian." And I think it worked really well in terms of that film. I was reminded of this by what you said earlier about women's voices in general, and the voice of the computer being a kind of nonthreatening one, the assistant versus the authority.

As a woman, I hadn't really thought of it this way until now, but it really worked because I wasn't trying to sound authoritative. I was trying to sound seductive. I've never used my voice in any way that is meant to sound authoritative, so I've now gone on to narrate several other pieces. In my new film [*Nuts!* (2016)] that I just sound-mixed, I'm supposed to be your friend telling you a funny story. We talked about that explicitly in the writing of the narration and in the performance. The vibe was friendly but not authoritative, even though I'm delivering all this historical information. But that question of working *with* the qualities of the female voice is something I think I've done unconsciously. I think in terms of trying to make films that work, and work with audiences, I've come to understand a variety of assumptions about the way that my voice should be used. I mean, I haven't challenged it. I don't know if that's a bad thing; it's just something that hasn't really occurred to me.

SK: I think the quality of the voice, or the kind of voice, may be one of the most powerful things to bring some kind of truth. To believe in what's been said, to believe in the character, to believe in the feeling, is very much a consequence of a voice, a sound. That's also why I think why when you're writing dialogue, for me it's about talking: you don't write, you talk, you say it out loud because it's all about the way it sounds. Very often when you see a film in a different language you tend to believe the characters more, you tend to identify less the artificiality of the performances, because you are already taken by a certain kind of sound. I think it's such a rich conversation. That's why we could spend hours talking about the voice, and many other hours talking about sound. For me, using my voice is something I'm doing when I film. It has to be me. Because of what I'm doing, it can't be another person. So even if it's not the voice I would have chosen as a voice, it's important because it's mine. And many times I'd say this to some filmmaker friends when they're editing and they want to put another voice because they think it's going to sound better—no, it has to be your voice. In fact, when you use your own voice for that reason, it almost doesn't matter. It's different from what you say, because then you're really a character, and it's a performance. But because you have to say "this is me saying," then the more flawed, the better, in a certain way.

CS: Penny, you're talking about ingrained expectations of the audience and playing to those, whether as lover or friend. Then, Sandra, over the past few days [at Anthology Film Archives] and in the postscreening discussion last night [at Colgate University] you've talked about how you have to fictionalize documentary to get to some sort of truth, or vice versa. This reminded me, Penny, of the screening we had recently of *Nuts* at the Wexner Center [in Columbus, Ohio] and how the film is all about conning an audience, or getting them to believe things so you can undermine them. For at least one audience member in that screening, the thing that wasn't believable was the voices.

PL: It was specifically about one of the voice actors' southern accent. Their objection was something along the lines of that really took me out of the film, because that felt like a stereotype of the dumb southerner. Some of the characters of the film have southern accents because the film largely takes place in Texas, but only one was a "dumb character." It was an interesting comment about the use of the voice that offended somebody.

AS: It's very hard to get the right voice. I'm at the moment looking for a certain kind of voice for a project, and I've been sent a list of all kinds of suggestions. You want a certain quality, and it's so specific that you can't pin it down and can't say what exactly it is you're looking for. And until you find it, it doesn't have an existence. I find that all the time. Going back to the question of using one's own voice, I don't like doing it. I actually only used my voice in that piece with Lis, and it became more bearable because it was the two of us. I don't really like using my voice; it's probably something quite similar to people who don't like to hear their voice on the answer[ing] machine. It never quite sounds like you. The resonance of your voice going through your bones is very different to hearing it out there. But at the same time, in my case, I have this really weird accent that I can't place, and when I hear other people talk with this slippery accent it's irritating because I'm distracted trying to place them. When I do voice-over I try to reduce that a bit and try to be a bit more unusual. It's very hard, because things slip out. I think it's that there might be an element in the voice that takes away from the content. If it's a very clear American or British accent then you just do away with the question of location, whereas if there's something a bit tweaky in the accent, then you start paying attention to the sonic texture, the pronunciation, and all these other things that distract you from the words.

PL: For a lot of people, I think, the choice to use a female voice in a certain way performs that same exact problem for the audience. "Why is this a woman?" is a question that might get asked of a certain kind of narrator, say, the voice of authority or an omniscient narrator. Its accent, gender, perceived race, and all kinds of things. But at least in the world that we live in, there's a sort of neutral middle, and it's not any of our voices in this room except for Chris. [Laughter]

AS: There's a British writer called Nina Power who's written quite interestingly about the voice that, in the Tube or the subway, says "mind the gap." It's this voice that's not quite robotic, but it's the voice that tells you, for example, what the time is. Supposedly it's quite a neutral voice, authoritative but not threatening. Because it's a female voice, maybe if it's the voice of an impending disaster, there's ways of using the female voice that precisely can be harnessed in a way that is somewhat authoritative but not terrifying.

MHC: I've never explicitly used my voice in a film, but I had sort of a surrogate in a movie I made last year. The voice had no connection

to the image at all; there were concurrent image and audio tracks that did not attempt to reconcile each other. I used a woman who's an opera singer, and she sang these fragmented, maybe semineurotic, quasi-poetic lines. I liked the idea that it would be the voice in your head, and you would tap into her improvised melody as something familiar, or something that might get stuck in your head, like you're planting these thoughts. It would be coming from the body but so virtuosic that it wasn't natural anymore. It has this tenor to it that is not normal, but the human instrument is making those sounds. So I used her voice as my surrogate because I didn't really want the naturalism or the intimacy that my own voice would bring to the film.

SK: When I was growing up, part of my fantasy and my world of imagination comes from the fact that I spent many, many hours in my life talking on the phone. I see that now it's so much about texting, and I wonder sometimes what this is going to bring for the future of using voice in filmmaking. The second thing is the fact that people use headphones so much. That experience of sound as something you hear in space, people are so taking for granted by listening to sound in headphones. So they're always whispering (but sometimes not whispering), blasting inside your ears. How is this going to affect the way we perceive and then make sound?

PL: I didn't think about sound until my first feature film [*Our Nixon* (2013)]. I was working with the sound mix, and I never had done that—I had always done my own sound, not because I was good at it. It was really an afterthought, something I spent very little time thinking about. And I'm still struggling, even in the filming and the edit, to be more thoughtful about the possibilities of using sound. But I will never forget that experience, that he [the sound engineer] could EQ (equalize) a voice and completely change everything; I had no idea what was possible. It made me feel [that] there was so much more potential in what I was doing than I had ever felt before. Since then, I've been trying to take that a bit and bring it into my own artistic process so that I don't just hire my sound guy at the end to have him come in and do his magic. But I'm really trying to think about what I learned with those two long mix sessions with him and then bringing it in earlier.

I work a lot with archival material, so there's a lot of silent footage, and I'm trying to build a world with sound in post[production]. I don't have a lot of native sound. The student filmmaker instinct is to layer music on everything as a way of making it not silent. But it's hard, not having been trained and not

really having thought about it, to think about what I could do with sound before that last week.

SK: It's a very interesting experience when you go to a studio and you understand that you have to decide, in an image and a frame, what is going to have sound and what is not going to have sound. What is going to make sound? Is that computer going to have sound? Is that window going to have sound? And where are these sounds going to be? This is such a fascinating aspect of the work. I am the kind of director that loves doing all the little work, the work that usually people say, this is the work for an assistant. I want to do it. It's where I'm learning and how I understand a little more what I want.

So there's one aspect of sound work which here is called "walla." That is when people make a recording of a crowd, but it is not meant to be heard. For the film we saw last night [*Campo Grande* (2015)], I went to all the recordings of this walla, and it's the most fascinating thing. It's like this: so you have a scene, let's say a bus stop or a shopping mall. These people come to the studio, and [on a monitor] there is a couple passing all the way in the back. Their job is to record the couple's conversation. They just look at the image [and speak over it] with the right accent, saying the right thing, you know? I thought they were incredible actors, even though the sound is going to disappear—that's why you call it walla. In the mix it's going to be inaudible, so only they know what these characters are saying. Imagine how these people see those films. They are people who see what everybody else is not seeing. They say "What's the scene?" and I have to describe the scene to them in a way that's exactly what it's not: "You're going to come holding a bag." I want to do something with this, because it's a fascinating example of the layers that sound brings that we don't think about.

CS: The two films you've mentioned, the Claire Simon and then just now talking about the walla in *Campo Grande*, is a great reference point for the Lucy Clout film that we have in the final program of Wild Sounds called *The Extra's Ever-Moving Lips* [2014]. She got fixated on a scene—it looks like a bad soap opera—and there are extras in the background, and they brought in professional lip-readers to try to determine what they're saying. It's this idea of creating sound and voice from pure image, finding legibility within the visual.

GY: It's like an archaeological project, digging out the layers of sound.

PL: I want to expand on the archival element. Because I film silent film, you're also starting from scratch to create the sound world. With something like *Our Nixon*, I had twenty-six hours of silent home movies of a world that I never was in. It was forty years ago, it was before I was born, it's people I would never meet in a universe that's so far away from any of our universes in any way. So thinking about it, it was again only in the sound mix that I really thought about this, because I thought "well, they're silent, they're going to be silent in the movie." It didn't occur to me that you could use Foley. It was an interesting thing to confront for the first time, that as soon as we added the slightest Foley—the sound of waves crashing in the distance behind Richard Nixon on a beach—the entire image changed significantly. The image became close, whereas before it had been far. So then in the mix, the sound designer and mixer's instinct was to Foley the crap out of everything and make everything feel real. But I had been editing these silent movies for two years, and I was hesitant. I was really sparing about what I wanted to add to those images in terms of sound. I had edited the movie with those images being distant and silent, and it was completely not the movie anymore when you did a kind of standard industry approach. So we came to a middle-of-the-road agreement where all the sounds needed to be archival, and as many of them as possible had to actually be from the same archive, the Nixon Library. The lucky thing is that the Nixon White House recorded everything. So I could say "I found the sound of the White House lawn in 1970, and we're using it," and we would. And if we didn't have that kind of sound, then I would ask him to create a wash so that it wouldn't pretend to be real. At the beginning of the film the images *do* start silent, and there's this very obvious place where the first sound effect is added because I really wanted you to understand that these were silent films and that anything we did to add to that was a deliberate gesture and not an attempt to fake it. This happened at the end of a two-year process, in the last two weeks. And I thought "wow, if I had been aware of this in the edit, I would have thought of everything completely differently."

SK: What you're describing would be the same thing as saying, if you're going to light a room for a scene, "let's put light in everything, you have to see every inch of this room." This is a little bit like how lighting works on television. For me, it's one of the very big differences between television and cinema, because cinema, especially

before digital, was all about what you're revealing. You're really working with showing and not showing clearly. Then you look at a television show, and it's all lit. Now there were technical reasons for that, but when you're working in film it's interesting, because you are working with an industry, you're working with technicians, and the example of Foley that you just gave is an interesting one, because there is the American tradition, which is different from the French tradition, and so on. So, for example, because I come from a country where Foley is nonexistent, I'm always working with another country on this part. When you're working in France, they say "let's choose what Foleys you're interested in. Do you want this or that?" So you make a choice, you don't do all those sounds. When you're working the American system, they give you all the sounds. Then you decide which one you want to use. But it's an industrial vision of the work. And it's very technical, because people obsess with the technical challenge and want to get the best possible result.

It's interesting for us who are making the films, who are trying to combine these two worlds: the technical world of being able to make that thing exist and happen and the completely subjective, personal, artistic world, which is the way we're going to be in it and deal with it, if it's going to be a singular thing that's going to be us. And to not be overwhelmed by the technical part, to be able to say "oh incredible, we can do all this . . . but, well, I only want this sound" is difficult. There's an interesting example about Foley in the film *Tabu* [2012] by Miguel Gomez. The entire second part is only Foley; you don't hear what they say. It's a subtle, elegant example of using offscreen sources, of how deciding what you *don't* use is so powerful, what you don't show, what you don't hear.

AS: This reminds me of the subject of ventriloquism. I was thinking of films where voice-over becomes the main trope. In [Peter Strickland's] *Berberian Sound Studio* [2013], you're seeing the mechanics of sound and image revealing itself much more explicitly. I find this really fascinating because a new way of listening, I think, comes into being. Because of the very deliberate and spelled-out disjunction, you start to think about it in a way that, because it's circumventing the manipulation of a certain truth or reliability of "read my lips," you can rely on the fact that they are in sync. There's something else that emerges that's very much connected to your curatorial concept.

PL: I like that idea: what "read my lips" means is "you can trust me." [Laughter] I don't know if you guys have seen [James Spinney and

Peter Middleton's] *Notes on Blindness* [2016], but this is another more recent British film where there's a similar thing. In the film there's a long historical archive of personal audio tapes made by the main character, who is documenting the process of going blind all while giving a sense of his family. The filmmakers create these very lush, almost too lush reenactments with actors, and then they lip-sync these audio tapes. So the tapes are like very clearly kind of fucked up and archival and poorly recorded, but the images have insanely high production values. They're lit like a Hollywood love story. I never really figured out if I liked the film. But as a kind of technical feat it was just so striking.

MHC: In a few films, to varying degrees of success, I've tried to do Foley for my audience or Foley for me behind the camera. So I'll play with breath in the body of the person operating the camera, or the applause or the walla of the audience, or the idea of using sound or voice or a gaze to address and animate the audience. Going back to this idea of dialogue, I think this is a nod to the power of the filmmaker. It's also kind of playful.



Wild Sounds

- Flaherty NYC film series at Anthology Film Archives, New York
- Programmed by Chris Stults and Genevieve Yue
- October 3–December 12, 2016

Program 1 (October 3): Voices from Beyond

- Aura Satz, *In and Out of Sync* (2012, 20 min, 16mm)
- Martine Syms, *A Pilot for a Show about Nowhere* (2015, 24 min, digital)
- Courtney Stephens, *Ida Western Exile* (2014, 7 min, digital)
- Sara Magenheimer, *Seven Signs That Mean Silence* (2013, 11 min, digital)
- Carolyn Lazard, *Get Well Soon* (2015, 13.5 min, digital)
- Gunvor Nelson, *My Name Is Oona* (1969, 13 min, 16mm)

Program 2 (October 17): Parabolic Woman

- Sandra Kogut, *Adiu Monde: Pierre & Claire's Story* (1998, 27 min, digital)
- Sandra Kogut, *A Hungarian Passport* (2001, 72 min, digital)

Program 3 (October 31): Singular Plural

- Candice Breitz, *Factum Tremblay* (2009, 78 min, digital)
- Kollektiv (Pablo Salas/Pedro Chaskel), *Somos+* (1985, 15 min, digital)

Program 4 (November 14): Word Play

- Wu Tsang, *Shape of a Right Statement* (2008, 5 min, digital)
- Eduardo Coutinho, *Playing (Jogo de Cena)* (2007, 105 min, digital or 35mm)

Program 5 (November 28): Women's Work

- Elisa Giardina Papa, *need ideas!?!PLZ!!* (2011, 5:30 min, digital)
- Elisa Giardina Papa, *Technologies of Care: Worker 3* (2016, 4 min, digital)
- Louise Carrin, *Venusia* (2015, 34 min, digital)
- Nicolás Pereda, *El Palacio* (2013, 36 min, digital)

Program 6 (December 12): Talk Back

- Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Five Year Diary, Reel 23: A Breakdown after the Mental Hospital* (1982, 26 min, video)
- Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Five Year Diary, Year 26: First Semester Grad School* (1983, 22 min, video)
- Cauleen Smith, *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (by Kelly Gabron)* (1992, 7 min, digital)
- Mounira Al-Solh, *Rawane's Song* (2006, 7 min, digital)
- Lucy Clout, *The Extra's Ever-Moving Lips* (2014, 8 min, digital)
- Cauleen Smith, *Sine at the Canyon, Sine at the Sea (by Kelly Gabron)* (2010/2016, 5 min, digital)
- Cauleen Smith, *Entitled* (2008, 7 min, video)