

# Catalogue Essay

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## An introduction:

Questions of the invisible are especially, if seemly paradoxically close to the conceptualization around my body of work. Photographs are the results of specific durations of time, each one a subjective framing of the composite realities we inhabit. The materiality of a photograph, as a thing or object, is often itself unseen. Photographic looking is at once an act of certain power about what is made visible, yet too highlights what remains unseen, something just beyond its surface or neat corners. Looking through the camera's rectangular frame, the photographer's eye decides to include and exclude. Her finger releases the shutter and the image drops off from the world at its edges.<sup>i</sup>

Through this interdisciplinary body of photographic and sound work, I want to consider ways in which photography can be re-imagined through and beyond the visual by the "invisible depth" of sound, even after the shutter has been released and the subject rendered. I am interested in the imaginative realms of sound made possible and actual through Salomé Voegelin's book, "Sonic Possible Worlds". Her book is concerned with the in/visible as well as the in/audible; and that which is made actual by listening for the possible and even the impossible. She proposes the kind of listening that asks us to hear the mobility on and beneath the surface of the visual image.

It is through this proposition for listening for the (im)possible that prompts my interest in the intersections of sound and photography. The exhibition's visual elements are the residue of processes of sound/music-making. The sound works and performances physically and conceptually plunge performers, my audience/participants and myself into the dark (room). This results in the limitation on the privileged realm of sight, focusing on the audible; music, noise and sound as generated by bodies, both human and non-human. Photography and sound have a strange affinity in their relationship to the uncanny. When photographed or recorded, one asks, "is that what I look/sound like?" I am interested in how both mediums complicate binaries such as public/private, exterior/interior, self/other, through echoing the performative, constructed nature of identity. Both do not exist as absence or presence of the subject/s, but as a negotiation, affecting a contingent, unfolding present in relation to the viewer/listener. This play between sight and sound give complex plurality to understandings of "femininity" and extend the ways in which woman are represented both in music and photography. Perhaps the voices of others and myself as womxn photographic subjects will become audible.

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In lieu of philosopher Walter Benjamin's "Unconscious Optics", Shawn Michelle Smith writes "At the Edge of Sight." The introduction to this book describes photography as revolutionising the cultural value of sight, and revealing new ways of seeing yet all the while highlighting all that is not captured by the photograph (Smith, 2013).

Salome Voegelin's "Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound" (2014) aims to extend a practice of embodied, contingent listening which allows access to the plurality of sound, the possible and even the impossible voices, which she describes as that which we cannot yet hear (Voegelin, 2014:1-7). Sounds cannot be separated from the body and experience of the listener. The act of listening, according to Voegelin, processes the sound in its ability to exist as many different interpretations. This book theorizes sound as that which grants access to the invisible layer of the world, that deep-beyond the visual and visible, which according to Voegelin, reveals the structures of the world so that we might question whether there are other possibilities beyond one singular actuality (Voegelin, 2014: 3). Crucially in terms of my practice, her book proposes a conceptual theory of sound that does not merely critique visuality in terms of what we see, but how we look. Voegelin suggests that listening to the visual allows one to access "thick layers that mobilise our view if we take care to confront it with a sonic sensibility." Understanding the inaudible as which does not yet sound for reasons of physical impossibility or ideology, will be used as a platform from which to tether together a relationship between photography and sound to make audible womxn's voices in these two spaces which both misrepresent womxn as projections of male desire and/or anxiety.

## Bl(i)nk:

I am in a studio with a camera pointed at my face. I am trying to make you think about photographic looking and the politics of the gaze and how the photograph enters the world through sound, the "click" of the shutter. This action sounds like percussion, a heart beating, a gun. Sound cuts through the visual frame to generate other possibilities which re-position a listener as participant (Voegelin:22). My video piece, Bl(i)nk reflects this ability of the sound of the shutter, not only sound like different things "thinging," but how the listeners relationship will determine how they themselves are participating, for example, are they shooting me or am I shooting them? My eyes blink to the sound and timing of the shutter, at once speaking to how the human and mechanical eye differ as well as hinting at a refusal to be "captured," or "anaesthetised" by the camera. Traditionally, blinking in a photo is seen as revealing photographs constructed nature (The photographer counts to three so that the subject will keep her eyes open for the shot) while it can also be seen as a parody on fluttering ones eyelashes as a performance of "feminine" seduction. This video also relates to music/noise and photography's relationship to violence and death. While Barthes describes being photographed as a small death or becoming a ghost (Barthes,1981:93), Jaques Attali speaks of noise as murder and music as the organisation of noise, as ritual murder. (Attali, 1985:28) In this video I perform a game of Russian roulette, a double game, with the camera and with my audience.

## Chamber sounds:

The word 'camera' originates from the first form of photography; the camera obscura, which means "darkened chamber" or "darkroom." The notion of a chamber evokes an intimacy that mimics my practice, employing processes involving contact in the darkroom. Through shifting attention from the purely visual aspects of photography the darkroom becomes a site that through sound, becomes both real and imagined space. Through a process of listening, it is possible to engage with the tension between the meditative and the unsettling nature of the chamber. The darkroom is both intrinsically a space of time, with its film processing timetables, enlarger exposures, intervals for developing positives in the develop, stop and fix chemistry, yet also completely out of time. "Off by heart" responds to photography's use of violent language in relation to its gendered modes of representation; to take a photograph is to "shoot," or "capture." The 4 x 5 large format camera used for the self-portrait diptych, depicting 9 seconds of singing the classic song, "Bang, Bang you shot me down," is still referred to as a "chambre" in French. The mouth can be described as a chamber from which the voice emerges. Colloquially, the heart is described as having four chambers.

In lieu of the notion of “shooting” ones subject, a gun too has a chamber, for bullets. Recorded by a digital stethoscope, the sound piece accompanying the diptych is made up of recordings from 5 women’s heart beats taken while listening back to a recording of themselves singing to the song, “Bang Bang...” to the tempo set by their own heart beats. The song echoes photography’s inherited narrative of power dynamics set up along the gender binary while still suggesting room for subversion and re-imaging.

#### Darkroom Performance:

In particular, western classical music as a discipline continues, in many regards, to be an insular space, that keeps its distance from engaging with issues of context or the social, avoiding questions around content in favour of form (Voegelin, 2014:124). Voegelin’s text positions music within the realm of sound, rather than insulated in its history and relative inaccessibility. She attempts to pry music away from its strict disciplinary nature towards what she calls “Hearing the continuum of sound,” by presenting ways of listening and music-making through an emphasis on musicality and materiality rather than technique and form. She explains, music’s “reality is not actual but possible, real not as an abstract piece but as an inhabited time-space: the plural and unfinished performance of its sounds heard contingently.” (Voegelin, 2014:154). This highlights my interest in music as a temporal, performative act, rather than a reinstatement of its strict particularity. This approach allows music to become accessible to inhabit and participate in (Voegelin, 2014:123). In this way my approach to music in this body of work is concerned with the interaction between the female body, not only with sound, but between the performance of sound production and inaudible materials, such as light-sensitive photographic paper (Voegelin, 2014:124). This approach aims to disrupt both ‘good’ or traditional musical/photographic practice, to disrupt historically masculine, patriarchal discourse and representation of women’s bodies and normative, limiting notions of “femininity.” Manifestations of these ideas are my “Darkroom Performance” prints, which are the results of the pressure, heat and motion of my fingers while playing the black and white photographic paper underneath my violin string. Inserting the paper beneath the strings inhabits comfortable movement on the instrument, the paper in contact with sections of the strings, distorting the tone and pitch of the sound. The paper is run through chemistry in the darkroom and eventually made into a positive as a contact print on fiber paper. Through using my violin to create sound, the the final prints speaks to an alternative way to represent the voice-body, in a way which refuses the male gaze but references womxn as maker, opposed to the bearer of meaning.

“Despite the invisibility of women as social subjects, the physical aspect of female bodies has traditionally been subject to heightened scrutiny”(Ponterotto, 2016:133/134). Sound is described as the dark, invisible, mobile depth that exists beyond the visible, and yet extends the visual (Voegelin, 2014:15). What is lacking in representation could be conceptualised around the notion of voice. Sound theorist, writer and artist, Brandon LaBelle describes the voice as that which constitutes the subject, however “illusory, unseen, fragmented or fictional”(Labelle, 2014:7). Pythagoras says, “a good principle that created order, light and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman”(Thompson, 2012: 5) Indeed a more accurate way to describe women’s position as social subjects is muted or silenced, this justified by women’s voices being historically positioned as intrusive noise. It is from this carefully constructed manner of representing women in photography as physically hyper-visible yet socially mute as well as western classical music’s heteronormative, limited constructions of “femininity,” that I plunge all bodies into near darkness under the safe-light to disrupt the paradigm of women as “sights” and to place emphasis on contact and voice, touch and sound in my work’s processes and final manifestations. In doing so I re-appropriate historically gendered notions of noise and darkness, to disrupt patriarchal orders of sight, sound and representation. “The most dangerous women are those who refuse the rules of representation; they are the elusive shape shifters, the noises in the system.” (Thompson, 2011).

“I once read that I do not exist” (an ode to Rebecca Clarke):

I use the analogue process of shadow-grams to elicit a resonance not only to sound, as ephemeral, but to the voice, which moves from the dark chamber of my mouth, towards another’s ear and yet announces me- as a body, as a subject. Labelle believes the voice is already a “bodily figuring” and “an expression full of depth,” the second iteration reminding me of Voegelin’s conception of the possibilities of sound as a dark, invisible depth extending the visual. This bodily voice speaks to a materiality, which my shadowgrams capture: the light tracing along my sound-making movements as an inaudible surface grasps at my hands and my body. In this series “I once read I did not exist,” I play the composer Rebecca Clark’s Trio for piano, violin and cello onto black and white photographic paper (Clarke, 1923). Clarke’s score had never been booked out from the UCT music library, which drove me to further enquiry about her life as not only a performer but as a composer. My title comes from an interview from 1976 in which the skepticism and prejudice towards being a talented, woman composer, lead others to believe that she could never have written this piece herself. Her name was thought to be a mere phantasm, a pseudonym, for a male composer of the same era. This work aims to re-imagine her voice through my performance, as an act of homage and connection through time and space. I resonate not only with her works intensity, but also her biography, which is interrupted by adverse male figures as echoes of her rejection by her father. These processes manifest as a photographic triptych echoing the three sections of the Trio’s sonata form. Photographically, this work reiterates my intention, which is to represent the possibility of a relationship between image and sound, to generate alternative ways of representing bodies. Rejecting the notion of women as a lacking (w)hole for masculine projection, this work engages in the ambivalence, complexity and performative aspects which construct the lived experience of one’s gender.

Four parts of a (w)hole: for violin, voice, score and the communal darkroom:

“Throughout the history of Western thought, women and noise have found themselves on the same side of philosophical dichotomies that have governed and legitimated their subordination”(Thompson, 2012:3). Thompson believes in the artistic and the feminist re-appropriation of noise as a means to erupt, so called “masculine” values of “light and order.” Thompson explains noise can be “good and bad,” both innovative and banal. In terms of music, noise has been deemed sometimes “extra-musical” and sometimes deadly. (Attali, 1985: 28). In my sound piece for voice, room and violin, “Four parts of a (w)hole” appropriates sound artist, Alvin Lucier’s sonic technique from his seminal work, “I am sitting in a room,”(1969) in which he speaks and records his voice in a room, and then plays and re-records the recording until all the room tone in conjunction with the technology used, almost fully transforms any semblance of his original words into their own noise. For me this process of repetition and transformation can link to Judith Butler’s concept of gender; norms based merely on imitation, and performativity. Imitations of the “norm” highlights its constructedness, a process Butler believes can lead to subversion. Indeed, the crux echoes American art critic, theorist and lecturer Rosalind Krauss’s sentiment, that the original is in fact always already the condition of the copy.

There is a “second” or “feminine” voice in music, which feminist musicologist, Susan McClary, links explicitly to the patriarchal form of the Sonata, in which the feminine voice acts as a structural motif, which programmatically plots the drama of the male protagonist. This “first” or “masculine” voice ultimately quests to control or discipline the “feminine/second”, which is contracted as lyrical and “other:” cast in a contrasting key to the “first/masculine voice.” The Sonata form can be seen as a script through which the control and disciplining of the body as well as the sexuality of the “other” (could also be the cultural or racial other) is naturalised.

For this work, I play the “second voice” from Cesar Frank’s second movement from Sonata in A, into the darkroom, using Lucier’s method as stated above. I perform this gendered voice, and the room tone, as well as the technology, assist me in sonically unraveling this gender essentialism and in the process create a new, noisy, disruptive voice, that when played into the exhibition space, vibrates the floor beneath the listener, creating a tangible resonance with actual bodies. The other three voices of this sound-piece are made-up of three scripts, which expand, question and disrupt this feminine/second voice. These voices are played through four speakers placed around the exhibition space. The performative voices insist on an active listening, (“are you there?”) from points surrounding the listener in the space, thus imitating the experience of being inside a darkroom; you cannot see the body from which the voices emerge but it is from this invisible mobility of sound, that creates an environment through the listener who is blind (“can you hear me?”). “The “feminine” voice (unravelling) responds to this process through the visual form.

Communal Darkroom performances in Collaboration with womxn musicians:

“When I make noise, I do not want to hurt you or make you submit....I want to make you feel. I want to bring you to the materiality of your body...I want to lock you in and draw you out. YOU KNOW NOT YET WHAT A BODY CAN DO”(Marie Thompson, 2012:7).

“Voices in the Darkroom” is a sound performance in collaboration with composer Lucy Strauss and performed by UCT music students Sibongile Nyembezi, Lucy Strauss and myself. This translates into a darkroom performance, that considers the relational and bodily dimension of sound, which connects human as well as non-human voice-bodies, delineated by their ability to act upon each other through affect (Thompson, 2014:116). This work is conceptualised around the idea that instruments, performers, listeners, speakers, photographic sounds as well as Rosedale’s communal darkroom’s resonant frequencies, may all be treated as sonic voice-bodies contributing to the re-performance and re-imagination of the traditionally male dominated space of the darkroom through sound.

This piece, with its musical score written by Lucy Strauss for my project, re-imagines the analogue space of the darkroom. Performed in near darkness, the limitation on sight allows the opportunity for a multiplicity of readings that extend the space as a purely photographic, inviting the possible and the impossible. Voegelin explains sound as the condition of nighttime or the dark in which I cannot see vis-à-vis but can hear “the shape of sound”, which is unstable and fluid (Idhe, 2007:61-64). This tenuous experience of my body in darkened-space may lead to knowledge of “what things could be rather than what they are apparently” (Voegelin, 2014:37). Playing in the dark tests the limits of traditional “Chamber” music form, as the performers cannot play from scores or take visual cues from each other whilst playing. The instruments themselves extend beyond traditional use<sup>ii</sup>. The piece is reliant on the performer’s memory and complete sensitivity to sound. It is not performed in strict time like traditional music scores but relies on the individual performers to respond to the different options presented by our experimental score.

The audience becomes spatially and sonically part of the performance; knitted tightly between the different voice-bodies. The darkroom itself, which is usually “inaudible”, is given a voice through composing the piece using only its resonant frequencies. Played through speakers, the voice of photographic processes, including the sound of the enlarger, the ticking of the timer, the agitation of chemistry and

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ii: Cello, violin and the viola play on the wood of the bow, and in-between the bridge and the fingerboard.

the droning whirr of the extractor fan, are sounds that weave through the timbre of the instruments. These multiple voices in an invisible room, manifest their meanings within the time-space of the performance, produced through collective yet invisible listening.

In conclusion, this body of work engages with the importance of considering voice in the process of both sonic and visual representation. My interdisciplinary practice engages with the possibilities of the in/audible and the in/visible, to reflect on the influence of photographic and musical representation on our social and cultural understanding of the female body. I also attempt to offer an alternative, through which the complexity of identity and lived experience begins to unfold. I propose contemplation on matters of language and representation through a multi-sensory engagement; stemming from the contact between eyes and beyond – to the audible; from my noisy voice-body, to yours.

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