

Kendra Place. "Andrea Roberts: The Stridents". *C Magazine*. 135, 2017: pg 66-67.

<http://cmagazine.com/issues/135>

From a new café in Winnipeg's east Exchange District, I followed Andrea Roberts through their fourth solo exhibition by way of a video with sound recording. *The Stridents* is a sparse presentation of three projects that mediate sound and language, print, textile and sculpture. The works' rectangular formats and modular frames anticipate their own portability, as distributed editions or products of neoliberal flexibility that are nonetheless "anchored" by the weight of a concrete bench near the gallery entrance. The works refract the space, evoking, in turn, the cold segregation of Medieval stone cells or anchorholds for Christian recluses, contemplative reading rooms, and the emptiness of recently bankrupt and abandoned businesses. Each imaginary space is shrouded by the artist's investments in shadow feminisms, as theorized by Jack Halberstam, with the exhibited media offering liminal surfaces where non-normativity, negativity and failure are presented as viable and desirable ways of life.

*A Mirror for Recluses* consists of a looped and duplicated audio recording emanating from two subtle ventilation grates on either side of the bench. The composition gathers performed incantations, echoing anchorite/esses reading from the 15th-century *Speculum Inclusorum*, an instructional manual for anchoritic life. Their voices, which Roberts post-produced to emphasize sibilant speech sounds, form a chorus of hisses deviating towards drone. The effect is sombre and ominous, and while I would not blame an alienated visitor for leaving early, a slower engagement affords the possibility to discern the politics of these aesthetic decisions.

Roberts describes sound, in this case, as spatial artifact. And I hear "artifact," in this case, as a valued object as much as an error in (digital) information, a trace of intention or failure to communicate. The plastic ventilation grates, which at first seem irrelevant as infrastructure, establish the unstable spatial aesthetic implicit in the exhibition, each emulating a church hagioscope while disguising a speaker. The concrete sculpture is also emulative, of an anchorite's bed or a gallery bench. Rather than being narrowly interpellated, the visitor is welcome, by the presence of these artifacts, to imagine a fluidity of identity or movement through spaces, whether standing, seated, asleep or walking; listening, reading or speaking.

*A Mirror for Recluses* has been modified since it was first installed for *Superimposition: Sculpture and Image* – a 2016 group show at Winnipeg's Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art. For *The Stridents*, Roberts has installed the speaker-grates beside rather than in front of a seated guest, emphasizing sonic rather than visual mirroring, an effect that parallels Montreal-based artist Adam Basanta's split sound-related sculptures. Roberts' investment in demoting visuality revives the multisensory nature of "visions" experienced and sometimes recorded by Medieval mystics; paradoxes of feminist history are embodied by an anchoress herself, who retreats

from the world by remaining in one location, the isolated inhabitant of a small stone cell that nonetheless remains attached to the congregation's church, communing with her God and the angels.

Roberts and I share a certain secular indifference to Christianity while also being oppressed by some of its structures and affects. Rather than creating a space for religious devotion, *The Stridents* draws these minor, material histories (of women, of outcasts) from European metanarratives to trace feminist and queer/trans archaeologies of reclusion, retreat or refusal. Here, mysticism is a challenge to perceive without reductive, forced binaries of gender, space, sense or value, offering the phenomenal instead of deconstruction. The installation works in contradistinction to contemporary sound projects that amplify aggressive masculinity or White pain while it also turns away from the assimilationist imperative to present oneself in order to claim a voice in representative regimes.

*Say it Ain't So* is a print series contending with recording technologies and their capacity to mourn, memorialize and resurrect or, rather, to stay silent or indecipherable in melancholia. The five framed prints, installed along one wall, hold a more intimate space. Each rhythmically lists four words as pre-Linnaean signifiers of plants, animals and minerals: spells to reach across death, or recipes for invisibility. The words are drawn from the *Lingua Ignota*, a 12th-century glossary and notation system written by St. Hildegard of Bingen that remains, since the mystic's death, as an unheard language. The colourful text is silkscreened across lampblack-covered drawing paper, a process that both shadows and illuminates as it displaces the sooty carbon pigment on which sound waves were registered by a 19th-century phonograph. If the reader were to speak these words, the agency of the obsolete recording instrument to speak to the future (realized belatedly in the 21st century) would be foregrounded, meeting the immortal silkscreen. Such enunciation is, however, suppressed by the conventions of many art galleries. The series becomes a record of an incantatory silence or quietly cast hex, as though intended to secretly assist someone coping with personal loss or to make something right (again).

Roberts' interest in self-help cultures is also legible in the infrasculptural textile works displayed throughout the other sides of the gallery, a showcase of precarity. Ironic banners, as though salvaged from the site of failed commerce, are laser-cut with text and patterns and stretched across welded metal frames. The forms synthesize a provisional approach to sculpture, recalling the arrangements of Montreal-based artist Marie-Michelle Deschamps, with a formalist humour and pleasure in materials that nonetheless respond to the aesthetic of capitalism particular to California, where Roberts studied. The central banner, displayed vertically across the room from the bench, repeats the list format of four words as sibilant sounds, associating the textiles with the prints and sound installation. Another textile, horizontal, reads "Total Insolvency." This strangely literal, if honest, conflation of commodity-production and destitution, pronouncing bankruptcy in one location only to be folded

flat and shipped to the next site, suggests that there might be a beautifully pathetic dignity in declaring one's own debt. A final textile is suspended from the wall above the entrance's interior: a floral print stating, "There is gold dust in the air for you." Drawn from the self-help book *The Dynamic Laws of Prosperity* for its new-age promise of willed wealth, the tinged phrase casts a dizzy sensation of metal fume fever over the entire show.

While it might seem like the artist is shifting away from the body-centric practice of their first solo exhibition in favour of text or dislocated conceptualism, the voices in *The Stridents* chant in all of their harsh and uncooperative dissonance to remind us of our corporealities. And yet Roberts' tracings of queer temporalities and shadow feminisms perform someone's conditional choice to throw the baby out with the sinkwater of reproductive futurity; at the shifting centre (the wandering womb) of *The Stridents* is an imperfect desire to reject the gentrifying effects of normal life while searching for elsewhere. As to the question of whether these works materialize the threshold across which a voice becomes a heard message, or establish a gravestone where so many unreceived sounds accumulate in a dead sounds office, I hear the possibility of taking a vow of silence that refuses the culture of silence and of creating a culture of speech that affirms the abolitionist (re: carcerality) and transformative possibilities of a feminist politics.

Kendra Place is a writer and artist (and femme of settler cultures) living in Tio'tia:ke/Mooniyang (Montreal).