

The Stridents

Essay: Emily Doucet

merchant, light, lavender, tongue[1]

In the Middle Ages, church architecture, including stained glass windows and altarpieces, could be read as a collectively experienced book. The church was an intellectual center, not only for the scholarly monks, priests, and nuns but also for the public. Then, as now, artists employed history and mythology as parable for the present.

In *The Stridents*, Andrea Roberts' words are sculpted into laser cut fabric mounted on silver powder coated steel structures, as though backed with the grisaille mesh patterns of stained glass windows and confession screens. Telling a story, recording a vision, writing a history, is to be caught somewhere between life and death, between lamentation and faith. *Say it Ain't So* articulates this temporal tension between preservation and loss, referencing one of the earliest methods of sound recording, the phonautograph and its use of soot to index sound. These gentle grouping of words recall alchemical formulas, printed on paper surfaces lamp-blackened like the aged walls of churches (and the phonautograph's acoustic diagrams).

gold, rue, amethyst, hair

Modern sound reproduction, beginning in the nineteenth century, was believed to split sources from their auditory copies, signalling the act of recording as enclosure. Jonathan Sterne has argued in his history of sound recording, that "the history of sound implies a history of the body." [2] As in the history of modern optics, acoustic technology frequently modeled technological form after parts of the human body, positioning sound reproduction as an erstwhile history of shifting understandings of phenomenological experience.

As Sterne has outlined, the hierarchy of the senses has a lengthy history, with religious texts frequently outlining a division between spirit and letter. The voice (and its sensual counterpart, hearing), is prized for its transcendence, the written word (and corresponding vision) damned to earthly decay.

The technology of church architecture, designed for acoustic resonance and vibrational transcendence, acts to preserve holy sounds in perpetuity.

mine, vesper, tansy, sulfur

Anchorites, the most extreme religious lives of the medieval period, were recluses who lived their lives enclosed in stone rooms. The life of the anchorite has been referred to as a kind of spiritual warfare modelled after religious figures such as St. Anthony, who in around 285 banished himself to the desert in an act of divine sacrifice. Through a small and aptly named window, a squint, those confined could converse with passersby. Both men and women were enclosed, although historians have found evidence that much larger numbers of women undertook the ceremonial enclosure—a rite to signal the anchorite's passage from one life to another. Through self-knowledge gained from withdrawal towards a greater knowledge of the divine, anchorite women were renowned for their spiritual visions, both auditory and visual. Held just out of sight, the visual experience of devotion could be replaced by sound. Hearing the voice of the anchorite through the wall was to journey from one spiritual world to another, an act of intellectual exchange and bodies held at a distance.

gasp, sigh, hiss, rale

Roberts' *A mirror for recluses*, trades visual refraction for sound, blending the auditory elements of spiritual retreat with droning resistance to the monotony of order. As Roberts has described, the recording foregrounds sibilant sounds (like s, z, f, ch). Also called stridents, these tones represent a challenge to modern sound recording—a refusal of fixity in the auditory surplus of the hiss. Defined variously as urgent, grating, and just simply too much, these sounds show us the shape of regulatory order.

lithium, milk, melamine, rose

To consider the history of a technology is often to remove it from its altar, that is, to show its perseverance as a concept before and after its physical and named form has come into cultural consciousness.

I suspect Roberts' knows this, for here a word is a sound is a technology is a recording is a built object.

total insolvency, there is gold dust

Roberts' investigation of the history of retreat paired with that of modern sound recording comes through to us as an archaeology of technology, loss, and the desire to transcend our bodies becoming ciphers of the divine—or at the very least, something of permanence beyond capitalist reproduction and technological obsolescence.

So mote it be?

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About The Writer:

Emily Doucet is a writer and PhD candidate in the Graduate Department of Art at the University of Toronto. She holds an MA from University College London and a BA (Honors) from the University of Winnipeg. Her current research explores the history of photography and the technological imagination in nineteenth century France. Her doctoral research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She writes about contemporary art for publications such as *Border Crossings*, *C Magazine* and *Canadian Art* online.

About the Artist:

Andrea Roberts is a Winnipeg based multidisciplinary artist whose practice incorporates sound, print, sculpture, video, and performance. Roberts has exhibited and performed at galleries and festivals internationally, with recent shows at *Plug In ICA* (Winnipeg), *Film Pop* (Montreal), *CT-International Print Biennial* (Santiago de Cuba), *aceartinc* (Winnipeg), *Whitdel Arts* (Detroit), and *SomArts* (San Francisco). Roberts writes on issues of sound, technology, gender, and the voice, and has performed in a number of noise and experimental music projects including their solo project *VOR*. A recipient of the *Murphy & Cadogan Contemporary Art Award*, Roberts holds an MFA in Sculpture from *California College of the Arts* (2014) and a BFA Hons. from the *University of Manitoba*. (2011).

[1] Word groupings in italics borrowed (in order) from Andrea Roberts, *Merchant Light (Say It Ain't So #3)* 19.5" x 27.5," Ink and lampblack on paper, 2016; *Gold Rue. (Say It Ain't So #4)* 19.5" x 27.5," Ink on lampblack on paper, 2016; *Mine Vesper (Say it Ain't So #6)* 19.5" x 27.5," Ink on lampblack on paper, 2016; *The Stridents #1 (sigh, gasp, hiss, rale)* 93" x 30" x 12," Fabric, steel, 2016; *Lithium Milk (Say It Ain't So #5)* 19.5" x 27.5," Ink on lampblack on paper, 2017; *The Stridents #2 (total insolvency)* 80" x 20" x 23," Fabric, steel, 2016; *The Stridents #3 (there is gold dust)* 64" x 36' x 1," Fabric, wood, steel, 2016.

[2] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: The Cultural Origins of Sound Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 12.