

Silence

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Chapter 2. The Pool of Silence

The word 'silence' often seems to be riddled with bi-polar afflictions. 'A silence fell upon the room' either means a great emptiness, disgust and sadness, or a near-holy state which words can never hope to be able to tackle. A silent person is typically seen as either a total idiot or possessed of a great knowledge that others are not worthy of sharing in. Extreme suffering brings silence; so does extreme happiness.^[1] Silence is loaded with either nothing or everything.

Ian Hunt speaks of "...all the risk of spurious seriousness and glamour that attaches itself to silence in literary discussions."^[2] Silence is something that it is hard to be really funny about—you can be uncomfortable in a giggly way about silence, but not really funny.

Social silence is a different being as well. At social gatherings, silence is to be avoided at any cost. When people talk about silence in daily life, they often do not mean actual, full-on silence, but an uncomfortable speechlessness. Brian Catling, one of the major influences on Aaron Williamson, uses this type of silence in his performances. Aaron Williamson describes a Catling performance: "...the standing spectators bowing their heads, avoiding looking directly at Catling's self-effaced figure as he passes heavily into or through their midst. It is as if he is a stylus, an index of a larger embodiment than his own presence, one that is inaudible yet tangible as his performances maintain long intervals of discomfiting uninterrupted quiet which implicate rather than objectify the audience."^[3]

When people talk about deafness, the word 'silence' is usually used at one point or another. 'Silence' used to describe the condition of deafness is usually romantic and hopeful. Silence means purity, and a silent people must be a pure people. In literature, silence and deafness is often used to represent the unknowing innocent.^[4] The cassette containing the Werner Herzog film "Land of Silence and Darkness" states "...what they say comes from the most profound depths of human experience, and is often startlingly beautiful and exalting." Some people believe that working towards deafness in meditative practice, as a means to experience silence, brings one closer to spiritual truth. In spiritual practices, silence goes beyond the auditory. In this context, it also means emotional and cerebral stillness, putting oneself into a void that is seen as pure. Auditory silence seems to act as representative of all these types of stillness to many. Calvinists and Quakers incorporate auditory silence into their religious gatherings and services. In fact, the silence that plays a central role in the religious gatherings of the Quakers is sometimes termed 'the pool of silence'^[5]. This term implies something that can easily be broken and, once disturbed, is difficult to still once again. It also implies a silence that is a material presence rather than an absence.

The idea of silence used in Joseph Grigely and Aaron Williamson's early work is the idea of uncomfortable social silence. Grigely and Williamson can go further than Catling because of their deafness. Catling's audience always knows that, even though the silence is uncomfortable, it is chosen by Catling. This lends a type of security because the responsibility for the discomfort and

the silence always belongs to Catling, not to the audience. Grigely and Williamson's audiences, however, often feel that the responsibility belongs to them because the artists are deaf. Grigely and Williamson utilize the perceptions of the deaf as possessors of a romantic type of silence. They do this in a way that can be somewhat sadistic. The writer Edward Hoagland says of his stutter: "I... realiz[ed] that the pain and frustration of a stutter can engender sadism"[6] Hoagland talks about being drawn to place himself in uncomfortable and dangerous situations. Certainly deafness can engender this as well.

Grigely and Williamson share a wish to force the audience into an uncomfortable place similar to the uncomfortable silence often experienced by the deaf in social situations, when hearing people do not know how to deal with the deaf person in their midst. This is supported by an anecdote Brian Catling tells about a Williamson performance, one of his early "Readings" performances. Catling says, "In Cambridge Cris Cheek organises a series of performances in a huge dance hall. Aaron did a reading performance set in between rock bands, the audience did not get it. Then the word spread round that he was deaf. One guy grabbed another mike and said to the audience "Shut the fuck up, he's deaf." [7] Williamson himself talks about his hopes that the audience of his early "Readings" performances would understand that he was trying to subvert the idea of the deaf as idiotic, animal-like mute. This did not happen, though, perhaps because the idea of silence as pure and romantic is so overpowering and rooted in spiritual rites. Instead, the audience wholly earnestly took in Williamson's performances without thinking that irony had any part at all in them.

Joseph Grigely's work is filled with statements that share the kind of stupidity as "Shut the fuck up, he's deaf." "I would think that one advantage to being deaf is not hearing people's rude body noises- I just burped and you didn't hear me but Amy did and thinks I'm a little piglet" [8] and "There can be different sort to escape. Not to hear can be one of it." [9] Even though Grigely's work is less of a confrontation for the audience than Williamson's, it is even more overtly about the sadism of uncomfortable social silence. One part of Grigely's work enjoys taking people's private thoughts shared with him alone, like the "Don't mention the handcuffs to my mum" statement in Grigely's Louisiana installation and placing them out there in the open for everyone to see and possess. Unlike Williamson, though, the silence in Grigely's work is not forced upon the audience, but integrated into the work in a way that the audience might or might not see. Grigely's work is ironic in that it is materially made up of words and conversations. On the surface, it is crowded with what can be seen and is often seen as "noise". Grigely positions noise in the way Williamson sees it in Catling's work: as the seed always present within the pod of silence. [10] Williamson says, "silence and sound do not operate in positive and negative to each other... Rather... sound operates inside and is always returned to silence." [11] It is very true that silence, the uncomfortable social sort of silence, always surrounds the 'visual noise' that reviewers are so fond of saying Grigely's work is made up of. [12] It is the condition that begets this visual noise and that the visual noise always returns to. Grigely, the deaf person in the social situation, is the person that embodies uncomfortable social silence to others.

Interestingly enough, the deaf themselves have not often embraced the idea of silence in daily life. Rarely do the deaf talk about silence. Yet, publications of the culturally deaf community and books about deafness often have 'Silence' in the title. It has seemingly been adopted as a type of blackface minstrel routine, a somewhat ridiculous symbol that has nevertheless been integrated into the culture. The work of the African-American artist Ellen Gallagher, who covers huge sheets of paper with tiny images taken from blackface Americana, might be a good comparison to how Grigely and Williamson use the persona of silence in their work.

An anecdote to illustrate how un-silent the deaf are: In their book *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* [13], Carol Padden and Tom Humphries discuss the noisiness of deaf people; "... he and his young playmates would go into the playroom in the boys' dormitory and invent games that used sound at as loud a volume as they could manage. One game involved a contest to see who

could make the loudest sound. 'Loud,' to them, meant sounds that favoured the lower frequencies. The boys learned somewhere.... that they could make sound louder by projecting it into a corner rather than into the centre of the room[14].... till the hearing residential school counsellors, finally fed up with the boys, would storm into the room, yelling 'You're all nothing but animals!'"[15] It is interesting to note here that deaf people are often called 'the silent people' and animals are not often talked about as silent, although they are sometimes called 'dumb'. It is probably because the main difference between people and animals is often seen to be language. Hearing people often see deaf people as deprived of oral language and therefore as silent. In actuality, it is more correct to say that many deaf people have been deprived of formal education and are in fact not silent, but without language. However, this is not intrinsic to deafness. This is the perception of deafness that Williamson used in his "Readings" performances- without language, but not silent.

What is actual silence? John Cage confronted one aspect of this in his work. Cage effectively says that silence is not an absolute, even though it is sometimes comforting to think of it in that way, in the same way that it is comforting to think of sleep as an absolute. However, all of these silences differ from silence as a constant. It differs even more from silence as an individual constant, as it is to a deaf person. Not speechlessness, not a condition to work towards, not something that rises or falls, or comes and goes. Is this type of silence everything or nothing? Is it a pure silence? Or is silence only pure when it comes as a relief to noise? Where does it exist in relation to noise when it is a constant in life?

In order to think about the silence of the deaf, it is helpful to think about other types of silence that are important in the dynamic of an individual's life. People who stutter experience a certain type of silence. It is interesting to consider that Antonin Artaud, whose writings Derrida responds to in his essay 'La Parole Soufflee', which is about the limitations of language, had a stutter himself; so does Brian Catling. It is no coincidence, then, that both Catling and Artaud feel the limitations of language intensely and that both are inspirational to Aaron Williamson in his work. Artaud rages against language and against constrictions in such words, as "For if there was neither spirit Nor thought, there was the fulminate of a ripe volcano, of a trance-stone, of patience, of tumours, and cooked tumours, and of the bed-sores of a skinned man." [16]

Catling states in response to a question about the physical nature of the experience of stuttering: "My stutter does not stop me from speaking, I just have to invent a vocabulary around it." [17] In another interview, he says: "In the installations and performances, the space between the actions is where the silence grows... There is no silence in or around my stutter. It is a compressing of voice, out of time.... the word is the thing that is trapped." [18] In these statements, we see that Catling's silence is an active presence, and something that grows when allowed. But what kind of a presence is it? Is it the vocal word- the sound -that Catling sees as being trapped, or the word-as-concept? Catling has also talked about how because of his stutter, he knows that boundaries are transmutable. [19] Perhaps post-language concepts [20] apply closely to Catling and Artaud because of the stutter. Perhaps the stutter affects the way Catling and Artaud utilize 'the word' cerebrally, in addition to trapping it vocally. You know the stone better if you trip over it, and stuttering is tripping over words.

In going back to Catling's statement that there is no silence in or around his stutter, we should consider that Catling does hear. He is surrounded by sound, always, perhaps even more intensely because of his complex relationship to speech. It is in matching the sound around him with his own projections that his experience lies. As he says, silence lives only in the gaps between his actions, between the fluttering start-and-stops of his stutter. Catling's silence is perhaps finally not a solid presence. It comes and goes; it is not constant. It is not something that can be marked. Catling's silence is not the pool of silence that the Quakers idealised. Instead, it is the gravel thrown into the pool of noise, a rock that disrupts it. Catling experiences silence as disruptive to noise, not noise as being disruptive to silence as the Quaker metaphor suggests.

Catling's silence is not something solid, like a stone, but something that is crumbly and scattered in a distorted way, like gravel. Catling says of his silence "...being able to limit or control sight but not sound. So that separation of the mass is always a mysterious thing to me, the divide of sound like water."^[21] Rousseau says that you can control sight by opening or shutting your eyes; there is nothing in experience of sound to parallel this^[22]. Except, perhaps, a stutter. Like an eye shutting, which forces you to cut your sight off for a few seconds, a stutter forces you to stop vocalizing for a few seconds. It makes you realise the boundaries of the voice.

A stutter straddles the experience of not being able to talk and the experience of being able to talk. The experience of being mute perhaps belongs to this type of silence as well, but perhaps the rock of mutism is larger and more solid, because the condition is more absolute than a stutter.

However, both the gravel of a stutter and the rock of mutism are thrown into a pool of noise, disrupting it. The silence of a stutter and of mutism is the act of being silent. With deaf people, on the other hand, the silence is the experience of silence, not the act of being silent. The earlier anecdote about deaf children experimenting with making noise testifies to this. For the deaf, the pool is one of silence and noise is the rock thrown into it to mark it. Silence is the constant, not noise.

As Aaron Williamson says, "Silence is what we say when we mean what we don't have to say it with. Silence is what we say we mean when we say that we don't have it. Silence is a saying which means very little."^[23] Silence means nothing to the deaf because it is the constant. Artaud and Catling do not talk much about noise, but rather silence or the constraints of words, because that is the rock that they trip over, not noise. Williamson and Grigely do not talk much about silence, but about noise, because that is the rock thrown into their pool of silence. Silence itself is not the rock. For the deaf children shouting in the corners of their shower, also, silence was not something to be explored; noise was. To call the deaf 'the silent people' is like calling the hearing 'the noisy people'. It is ridiculous to term a people by their constant because the constant is exactly the thing that they do not notice.

Interestingly enough, although perhaps naturally enough, both Grigely and Williamson have moved on from using social silence in their work to using noise in relationship to silence. The emphasis is on "in relationship to silence". Grigely and Williamson are not using noise in itself. Christian Marclay is one example of an artist who uses noise in itself. Although Marclay always talks about visual ways of making noise and some of his work is very similar to Grigely's (his *Telephones* video, for example, is a montage of film clips of people talking on the phone, without sound) the common link in Marclay's work is music and sound in itself. Marclay asks what music is. He does not ask what noise itself is, as opposed to silence, as Grigely and Williamson do. It is a way of approaching noise that perhaps is unique to those who experience the pool of silence.

In Grigely's 2003 solo show at New York's Cohan, Leslie, and Browne, *Vox Populi*, he showed five dog sculptures as well as a poster made up of statements he collected from the notes he had used in his work over the years and then typed up. The dog sculptures were the culmination of a fascination Grigely had developed over the years with images of people talking. His 1998 bookwork *Conversation Pieces* contains his trademark notes laid opposite images collected from paintings over the ages. Many of these images are of people talking and animals making noises. The 1997 MIT exhibition Grigely held with Kathleen Gilje, *Recovering Lost Fictions: Caravaggio's Musicians* explores the symbolism behind *Musicians*. Grigely is fascinated with the thing that is not in these paintings: sound. Grigely is interested in representing the physical changes that sounds bring to its environment. Grigely's models for the dogs used in the 2003 exhibit were dogs in Canaletto paintings that, via cocked ears and body language, revealed to the viewer where the action was. By reproducing these dogs as sculptures alongside his collage of written statements, Grigely hoped that *Vox Populi* would become about something different than his

previous exhibitions: noise, actual auditory noise, as opposed to what had been termed 'visual noise' in previous exhibitions. A bookwork accompanied these works, as well. The bookwork included the parts of Canaletto paintings that contained dogs, alongside photographs of real-life dogs reacting to environmental noise.

In Williamson's 2001 book *Hearing things*, Williamson explores sound in the same naïve, curious way as the little boys shouting in the corner in the earlier anecdote. He performs, so-called 'silently', and then feeds the sounds produced by these performances through 'sophisticated' speech recognition software that interprets the sounds as words. Williamson presents the results as poetry, verses such as "Law low rule will la la little low are rural in a look a new knee in little leading the blue at new"[24], which he says he got from the sound of a deck of cards being shuffled. This little-deaf-boy fascination with how noise is interpreted and represented also showed up in a 2000 performance/installation at Angel Row Gallery, where he assigned objects to a series of head sounds (sneeze, gasp, cough, et cetera), and then performed a specific action with each object. This fascination with the way sounds are translated- into words, into physical representations- has given away to a new way of viewing sounds in Williamson's newest work.

In Williamson's more recent performances, he explores markings and violent traces. In one performance, given in the Arctic to an audience from the Inuit community, Williamson buried his arm into the middle of a block of ice and held it up, his arm visibly trembling under the strain and his face reddening, until it was not possible to hold the block up any longer and his arm 'melted' into the ground. He then removed his hand from the block, stripped and, using claw-like fingernails, scratched the block of ice and himself, leaving visible red marks all over his body, continuing until warmth came back into his hand.

Williamson said of the performance: "Here as with other pieces there is an analogy to deafness because of the process of 'distressing' surfaces.... There's a danger that the 'ice piece' could be read metaphorically but for me it is a metonymy for the process because I am working 'live' sculpturally at making an image. To deplete a surface, carve a figure etc from a block." [25]

In his past performances, Williamson was seen as assaulting the viewers with representations of noise in vain struggle against his deafness. *Time-Out* said about an early performance: "Sibilant splinters echoing his own tinnitus, machine-gunning the page, ricocheting against our smug complacent ears." It is very tidy to think of Williamson as progressing from that to 'carving' silence by marking it and attempting to shape it in the recent Arctic Circle performance.

Williamson utilizes noise as violent, noise as red marks distressing silence. Breaking the pool of silence with noise can be considered an almost violent act, a wish to mark something. To go back to Artaud, Catling, and Hoagland as possessors of the parallel pool of noise, they do seem to have a near-violent way of dealing with silence (their 'rock'.) Because they experience silence as repressive and something to be fought against, they wish to burst words apart, to break free of words and of the repression they feel

Referring back to the Hoagland quotation about his stutter engendering a type of sadism, perhaps even the concept of noise is a type of sadism for the deaf.[26] . Perhaps this is why deafness appeals to the spiritual practices of some faiths- because sound as a violent marking has the potential to never enter the picture. The pool of silence has the potential to remain intact, in a way that the pool of noise can never be continuous, because noise comes and goes. If we agree with Catling and Williamson, noise always exists inside of a pod of silence, anyway.

Hoagland stated about his stutter: "...the clichés of the time were Dostoyevskian and I'd swallowed them: that suffering was a catalyst or philosopher's stone.... I'd suffered from and did regard my stutter as a concentrating, even purifying experience, but not cathartic, and much more of a handicap in gathering material than a lens to process it." [27] Along this vein, Joe

Grigely quotes from a Woody Allen movie where the Allen character says, "Why are the disabled always so cranky?"

Perhaps another way that the two types of silence differ is that the silence of the mute and the stutterers is not a lens to process material. Processing is about acquiring. This type of silence certainly affects human interaction and ability to get information from others; however, the manner in which one daily acquires information about the world is not affected. In deafness, it is, and so might be viewed as more of a lens; after all, silence can be said to surround the very notion of language, and perhaps this is yet another meaning for the pool of silence of the deaf.

[1] At funerals, weddings, and christenings, everyone is supposed to be silent.

[2] Aaron Williamson, *Hearing things* (London: Book Works, 2001), p. 8.

[3] Aaron Williamson, 'Audible WITHIN: Brian Catling's Performance Soundings', *Performance Research* 4(3), p. 55.

[4] See the writings of Jennifer Nelson, especially her dissertation.

[5] Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years: The History and Beliefs of the Society of Friends Since George Fox Started the Quaker Movement* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1993), p. 63

[6] Edward Hoagland, *Compass Points: How I Lived* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 147.

[7] Interview with the artist via pen and paper, 12 November 2003.

[8] Joseph Grigely, *Blueberry Surprise*, 2003.

[9] Joseph Grigely, *Figures of Speech*, 1995.

[10] Williamson is responding to Jonathan Ree regarding this theory, which originally came from Peter Van Musschenbrock and other eighteenth-century scientists. Ree discredits this theory; Williamson adopts it again.

[11] Aaron Williamson, 'Audible WITHIN: Brian Catling's Performance Soundings', *Performance Research* 4(3), p. 52.

[12] In the brochure for the Grigely show mentioned previously, which was part of an ongoing series titled *Conversations with the Hearing*, Debra Singer, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Whitney, quotes Grigely as saying "We all know pretty much what a conversation sounds like- but what does a conversation look like?" Singer then talks about "implied auditory experience through visual means" and "dense auditory experience of overlapping voices."

[13] This book is rather ironically titled; is the use of the word 'voices' intentional? One hopes so!

[14] This is a common story among deaf people; the author can remember shouting in corners in the same way herself, many times, and even remembers her very dignified father doing it in an elevator on a family holiday!

[15] Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 95-96

[16] Antonin Artaud, *Artaud Anthology* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965), p. 157.

[17] Interview with the artist via pen and paper, 20 October 2003.

[18] Interview with the artist via pen and paper, 12 November 2003.

[19] Interview with the artist via pen and paper, 20 October 2003.

[20] For more on post-language concepts, e.g. ideas about what comes after language, see Lyn Heijnan, Fanny Howe, Susan Howe, Michael Davidson

[21] Interview with the artist, 12 November 2003.

[22] You can cover your ears, of course. But this does not happen ritually throughout the day as closing your eyes does.

[23] Aaron Williamson, *Hearing things* (London: Book Works, 2001), p. 10.

[24] Aaron Williamson, *Hearing things* (London: Book Works, 2001), p.21.

[25] Interview with the artist via pen and paper, 29 May 2003.

[26] The author remembers, as a child, being fascinated with her own voice as it bubbled up in her throat, just as a novelty. It felt foreign and odd. Opera singers and people singing, clutched

with emotion, were fascinating for the same reason. It felt uncomfortable, painful, and funny watching these people, and isn't that what sadism is?

[27] Hoagland, p. 178.