

Resonating the Visual: Printmaking and Sound Practice

[Magda Stawarska-Beavan]

Cross disciplinary practice has long been established in contemporary fine art but how might working in one discipline, influence that approach taken in another, especially in the context of printmaking and sound art?

I am interested in how one method of creative technological practice informs and translates to others, for example how working with printmaking can influence the way artists approach sound or music and vice versa, how working with sound, deep listening, can change the way we create and read the visual image. The elements of printmaking techniques such as layering, transparency, and viscosity can readily be recognised in the creation of sound compositions but equally the rhythm, passage of time and performance can also be read in examples of printmaking where moving image qualities flow back and feed into the works on paper. In particular, I am interested in how the visualisation of sound can affect the image making and how the ephemeral qualities of sound and memories translate into printmaking forms.

I will discuss the issues referring to the examples of artwork presented in the exhibition *Sounds Like Her* at New Art Exchange¹, Nottingham which was on show from October to January 2017. *Sounds Like Her* is a groundbreaking exhibition, set to broaden existing approaches to sound. Although the main focus of the curator, Christine Eyene, is sound art, there is a very strong representation of visual artwork, so the viewer is invited to perceive sound not only in an auditory way but also visually.

Christine Sun-Kim's work is a great example of a practice which talks about the materiality of sound in the form of coded drawings and diagrams. The artist has been deaf since birth, so she perceives sound with her body rather than her auditory system.

¹ Sounds Like Her – Exhibition Curated by Christina Eyene in collaboration with Melanie Kidd in New Art Exchange, Nottingham, 15th October 2017 – 7th January 2018

She has developed a system of visual communication using musical notation, American Sign Language, and an expressive matrix of graphic symbols, to represent sound, silence and her awareness of musical forms or characteristics of voice. Looking at her work, I feel that she is conveying/translating the music to images with an extraordinary sensitivity.

Although it is a very personal and subjective account of experiencing the sound, the innovative visualisation invites the viewer to be part of that experience. To decipher the work, we have to access the code of musical notation or ASL. This barrier and struggle mirrors her experiences, accessing the soundscape of hearing people.

To illustrate how visually she thinks about sound, I will relay one of her quotes. She is describing her work with different sign language interpreters, and how this translates to works on paper:

“I work with a large number of ASL interpreters, and that means my voice comes in different colourful characters. No interpreter is the same, no personality is the same, no voice is the same. I have all different voices for specific situations — a blue voice for fancy talks, a purple voice for social settings, an orange voice for conferences, a red voice for therapy sessions and so on. Putting all my voices together looks like a rainbow ... and that would be my ideal voice. I chose not to use the actual colours in this drawing; I think the hand-drawn lines and texts better express my idea.”²

Here Christine Sun Kim is talking about the musical symbols such as “P” for piano in her work and her relationship with the concept of silence:

“Although people often associate silence with deafness, when I started employing sound in my art I saw how little I actually knew about silence. That’s when I realized that I could use musical symbols to communicate some of my sensory experiences. “P” is the musical symbol for “piano.” If you see it on a score, you play quietly. If you see two P’s, you play more

² Sum-Kim, Christine (2015), “*Gallery: Beautiful drawings show the music of sign language*”, TED Talk, by TED ideas.ted.com/gallery-beautiful-drawings-show-the-music-of-sign-language (accessed 19th March 2018)

quietly. The more P's, the more quietness. But you could never get to the point of complete silence. Silence, is an obscure sound"³

When asked, what she thinks the visitors will take away from her show, she replies
*"I hope they leave, understanding that voices are not only sound, they can be visual as well"*⁴

In the works such as *Jazz Music Upstairs* and *Very Fast Rap Song* using legato, piano, and music notes, she visualises her interpretation of music:

The curator of *Sounds Like Her* exhibition, Christine Eyene, strategically placed my work on the opposite wall to Christine Sum Kim, as the work is in a dialogue, as she points out in the catalogue text: *"... Kim plays with different forms of musical notation with multiple crotchets or ties which, just like in Magda Stawarska-Beavan's work on paper, may call for a form of decoding"* ⁵

The code I use in *Transliteration* (2011) the set of screenprints prints, is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). As Sum-Kim's work requires some knowledge of musical notation; reading my work requires some basic knowledge of phonetics.

I use IPA to preserve the temporary quality of sound as a permanent visual artefact. The numerous subtle marks on black paper and elaborate typographical arrangements engage the viewers on a visual level, but the phonetic text obstructs the reading process. The meaning is coded.

The wave of the lines and the flow of the text on paper imitates the attribute of a soundwave, the text appears in different colours and sizes to captivate the viewer and navigate the reader through, in a less conventional way. The viewer is led to look for familiar signs in the text but, to break the code they must sound out the signs and listen to their own voice in order to decode the narrative.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Eyene, Christine and Kidd, Melanie "Sounds Like Her – Gender, Sound Art & Sonic Cultures", Exhibition Guide, NAE (2017) p17

Any person able to read phonetics could still pronounce the words correctly without necessarily understanding their meaning. This work plays on the idea of reading as a dual process that involves reading a text on a semantic level, or reading words and signs as visual objects. The first print in *Transliteration (2011)* is a transcript of tongue twisters in English and Polish, highlighting the characteristics in the sound patterns, which are difficult for a child or foreign learner. In the other prints, the text is based on a bilingual conversation where one person speaks Polish and the other understands the language but chooses to answer in English (passive bilingualism).

The person, who can only understand one of those languages, by decoding the key of IPA, can still correctly pronounce the words in the unfamiliar language and is therefore able to speak it without semantic understanding. The piece creates a tension between inclusion and exclusion as one experiences the intimacy of a conversation that is never fully revealed.

I will point to the connection to Christine Sun Kim's work once more:

"being deaf

in a world of sound

*is like living in a foreign country, blindly following the cultural rules, customs and behaviours without ever questioning them"*⁶

In *Mother Tongue (2009)*, also included in the exhibition, I am trying to represent the passage of time and preserve the ephemeral moments in the development of a child's relationship with language. This is essentially an investigation into the parental obsession with passing on our identity to our children through language.

I use the recorded sounds of my child's bilingual speech development, from his first noises when he was born, to the words and sentences that he has spoken since; from birth to three years old.

⁶ Sum-Kim, Christine (2015), Op.cit

The three prints depict recognizable visual representations of sound such as waveforms and phonetic symbols. These marks are visual artefacts of temporal sounds. Although these particular marks are associated with the objectivity of technology and linguistics, the refined use of aesthetics; colour tone and scale bring to the work a level of personal account.

As with Christine Sum-Kim, I think about my voice but also language, in colour, i.e. *Mother Tongue II* (2009); the colour of the soundwave of my child's voice is turquoise blue, mine is crimson red and the father's dark emerald green.

In *Mother Tongue IV* (2009), again using the phonetic script, I documented my son's speech from his first scream, made while being born, to the more linguistically recognisable sounds as he acquires the language, both in English and Polish as he interweaves both languages together in his 3 year old speech pattern.

The colour changes as the time progresses, the blue colour represents the gurgling sounds produced by any baby across the globe, then as he starts to produce the syllables which I can differentiate as Polish or English, the colour changes from light blue to blue-purple or crimson-purple.

My aim is to first engage the viewer visually with the work, by drawing them to these delicate marks on the paper, to try to decipher the phonetic bilingual text and to interpret the waveforms.

Linda O'Keefe in the work *'Hybrid Soundscapes I, II, III, and IV* (2017), presented in the *Sounds Like Her* exhibition, in a transdisciplinary manner, puts together visual image with the soundscape to address the environmental issues of four different locations. Composing with visual elements which represent sound, present or absent in the location, in combination with images signifying the collecting of the data, she is creating a visual landscape of the soundscape. The work shows the impact of renewable technology on the sonic environment and the community. With the graphic elements, such as these circular shapes, she brings the analogy of the ripple and Doppler effect, drawing our attention to the stretched in time duration of this impact.

In my series of prints *Krakow to Venice in 12 hours (2013)*, which are part of a 12 hours, 8-channel audio installation, I recorded the soundscape of 12 cities at a particular time of day. The prints represent the passage of time while I move through a geographical location. As an outsider, I am looking for key points within the urban space, but the city imposes its structure and creates a unique pattern for each of the drawings. The coloured dots on the map point to the key locations where the recordings took place, such as train stations and city squares. The set of prints is divided to lines based on the 12-hour clock but they are also inspired by the timeline of the audio editing software. Each city is signified by a different colour. I carefully mixed the colours while listening back to the recordings trying to, in a manner of synaesthesia, represent the sound and my relationship to the place in colour. In the audio part of the installation, I layer rhythms and ambiences to create an hour long sound composition for each of the cities. I transfer the layering methods I used in printmaking to working with sound.

In both the prints and the audio there is a rhythmic voice whispering in the native language of the location a number per second.

jeden, dwa, trzy, cztery, piec..... eins zwei drei....

To summarise : In the aforementioned examples, we can see how the boundary of one practice seeps into another and the experience of one informs the other. Looking at Christine Sum Kim's work we can hear the sound. It is very clear, how past and present experiences with printmaking are transferable and inform the way Linda O'Keeffe or myself approach sound practice.

In the recent work *Wer/Who (2017)* which is in the form of a split screen moving image (also included in the *Sounds Like Her* exhibition) I made a film by animating still images, playing them in the rhythm of a spoken voice alongside motion footage of scenes of Vienna with the camera in a locked, static position.

This locked shot moving image is intended to look like a still image, and gives the viewer a chance to slow down and reflect, as the colour in the *Krakow to Venice* prints gives us the

opportunity for contemplation and reflection. The starting point for the narration in the *Wer/Who* (2017) piece was the visualisation of sound by listening to the soundscape, which then triggers memories.

This collaborative element is constant in my work. In the near future, I am planning to work in tandem with musicians who once were strangers to the city but who now understand the place in a different way to the people who have lived there all their lives. This approach will add another layer to what it means to respond and what it means to the musicians to have the power to contribute their version and their 'colourscape' of place. This new body of work will develop in the form of printmaking, sound art or a combination of both.