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Making Sounds

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Making Sounds

By

Patrick Costello

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Combined Media, Hunter College, The City University of New York

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May 20, 2018
Date
Constance Dejong
Signature

May 20, 2018
Date
Alexandro Segade
Signature of Second Reader
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Making Sounds

I.

I come from a family of working class religious people -- white Mormons from Idaho and white Irish Catholics from New Jersey. My grandparents drove trucks, worked on the railroads, and farmed. I grew up coveting my grandmother’s homemade square-dancing dresses, hoping that one day, I too would be a rodeo queen. I remember feeling titillated by my grandfather’s modest collection of mass-produced paintings and sculptures depicting rugged cowboys riding bucking broncos or bare-chested Native American warriors with their heads lowered in defeat. I remember my small self feeling disturbed and saddened by the manifest destiny narratives of the American west, but at the same time, it was hard for me to imagine another perspective about U.S. history. I wanted to be a country singer, and those name-in-lights daydreams seemed dependent upon a landscape dominated by white settlers and courageous cowboys.

I invented PJ Idaho, my gymnast country singer alter ego, after returning home to Virginia Beach from a summer visit to my grandparents in Idaho Falls. The I-95 corridor seethed with energy as Monarch butterflies started their migration south for the winter, and I flipped and sang toward the epic journey of my true calling. PJ Idaho held my one-way ticket to fame and fortune. I designed fringed western wear that my mom sewed for me, wrote yodel-tinged country tunes, and memorized my stage show tumbling choreography.

PJ was my first attempt to articulate a personal sense of queer identity. Before I had words, queer friends, or sexual experiences, I had a country music persona. PJ Idaho unfolded like a kind of biomimetic survival strategy, at exactly the point when I started to get bullied in
school for my gay voice and flamboyant ensembles. I had more in common with the Monarch butterflies than I knew. Monarchs are a classic example of aposematism, or “warning coloration.” Their iconic orange and black patterned wings warn predators of their toxicity; a visual strategy for protection. If PJ was a wild and aspirational project, it was also an attempt at making a coping mechanism. If I could not camouflaging myself in my fey understanding of masculinity, then I would wear PJ’s image as a shield.

Aposematism didn’t do much for me in grade school, as I continued to get pummeled. But I’m 32 now, and in the last few years, PJ’s revival has become a site where I can stage complicated conversations about my personal understanding of masculinity, queerness, and the construction of whiteness in the United States. I investigate these ideas physically, using my voice, acrobatics, and gymnastics training routines. I believe that people hold trauma in the tightened corners of their bodies, and that sometimes, a physical practice can dislodge, uncover, and maybe even heal things more effectively than trying to work through them cognitively.

II.

We stood shoulder to shoulder on a set of rickety wooden bleachers positioned awkwardly on lumpy earth around a large fire pit. The Northeast Kingdom of Vermont is chilly, even in June, especially when the sun isn’t around to warm the back of your neck, or the tip of your nose. I wore a pair of perfectly worn-in black skinny jeans and my 2012-trademark sweatshirt: a teal thrift store find, with three rows of personified teeth painted on it, each row helping to depict a before, during, and after narrative of getting braces. The middle row was very nervous about the little squares of wire-bound metal painted over their tooth face
molars. My own teeth buzzed a little and my body shook slightly, two physical responses indicating that I was also a little nervous, inadequately dressed, and hungry.

The fire pit billowed smoke; someone had started the blaze with wet wood again. About forty-five humans surrounded that smoldering and mercurial carbon creature, as we learned the complex vocal harmonies of the song “One Day More,” from the musical Les Miserables. If the fire was our humble sun that evening, we orbited close to it, even though the smoke stung our throats and eyes as it swirled around us. Our circle of bodies nestled within a larger ellipse of grassy field dotted with four small wood shacks, a faded yellow and red striped circus tent, and an outdoor kitchen with its provisional eating area delineated by a blue tarp roof. Outside that larger hub of human activity, the vast constellations of Sugar Maples, American Beeches, and White Ash trees hid our camping tents as well as three rustic outhouses, which boasted lace curtains and stunning views of the wilderness. A family of black bears occasionally lumbered through all of it, perpetually in search of our dumpstered stash of expired dark-chocolate Reese’s Cups.

About sixty of us ate three square meals a day that June, cooked by our friends in that tiny outdoor kitchen. Those meals regularly punctuated fourteen-hour workdays wherein we rehearsed a full production of Les Misérables (which we renamed Less Miserable), built out of debris and paper mache and scrappy resourcefulness. That daily routine felt powerful; I would wake up in my tent each morning and cry a little bit -- sometimes out of elation and sometimes because of the daunting intensity of our chosen undertaking. Somehow, we prevailed. At the end of the month, we embarked upon a weeklong sold-out tour of our rogue version of that
three-and-a-half-hour musical, bumbling down the east coast in two vegetable oil-powered school buses, a minivan, a truck, and a station wagon.

We mastered most of the soaring, virtuosic singing, handcrafted Les Mis’ emblematic revolving stage, and sewed heaping piles of costumes on an almost non-existent budget. But, I don't think it mattered that our production approximated a professional version of the show with a certain degree of accuracy. And I don't think we needed to be making Les Mis, specifically. It could have been any show, as long as it was wildly ambitious for us to attempt it. The more impossible, the better. What mattered seemed to be more about making things happen that we wanted to see in the world. Or really, making a world happen around values and processes and dynamics we wanted to embody.

III.

I live with six other people and an occasional rat in a commercial space one block away from the East River’s Buttermilk Channel, in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn. The East River, despite its name, actually constitutes a tidal estuary, fed by the Bronx River, Flushing River, Harlem River, and Newtown Creek. Its brackish waters flow into the New York Bay and eventually, the Atlantic Ocean. Its dramatic tidal activity rhythmically submerges and reveals the slowly recovering oyster populations whose former abundance created skyscraper-like piles when the Lenni Lenape people lived here, well before European settlement. Very few ecological features from that time still exist; absences that indicate the radical and mostly irreversible transformations of this place.

Electrical outlets perforate the ceiling of my home in long rows, regular reminders that this space at some point housed a chandelier showroom. And just before my friends and I came
here, our crumbling brick warehouse contained a boutique bicycle factory and showroom. When we arrived a year-and-a-half ago, my housemate Mitchell made and installed four new windows and built out several bedrooms. Lizzie, another housemate, designed and fabricated our kitchen counters, and our friend George redid the plumbing – he’d done something similar at his shack upstate. Alex, our resident amateur electrical expert worked on the space’s wiring problems, and the rest of us diligently painted every corner of our new abode.

Our home’s genesis story constitutes a well-documented cliché of artist living situations in New York City. From our ramshackle rooftop garden to our shared in-home studio space complete with second-hand sewing machines, we have realized a particular version of the American dream. Our customized, leftist-collective image feels partially reclaimed from mainstream notions of that idea, but I still can’t deny its relationship to it. Sometimes I feel like a cartoon of myself riding my single-speed road bike around the neighborhood, or walking down the sidewalk trying to greet and make eye contact with each neighbor I pass. I shudder at the constant signs that my housemates and I are part of a massive wave of outsiders that will flood this low-lying coastal neighborhood, wreaking a different kind of destruction than Hurricane Sandy did in 2012, before our arrival to this place.

I feel uncomfortable in my body a lot of the time. I’m aware of how identifying/being perceived as male and white allows me to move through the world with certain ease. I try to act in ways that are informed by that awareness. But I still feel like my analysis of power as it intersects with race, gender, and class is riddled with holes. And I can see that because I act in ways that benefit my self-interests, I am perpetuating injustice every day. Making ambitious projects with other people has become a central method by which I can process and test ideas
about those dynamics. Can I support myself (materially, spiritually, physically) doing work that subtly shifts, or at least clearly questions the dominant narratives of power? Does working within an unjust and exploitative economic system cancel out my thoughtful intentions?

I think in many ways yes, unfortunately. But also no, maybe? I actively pursue projects that help me develop strategies for working with groups of people toward a common goal. 

Essentially a modernist approach to creation and change, for sure -- toggling between the individual and the collective to reach some idealized future order. But I think something weird happens when these projects manifest as performative experiments, relying on the iterative and the ephemeral as contexts. Working in this way enables me to prioritize the ecology of relationships within and around a temporary, fixed point.

IV.

Almost one month ago, my MFA thesis show opened at Hunter College’s 205 Hudson Gallery. Working with my housemate Mitchell, we had designed and constructed a twelve-foot tall plywood structure complete with two doors and a partially open roof. We made it with specific acoustics in mind – it was a choir room. Gallery visitors signed up on lists posted outside the room to enter the space at specific time slots. Each group of ten to twenty people formed a choir and learned a choral song that I co-wrote and arranged with Emily Bate, a Philadelphia-based musician and composer. A rotating group of choir directors including Anna Young, DeCarol Davis, Chenda Cope, Emily, and I taught the song to participants, often working in teams of two or three. The participants learned to sing the song together and then performed it only for one another, becoming both the audience and the performers in an experience that
would never again be re-created under the same conditions. Over the course of the two-and-a-half week show, we performed with eight different groups of people.

In many ways, the piece, entitled “People Making Sounds With Their Mouths In A Circle” was a project that highlighted limits and limitations. Only a small number of gallery visitors could fully experience the participatory work, because of the size of the constructed space, and because the piece encouraged a self-selecting audience – people who were open to singing with others in a group setting. Furthermore, those participants often had some connection to me, and an investment in the things I make. I later learned that when participants sang the complex vocal harmonies and arrangements in the song, they often had difficulty hearing the full composition because they had to focus so much on their own vocal part. For every moment of transcendent collectivity, the performance asked us to ground in the awkwardness of where we were, and what we were doing.

In her essay “The Persistence of Vision”, Donna Haraway writes, “We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings that situated knowledges make possible. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (Haraway, 684). I think a lot about her words when I’m making things, and this essay proved a critical component in processing this piece. Haraway’s words make me feel like there may be some space around, within, and between tired binary modes of thought. And inside the singing room, time after time, I felt glimmers of that idea in action. If the piece was generated from and subject to certain limitations, it also added up to something more than the sum of its parts. My relationships with skilled fabricators and choral arrangers allowed for the piece to be more complex than something I could manage on my own. The song’s multiple singing parts
allowed for the aural production of simultaneous chords. And the sound leaking out of the room during a performance created another audience in the gallery, of people catching bits of disembodied melodies.

V.

Monarch butterflies will only lay their eggs on Asclepias species of plants, or milkweeds. A friend recently told me that new research shows that the butterflies will even come back to the exact same plant, year after year. This hyper-specific pollinator/plant relationship allows for both organisms to flourish in the world. Milkweeds provide monarch egg habitat and food for the larval stage of the insect’s life cycle, and then the mature butterflies help pollinate the flowers of the plant, allowing it to regenerate and spread every spring.

This system only functions because of a complex conversation between the organisms. The milkweed produces toxins and a white milky fluid called latex, discouraging the monarchs from consuming too much of the plant. In response, the monarch caterpillars will eat the veins of the leaves or the petioles to stop the flow of the latex and avoid the toxic, sticky substance. Still, the milkweed’s defense systems kill significant percentages of newly hatched monarch caterpillars every year. Factor in changes in climate, the presence of weather and environmental phenomena that affect plant health, or natural predators, and you’ve got a performance built from a series of interactions that is impossible to comprehensively understand from any singular position.
Works Cited

Image List

Figure I *Installation View*, 11’ x 11’ x 11’ wood structure, 11” x 17” song sheets (350), packing blankets, rug pad, ceramic bowl of plastic fruits with audio playing devices.

Figure II *Detail (Inside the Singing Room)*

Figure III *Detail (Song Sheets)*

Figure IV *Performance Documentation*

Figure V *Performance Documentation*

Figure VI *Performance Documentation*
"PEOPLE MAKING SOUNDS WITH THEIR MOUTHS IN A CIRCLE"

INTRODUCTION
I am the one who sings, I am the one who dances,
I am the one who tells the stories...

CHORUS ONE
I don't really know the words here to tell a story...

CHORUS TWO
Oh water rises, it does, it does, it rises...

Laid back and change

1. Ta, web, ta, web, ta, web, 3, 2, 1, fall
2. Ta, web, ta, web, ta, web, 3, 2, 1, fall
3. Oh no, we are plenty giving up direct plans to rain
4. Oh no, we are plenty giving up direct plans to rain
5. Oh no, we are plenty giving up direct plans to rain
6. Oh no, we are plenty giving up direct plans to rain
7. I'm not emotional

SECOND TIME
a river of sand is a river of sand,
rapids and rocks are shining,
also a good pool, a good pool, we are good people, a snake!
are we shining? we are shining?

BASS 1
All (2x)

BASS 2

DRUMMER

SAY AWAY SAT AWAY SAT AWAY I am emotional.

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