



SONIA LEBER AND DAVID CHESWORTH

SONIA LEBER, BORN 1959 IN MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA
DAVID CHESWORTH, BORN 1958 IN STOKE-ON-TRENT, ENGLAND
LIVE AND WORK IN MELBOURNE

Sonia Leber and David Chesworth's *This Is Before We Disappear From View*, 2014, exists significantly in the realm of the imaginary. The ultimate power of their sound work resides in the activated unconscious of the visitor, who must grapple with an overwhelming barrage of sensory stimuli. The artists use vocal sounds – and a particular sonic configuration known as a Shepard tone – built up from recordings of over 100 individual voices, which, brought together as a kind of choir of poltergeists, rise and rise, in never-ending escalations. The result is proto-musical and primal; pre-linguistic.

Leber and Chesworth often work with architecture as a framing device, fascinated by how forms both natural and man-made act on us in particular ways. Situated on Cockatoo Island, with its mixed dark and industrial history, it is as if Leber and Chesworth have summoned the spirits of the place – releasing them from their time prison to once again inhabit the spaces of incarceration and labour. The structure of the disused coal store, the high walls of which obscure vision, evokes a sense of enclosure, a holding place or a dead end. We are near the city, but apart from it; close to the water, still it remains out of view. We may look up into the vast sky above and feel its limitlessness, while remaining firmly rooted to the ground. Leber and Chesworth's multitude of ecstatic voices fly above, around and into the walled space, suggesting another dimension, another place. And in this environ, a single voice is also heard in measured, staccato bursts. Robotic, synthesized and genderless, it delivers instructions, admonishments and encouragements – dogma. It is both overlord and oracle.

Leber and Chesworth utilise the uncanny aspects of sound in a similar way to how it is frequently used in cinema, where a haunting, suspenseful atmosphere is created by dislodging sound from a visual context. Set adrift from the vessel of person or thing, sound becomes a dramatic character of its own – what French writer and composer Michel Chion, after Pierre Schaeffer, has called 'acousmatic presence'.¹ Leber and Chesworth conjure auditory phantoms, set free to lurk in shadows, breathe down necks,

whistle in the dark, scream, creak, bang and challenge our general expectation of ocular mastery. Like a kind of gestalt therapy experience, we are required to forgo absolute knowledge for an instinctual encounter that may at times be overwhelming. Darkness lurks in the piece, and moments of frivolity have hysterical aspects.

The dramatic *This Is Before We Disappear From View* is an overloaded sound experience in which there is no end, clarification or catharsis, only a mass accumulation of human sounds in tumultuous excess and endless repetition – a sensory assault both exhilarating and defeating.

1 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, p. 188

Sonia Leber and David Chesworth have been collaborating since 1996. Their recent solo exhibitions include 'Zaum Tractor', Gridchinhall, Moscow (2013); 'Space-Shifter', Detached, Hobart (2012); Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (2011); and Conical, Melbourne (2009); and 'Almost Always Everywhere Apparent', Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (2011); Mildura Arts Centre (2008); and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2007). Their work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions, including 'Melbourne Now', National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2013–2014); 'Cooperation Territory', 16th LINE art gallery and MAKARONKA Art Center, Rostov-on-Don (2013); 'Spaced: Art Out of Place', Fremantle Art Centre (2012); 'In camera and in public', Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2011); Madrid Abierto (2007); and Melbourne International Arts Festival (2004). Leber and Chesworth were finalists in the Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture 2011 and have been commissioned to create site-specific works for public spaces in Australia, New Zealand, Wales and Slovenia.

This Is Before We Disappear From View, 2014
(process image), 16-channel audio. Courtesy the
artists and Fehily Contemporary, Melbourne