

Ghost Stories and Eidolic Speculations

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Eidola: installation view. 2009

In a sense, every sound is a ghost. This is why we look for the sources of sounds, trying to place and identify them: we are never without sound—we even hear silence, sounds of things that are not there—and we are consequently always hunting down these haunted moments, to find out more about them, and to also always hear more as a result of our directed attention. It was Albert Camus who famously demanded philosophical accountability from the universe—he was answered in silence—and indeed, with this first story of silence as a guide, we might pause to remember that when all is quiet and calm, we can still hear blood circulate through our veins, and the faint rhythms of a heartbeat that insists on a regular rupturing of this universal quietude. The body is the ghost of a question such as this, a perpetual, if gentle, chatter and thump—a rattling of corporeal chains—that suggests that we too are ghosts and that to be alive is to be haunted... by the universe, by our own bodies... by our own imperatives to make sense where there is none...

Conversely, if paradoxically, in a sense every ghost is a sound too, a lingering heartbeat that came from somewhere and somehow strangely persists; persists, perhaps, precisely because its strangeness refuses to be reincorporated back into a world of the everyday. Ghosts—like sounds—have no material presence, the attribution of causality to their manifestation is a matter of discursive convenience rather than a quality of the encounter. Ghosts separate from their origins to travel—to persist out of body—until they encounter us and reintegrate into an experience of the synthesized moment. But sounds do this too, waving goodbye to their origins to oscillate immaterially—sonic projectiles that travel as missiles from object or body or mouth until the waves crash back into the ear itself, horizon for the reintegration of sound. Always separate from their origins, if only by a moment of time, sounds are inevitably ghosts from the past that haunt us with their relentless chatter even while their voices dissipate into the world, the speed of their fading exactly equal to the speed of encounter itself... their own imperatives to not make sense, even where there is some...

This sense, however, depends on how we see it. Strangely, there is a doubled bias of sound and vision, a paradox of absences and encounter that is played out in their underlying tension: to see something is already to have answered the question of sound—if only because light is a ghost that travels that slight bit faster. And yet, by the time we actually hear anything, the sight itself is long gone—already refreshed by the next wave of illuminated presence. Taken literally, the perceptual world is one of doubled ghosts where the dubbed voice-overs of sound always trail behind the fading visions of what was, just a moment before, illuminated. And yet, isn't this precisely the point where imagination flips into hallucination, where we begin to perceive that which is not there—even if it used to be? That is, isn't it the most marmoreal visions that are most unsettling—for better and worse—because we lose our purchase on the line separating the real and the imagined, between the object and its emanations in the myriad tendrils that escape from it? The Greeks knew this, and wrote their most episodic stories not in ink, but in the cold, hard flesh of marble statues: statues that speak precisely because they have no words.

In both sound and vision, then, what is at stake is not an irenic conflation of the senses, but a struggle between presence and absence wherein appearance and disappearance are both denied, each an incontrovertible fact that can only, sensibly, be true if the other is not. And, indeed, this doubled bias of the senses is doubled again, because vision and sound flip into one another when pushed to their extremes. To listen to an object is really only to gain a night-vision that illuminates the shadows that always lurk in the dark, *invisible* but nonetheless *visual*. And the reverse is also true: what is seeing, if not a time-shifting microphone that hears in advance the actions of what is seen? In the difference tones of these redoubling waves, then, shapes don't so much emerge as refuse to submerge, mottling the senses in a primal rendering of the Rorschach test... becoming sensible on a nonsensical stage. A preponderance of reversals emerge, suggesting that antagonism is not the whole story; indeed, beyond the confluence of visual and aural worlds, the specifics always creep in, resisting convenient formulation, insisting in the end on the paradoxes that are *Eidola*.

Following pages: Ellen Moffat. *Basement Suite*: detail. 2009 and
William Brent. *False Ruminations*: detail. 2009





This is precisely what is at stake in William Brent's *False Ruminations*, where one intuitively feels the difference between sound and sounds, between the unknowability of sound itself and the sound-objects that condemn this mystery and seek to contain it. We feel this first when we look at the Ludbots: these robot instruments that are strange only because they have left their percussionists behind and absconded to the rafters of the gallery. Even if one first spots them while they are suspended in stillness, inverted, there is still the sense that their objective presence is foremost an alibi for an event to come. We hear—with our eyes—a world of possible sounds, even as the work itself is “silent.”

This potentiality is played out in the musical composition of the work, too. Prior to the installation, an initial rhythmic sequence stole from Brent's hands into the computer, where it quickly propagated into the roughly 20,000 sequences that now scurry about



In these ways and more, Ellen Moffat's *Basement Suite* paradoxically reveals itself as nothing if not *eidolic* in all the doubled senses of the word. A series of ethereal lights cast architectural shadows on the gallery floors, themselves ghosts of another basement architecture, one might suppose. It is as if the floating floor, fragmented into only those platforms that matter, makes all the difference—salvaged icons used to ground the underground echoes of times arranged and reanimated. Yet, these are not quite the mysterious concrete floors or creaking baseboards of basement myth, but unidentified flying objects, not anchored from below but suspended from above, if only to reinforce the liminality of the promised encounter.

And in this encounter there is a schematic of ghostly reanimation in play: these small platforms, Moffat describes, refer back to the original architecture of her own basement, themselves made mobile as the material echoes of distant

the wires. Revolving around a custom algorithm, then, each iteration of *False Ruminations* is an execution of two transitional processes that take place in parallel: two of these offspring variations are selected as starting points (A, C), and two are selected as ending points (B, D); each performance of the piece is simply the simultaneous convolution of A into B and C into D. The point, then, is that the Ludbots exist first as material detritus of *False Ruminations*' sound. They are not *instruments* per se, because they are not instrumental to anything. Instead, they are what is left after the digital commingling has ceased and the algorithmic dust has settled.

And yet, conversely, there is a subtle but vital shift that takes place in the joint exhibition itself: in the productively antagonistic context of *Eidola*, it is possible that the Ludbots act first and algorithmicize second. This is to say that the exhibition imbues itself

place. Loosely rendered as an abstract reference, the sounds from the *Basement Suite* are those of high heels and dancing and tuning forks and dinner parties and the dragging of furniture across the first-level floor. These are the sounds of the house itself, played as an instrument and replayed; a house transposed to a different space, housed in the gallery for a moment of re-encounter. Nor are these sounds benign in any sense of the word. Not merely sounds from the past, but sounds harvested for the present, ghosts whose very stage was set already for their eventual disappearance into the aesthetic reconstitutions of *Basement Suite*.

And, interestingly, these sounds are also recorded at a distance—recorded from below while life goes on up above, not the creaking sounds of mysterious skeletons and ghosts rattling about in the basement, but the sounds of life on the inhabited first floor. These are the sounds the ghosts themselves would hear when resting in the basement suite below. And,

with an explosion of spectacularly unpredictable activity, even as it stands still: like the Large Hadron Collider—that most famous of modern-day ghosts—*False Ruminations* haunts its own algorithmically patterned future in advance by insisting that, precisely because we already know what will happen when it is “turned on,” we cannot know what will happen to this knowledge when it shifts from prophecy to history.

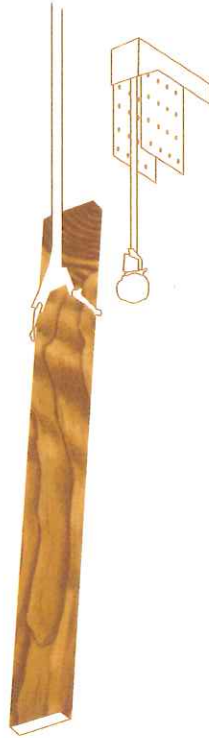
However, even in this understanding the distance between the robots and their performance—the distance between the composition and its interpretation—is closed. In this, the Ludbots take us from the unknown relation of a gap to the always known-ness of a non-relation, from sound to vision. Put simply, we move with the Ludbot from second to third order simulation, from listening to the robots “play the piece” to simply listening in a place where we no longer have the distance from the piece to stand



knowing this, the platforms themselves are not the basement floor at all but the basement *ceiling*, and we are placed into this field of sounds as ghosts, witness to an activity we can really hear but only visually imagine: the goings-on up above in the first story suite.

It is a spatial and optical illusion, and its effect provokes a vertigo of encounter, made all the more apparent by the fact that the installation hangs at waist level in the gallery space—conscientiously positioned so that its sound comes from below. Consequently, we too are re-positioned—upside down—if we stop to imagine the sounds of spatial reconstitution. These are sounds from above, coming to us from below, reconstituting the gallery itself as an upside down *Basement Suite*. Not merely sounds from the past, but sounds harvested for the present, ghosts whose very stage was set already for their eventual disappearance into the aesthetic vertigo of *Basement Suite*.

back and see who is manipulating it as such. Here, we are indeed in a ghostly territory where we hear everything...but also know that everything, in a sense, isn't.



Despite (or perhaps precisely because of) its apparent simplicity of form, then, the formal simplicity of invoked appearance also causes a vertigo of disappearance: ghosts speaking to, dancing with, and rearranging furniture with other ghosts. And it is not as simple as to say only that the house—or the basement—is haunted. Instead, it only makes sense to suggest that it is we who are haunted by this basement suite, sweet sounds that re-place us in their midst, enticing us into their space, re-timing us as we wait for and perceive the next round of sounds. In this encounter, we are folded into the story—a story that happened once and now repeats (like any good ghost story) with the variables of witness brought back to interact. In the process of this encounter we are ghosted—we too are rendered *eidola*.





Ellen Moffat. *Basement Suite*: installation view. 2009

With these tensions and questions and delusions, *Eidola* persists as it began: as an exploration of the ephemera and the biases of sonic and visual art practices that poetically interrogates the manifest uncertainty of disciplines that are each infused with a part of the other that *they simply cannot make sense of*. And yet, the interesting thing about *Eidola*—as an exhibition—is not merely that it represents or illustrates this concept of paradoxical aesthetics brought forward into the everyday of idealized, yet ghosted, experience. Instead, and more intriguing, is that this representation extends the concept itself, ghosting our ways of understanding, challenging the interpretive drive to substance with exactly the opposite possibility. It is as if to suggest that looking for substance were exactly the wrong way to look at art, be it visual or aural. Instead, and, further to this, what if the challenge was not in any way to look for a right way in contrast to the *wrong*, but merely to examine why the wrong is—and can continue to be—engaging?

Thus, if the teleological orientation of *False Ruminations*—the fact each iteration moves through a predefined process—serves to orient the piece as an atemporal object in space, this very object-ness is amplified by *Basement Suite* to paradoxically point to the indeterminate temporal framing that the piece exists within. It is indeterminate because it hinges on the embodied—and thus singular—activities of the listener who moves with the piece. And, similarly, though *Basement Suite* floats in space such that it can be perceived from different angles, doesn't a melody of sorts begin to emerge in it? Not only its creeks, crackles, and complaints, but also the panels that lie lithely still superjacent to these sounds, a strain that is all the more tuneful for the abrasive intrusions of *False Ruminations*.

To put this slightly differently, if Brent's *False Ruminations* can be so seductive in its aggressive yet rhythmic variations, is this not also because it makes us wait during its periods of non-activity—and in so doing incorporates us too into its procedural algorithms? Ghosted by the very work we witness, the viewer is part of the mathematics of the equation, even if for no other reason than to give us the opportunity to wander into the *Basement Suite* undistracted. And, if Moffat's *Basement Suite* can provoke such vertigo in its quietude, is this not precisely because it refuses us a safe distance from the basement ceiling, instead placing us within its spatial matrix of seduction? Displaced into the piece itself, the immersion is part of the charm, until the sounds from the literal ceiling begin to ruminate with a disjuncting truth that returns us from the basement to the gallery proper.

And so while, speaking sonically, Brent's *False Ruminations* is the frame for Moffat's *Basement Suite*, speaking visually exactly the opposite is true. And the result is a tension of a new sort, a mashup of spatial and visual and sonic encounter. This, ironically, might be called a series of *true ruminations* from the *basement ceiling*, a paradoxical encounter in which these works come together to create a third space not intentionally addressed by either. And, moving through *Eidola* in this way, what emerges is a series of "ghost tones," sonic, spatial, and visual renderings of the acoustic phenomenon by the same name—a phenomenon whereby two tones, each possessing their own harmonic presence, combine to produce a third. This ghost tone has a

pitch that may be, as one might expect, the sum of its parts, but it might also be their difference, or even something unidentifiable that haunts them both. Put differently, *Eidola* possesses an internal resonance that mediates disparate phenomena: that is, *False Ruminations* and *Basement Suite* each process the potential energies of one another, and of those who move through them. In this, *Eidola* the exhibition is a haunting that is haunted, and that creates new hauntings in the process, and through our own intermediating lines of ghostly perception and memory persists with all the paradoxes and biases of ephemeral practice.

