
FEATURE ESSAY

A Bodied Sound

Anni Pullagura

The body is a moving, singing thing. Every pulse, breath, beat unfolds with mechanical momentum, in a tempo set to the otherwise mundane activity of forward-moving life. Body sound, bodied sound: the pumping of blood, the intake of air, the movement of organs, the consuming of nourishment, and the expulsion of waste—this is the undercurrent for the differently- and multiply-abled alike, a form of life-listening composed predominantly of haptic sensibilities. Sound feels, because the body hears: it hears for what works, what fails, what disturbs, what leaves, what remains. But sound sees, too. Our vibrating matter is a visual as well as aural phenomenon, something intimated and visceral. As Fred Moten reminds us: “*Sound gives us back the visuality that ocularcentricism had repressed.*”¹ By tapping into the aesthetics of this shared haptic experience, Kevin Beasley’s aural sculptures shape themselves around exactly this sense of a bodied sound.

Stretched and dripped over yawning oval cores, Beasley’s hooded sculptures inscribe an ultimately soundless figure with a visualized anticipation of imminent sound. Beasley, who often works with acoustics and, even when he does not, thinks through the visuality of sound, builds these sculptural forms from housedresses acquired at the kind of corner fabric stores the women in his family and neighborhood would often visit to purchase readymade pieces or find fabrics to render their own. He soaks each found garment in resin and drapes them over Styrofoam mannequin heads affixed to microphone stands. As the resin hardens and the supports are removed, life-size ghosts emerge, curving elegantly and almost listlessly forward as they cling to the static force that suspends their tenuous weight. Something is arrested here, and something else is beginning to sound out.

Described variously as spectral and haunting, Beasley’s hooded sculptures entered his visual art practice on the heels of his ongoing sound-based works. Like an exercise in call-and-response, his installations have every appearance of possessing the vocal faculty Beasley demonstrates in his performances, in which he often remixes amateur recordings of conversations with family or friends alongside samples from recording artists or ambient noise from surrounding environments. His sound performances are laced with something not yet formed, as though containing within themselves a promised reward for close listening, while making any such opportunity nearly impossible. His sculptures, meanwhile, are open with another kind of tentative not-yet-there, gathered in a choral arrangement ready to sing but emptied of the possibility.

With or without the face, the body remains—or at least the threat of one. Visual culture studies scholar Tina Campt posits that everyday sound, the quotidian, is a “practice honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life.”² The dispossessed are not without sound; theirs is a sounding always present, ever gathered, continually pulsing. Perhaps moved to imagine what forms this dispossessed sound could take, Beasley began incorporating mixed sound into his hooded sculptures in the mid 2010s. In *Phasing (Ebb)* and *Phasing (Flow)*, ambient gallery noise from

¹ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003), 235.

² Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

adjoining rooms is picked up by hidden microphones and fed back to a receiving speaker situated before their respective work. The emitted sound is one in which the sculptures speak an assemblage of borrowed voices, of visitors idly passing, breathing, speaking by, of the background murmurings we are trained, by habit, to ignore. If not dispossessed, this is white noise made not meaningless but rhythmic, pulsing, vibrant, rehearsing over and over the sonic currents of the gallery space.

Channels are forged and re-forged in Beasley's aural networks. *Phasing (Ebb)* is maybe even too channel-like, regurgitating the familiar into the unfamiliar, creating a loop both lyrical and menacing. This is a channeling different from other looped sculptural works Beasley has staged, such as *Air Conditioner (Tempo)*, comprising the shell of an air conditioner set between a wall, only one half visible at any given time, while an audio track replays the dull, numbing ambient sound we rarely even notice. Therein is the trouble: background frequency is the lowly sound that should not register, but does, achingly. The quotidian is in fact full of noise; it opens new registers, or drags them, kicking and screaming, to the surface of our cognition. Sound, plainly speaking, is not to be dismissed but held, disrupted, dispersed, and claimed. Let us call this the "sounding" of being: "between bodies, in real time, in virtual time, in memory, in history, and across space."³

If we ring ourselves into being, then we swallow the sounds that came before us and that will live somewhere, sometime, after us too. This is the kind of aural citation at work in Beasley's 2014 performance at the Cozad-Bates House in Cleveland, Ohio. Entitled *And in My Dream I Was Rolling on the Floor*, in this work Beasley staged a four-part performance on a site once alleged to have been part of the Underground Railroad. Here, sound hinged on what Beasley imagined might once have been heard, and even still could be present, in the now condemned building, generating a sonic landscape suspended between times. It was this imprecise entanglement that first drew Beasley to traverse the visual and aural together. For Beasley, this exercise became "so much about observation and actually submitting to what is being projected, and that is a very vulnerable and revealing space to commit to, because you open yourself up to hearing something you may not understand, like, or agree with."⁴

Agreement, especially the aural sense of it, is an odd thing to avoid. But noise, as David Novak reminds us, is disarming, distancing, and nauseating from its very phenomenological point of origin, "the Latin root of the word is *nausea*, from the Greek root *naus* for ship. The reference to seasickness captures the basic disorientation of the term: noise is a context of sensory experience, but also a moving subject of circulation, of sound and listening, that emerges in the process of navigating the world and its differences."⁵

Becoming—aware, conscious, human—is sickeningly noisy. Beasley's sculptural figures, in their own struggle to become, entice as much as they make us recoil. They speak on borrowed sound. Voraciously bright, they stretch their mouths out to reach us, leering and yearning, to bite vampirically into the breaths and words we utter before them.

And sometimes, we are the vultures. Bodied sound is circulatory, after all, and comes to rests, but never to ends. A sounding self is as much an ongoing encounter with what resounds as it is itself a process of becoming bodied, how phenomena consolidates into meaning. We register each other because—see, listen—"I sound better since you cut my throat."⁶

³ Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

⁴ Ruth Erickson, *Kevin Beasley* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2018), 65.

⁵ David Novak, "Noise," in *Keywords in Sound*, David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 125.

⁶ Fred Moten, "rock the party, fuck the smackdown," *Hughson's Tavern* (Providence: Leon Works, 2008).

Anni Pullagura is a doctoral candidate in American Studies at Brown University. Her dissertation, “Seeing Feeling: The Work of Empathy in Exhibitionary Spaces,” explores the intersection of moral philosophy and visual culture in contemporary art and media. Currently, she is the Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston.



Figure 1. Kevin Beasley, *Untitled (Sea)*, 2016, resin, housedresses, 82 x 96 x 26.5. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (gift of Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, photograph by Jean Vong). Image courtesy of Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York.