CALL AND RESPONSE

ON THE RECENT WORK OF COBI VAN TONDER

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A deliciously onomatopoeic term, the ping carries a number of rich valences. Ping is the sound your car makes when you finally notice something needs attention, the chirp of a bat flying in a darkened cave, the blip of an object on a submarine's radar screen. More recently, ping has been casually repurposed as a verb; we ping a server each time we wish to know how long it takes a signal to travel from our computer to Google or any other site; an abstraction of copper wire, (a)ethernet connections, expanses of cable, all transcribed into tidy milliseconds, a shorthand for measuring the ping. And yet the ping carries something more than just these technological and phenomenological definitions. The ping is also a basic existential device, the ur-utterance, a two-fold accounting of-and-for the self: We make a sound first to articulate our very being, then wait for the sound to come back to us, transformed, transfigured, in order that we may place ourselves in a broader landscape. Through a series of multi-channel audio installations, Cobi van Tonder has taken into account this very nuanced understanding of the ping, in ways that extend beyond the merely auditory, and into the political, social, and psychological ramifications of defining and situating oneself within a larger system.

At the heart of the artist's practice lies a gleeful insistence upon the psychological necessity of sound – the desire to acknowledge how frequencies resonate inside of and around us, how we absorb and respond to our surroundings. That we eat, for example, so that we may hear crunching and swallowing. That we build machines, so that

we can hear the sounds they make. It is through this engagement with perception, and the limits to which such human faculties are attenuated, that South African-born Van Tonder is easily in artistic dialogue with any number of critically acclaimed millennial sound magi; compositions by William Basinski or Christian Fennesz spring readily to mind. Similarly, Van Tonder's recent years of traveling throughout Asia, South America, and Europe have resulted in a hybridized aesthetic, one that rewards the patient listener, one open to attempting to listen to the world listen to itself. However, due to her embrace of extremely minimal sounds, her ability to capture minute gestures in ambient recordings, and what might be best described as engagement with an aural sense of "closeness," Van Tonder's work might best be compared to that of consummate listener Chris Watson, whose extremely intimate—and nearly unmanipulated—field recordings of wild animals sleeping capture a poetics of proximity. In the wake of hearing universes unfold in rise and fall of a lion's snore recorded inches from its source, synthesized sound seems derivative.

Indeed, the suggestion of such an unbridgeable distance seems to be at play in many of Van Tonder's compositions and installations, represented here in part through a recent series of video and multiple-channel audio works entitled Vuurvangerkindmens (2009). The title, which translates from Afrikaans loosely as "fire-catcher child person," refers to an anonymous figure starting a small fire on a mountainside. Filmed from a voyeuristic perch atop an adjacent mountain, the video functions similarly to much of Van Tonder's audio compositions; one is instantly forced to grapple with the significance of reaching to tender lengths, not unlike Watson, of sounding out across the void. Yet at the same time, in returning to the almighty ping, all of this begs a question at once technical and existential: what happens when the signal in question begins to break down? Shot on digital video at extreme distance and utilizing a telephoto zoom that begins to pixelate wildly, Vuurvangerkindmens is a study of evaporation and sublimation as much as it is an oblique nod to anthropology and what it means to capture, to

catch. In a flickering grid that suggests a painterly smear as much as a surveillance camera, the subject blends with and becomes fire, smoke; all of the players and figures in the scene take on a submerged quality, a process that in turn has led the artist to consider the implications of the viewer drowning within the piece.

Other recent works similarly attempt to spark heightened consciousness via immersive environments. A recent installation, 888 (2008), consists of a simple space for listening: black cloth draped over an eight-foot cube shaped frame, installed anywhere it will fit: the artist's studio, a field, etc. While explicitly in dialogue with the legacy of minimalist sculpture, 888 is equally engaged with what one might call the hegemony of modern vision; The work functions (albeit unintentionally) as a riff on the camera obscura, a darkened space one may enter into and grow accustomed to, even gain heightened awareness of, the space that surrounds the box.

Van Tonder has also continued her innovative work with increasingly elaborate multiple-channel installations. Here, in a second contribution to the thesis show, sounds from a series of site-specific locations from throughout the globe are linked and assembled, real-time, via a novel web interface, into a decentralized feedback loop. Each location is equipped with a microphone recording a speaker, then relays the accumulating signal to the next node in a closed circuit: the ping of a ping. Because of the digital network's ability to send and receive data via internet protocol, the project is capable of literally spanning / scanning the globe in rapid fashion. Here, Paris, Johannesburg, and any other place where Van Tonder has erected a node become more than sites in a network; they are signs of Van Tonder's own political and biographical mapping, indices of her itinerant and highly mobile practice. More proximal to the theme of the current exhibition, and forming the bulk of what visitors will hear during the exhibition, the artist has collaborated with her peers, placing nodes in the studio spaces adjacent to her own, in what might signal an interest on the part of the artist and her peers to address the

significance of collaboration, innovation, and education as it unfolds within an institutional setting. Here, inside of what the artist has deemed a "recombinant acoustic space," listeners will take into account their own location within global and very local networks, and experience the phenomenon of a sound listening to itself.

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