

A kind of sonority felt through the eyes:
on the video symphonies of Marsia Alexander-Clarke
Michael Ned Holte

*Before one can abstract, one has got to know what one is abstracting from. See?
That's one of the problems with language. People think of abstract art as mumbo
jumbo....*

Anything that is abstracted from something is the essence of that something.

—Bill Dixon

i.

SONIDOS
(Sounds)

OYENDO
(Hearing)

LLAMANDO
(Calling)

MURMURANDO
(Murmuring)

The Spanish-language titles of these four video works, by Marsia Alexander-Clarke, each intimates intense sonic experience, whether general (“sonidos”), or specific (“murmurando”). Paradoxically, these videos are all silent. Consider these titles

apparitions, then: As we watch the videos, sometimes on a single monitor but often elaborated across a horizon of five or seven screens, their silence is deafening. And yet, visually they conjure a kind of sonority, if not full-blown musicality, albeit one that is felt through the eyes rather than through the ears.

To hear with the eyes suggests a case of synesthesia, in which colors are triggered by certain sounds (tones) or graphemes (letters or numbers). For those with synesthesia, the usual barrier between these categories blurs because these categories don't exist, linguistically if not physiologically. One is nudged if not hurled into an earlier state of development (infancy, if not fetal) where language only exists as sound, not yet as signifier, not yet as a way of naming things in order to shape and divide and conquer the world.

While I don't have synesthesia, words tend to fail in my experience of watching these videos—a curious problem for someone who “writes about art.” Their titles provide a useful signpost, or a held hand, in welcoming us into the visual experiences they name. *LLAMANDO*: Silently, the video is calling me.

ii.

The house of the artist is gently tucked into the foothills of the Verdugo Mountains. The home is also the studio, and one quickly senses the way in which art making pervades daily life, and vice versa, too. Lovely but unassuming from the street, most of the neighbors would be unaware that an artist is quietly at work here. Marsia's office is also a meeting space, an archive, and a library. (The desk is the primary site of production, with its computer and editing software, which is how and where most of the work is made.) The living room serves as a gallery for the artist's prints, but quickly transforms into a screening room for her videos when the lights go out. Decorations throughout the house are charming and eclectic, representing a life well traveled—Marsia was born and raised in Valparaiso, Chile, the daughter of missionaries, before moving to the states in her teenage years; later, with her husband,

she spent a year in Australia, an influential episode. Everything has its place and a sense of purpose. The house is orderly, as is the artist's work.

A studio visit will inevitably lead to the backyard, home to a variety of flowering trees and two garden sheds, though neither structure contains any gardening supplies. These sheds are named the Video Chapel and the Video Temple, and as their names suggest they are dedicated screening rooms for the artist's work. Somewhat amusingly, the Chapel, with seven monitors wrapping the corner and exactly spanning two of its interior walls, is larger than the Temple, which has a similarly arranged installation of five screens. The Video Temple is painted with vibrantly alternating black-and-tan patterns, its door adorned with a cruciform arrangement of words:

OJOS
TEMPLO PROFUNDOS OSCURO

Both sheds are custom-built for Marsia's multi-channel installations. To view the videos in this context is ideal—and idealistic, given that few viewers will get to experience the work in the artist's own backyard and with the artist viewing the works alongside. The religiosity of the modest building's names is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, though there is something transformative (*PROFUNDO*) that happens as soon as one crosses the threshold and the door closes behind. To enter each *TEMPLO* (or *CAPILLA*) *OSCURO*, suddenly removed from the outside world, its infinite demands and distractions, is to give oneself over to the videos and the artist, and get lost in the process. "I work with time to arrive at non-time," she has explained. To enter the little garden chapel is to submit to the vast and generous space of non-time.

iii.

The videos resist language. In their intricacy, as accumulations of so many tiny moments, they also escape or at least overwhelm the memory, practically demanding repeat viewings. (And repeat viewings are indeed rewarded.) I will foolishly attempt to

characterize some of them anyway. They are, undoubtedly, formal compositions. In the past three decades, Marsia has continued to articulate and refine her visual language, working within the rectangle of the screen and then across multiple screens. Despite a horizontal arrangement of each monitor and each array of video channels, the predominant mark in the recent videos is a thin vertical column, or slit. This is typically used in repetition. “Marks in painting and drawing are traces from the artist’s hand,” Marsia describes, “carrying the energy and expressiveness of the movement.”

Marks in my video work are similar, as they record what is seen through a collaboration of my body movements with the movements inherent in the camera, the pan and the zoom. The selected recorded section is cropped, thus limiting its gaze and creating a narrow mark-like form which I call a video mark. Each video mark has movement and is at once geometrical and organic. In my latest work the marks are narrow linear forms.

The thin video marks read alternately as a positive (figure on ground) and as a void. Hence: “slit.” During one of my visits to the studio, Marsia shared with me a set of photographs she took in Australia in the 1980s, revealing only the narrowest slices of the Outback through a vertical cut sliced through a painted screen. This slice reminds me at once of the so-called “zips” in Barnett Newman’s paintings and the “slit-scan” aperture designed by special effects wizard Douglas Trumbull to represent the Stargate in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*—both exceedingly narrow entrances to the sublime.

The Australian photographs also prefigure her video mark. Marsia’s videos often begin simply enough with one mark, which is then repeated, building toward an accumulated density and staggering complexity across the array of monitors. In *LLAMANDO*, these marks flicker and “dance.” In *MURMURANDO*, the marks accumulate and pulse across five horizontal lines—loosely recalling staff notation. Following the examples of minimalism in art (Sol LeWitt’s exhaustive variations) and music (Steve Reich’s notion

of “music as a gradual process”), one familiar mark or gesture can be re repeated toward seemingly infinite permutation and nearly psychedelic profusion.

To return to my synesthetic reading, these are symphonic arrangements, and in fact the artist has sometimes referred to them as “video symphonies.” Following this lead, I will refer to her as their conductor, orchestrating a vast assemblage of marks, tones, rhythms. Unsurprisingly, these abstract works have a long engagement with music, and Marsia has collaborated with a number of composers and choral groups. The most elaborate of these works is *6 IN 1 TO 64 CHOIR* (2001), a 12-channel video made in collaboration with Local Color, an *a capella* chorus of 14 women. (This direction, toward musicality and multiple channels, was precipitated by an experience of Robert Ashley’s opera *Perfect Lives* in the early 1990s.) More recently, with *OJOS PROFUNDOS* (2020), choral music is deployed intermittently to punctuate the visual experience. In a sense, sound is used almost like a video mark, interchangeably, rather than as a structural framework. In all of these cases, music is not subordinate to the image, or vice versa, but are co-conspirators, wildly entangled.

iv.

At first glance these works are abstract in the most obvious, categorical sense of the word, and they belong to and extend a lineage that includes the paintings of Barnett Newman and Agnes Martin (both important references for the artist) but also the animated experimental films of Oskar Fischinger and Hans Richter. They are also abstract in the active sense that composer-musician Bill Dixon describes: they are abstracting from something into “the essence of that something.” This “something” is sometimes more or less obvious: Marsia has distilled video marks from footage taken of a quarry in North Adams, Massachusetts; an antique elevator at the Lincoln Memorial in Kansas City; various botanical gardens and plantlife; a campground; and the moon; among many other subjects.

At other times in these videos, a thing's source remains mysterious, retaining little beyond its color, as is signifier or clue. A mark insistently remains a mark, quantified in zeros and ones by her software. And surely some mystery is okay, in art if not also in life. If we can put faith in the artist and ourselves, abstraction allows us, as viewers, space for wonder, contemplation, imagination. Imagine that.

v.

An artist is born into abstraction and then returns to it after a confrontation with the world and the language that aims to make sense of it. I am suddenly remembering something Marsia mentioned to me in passing, in one of our visits: That, as a child, she didn't speak for a very long time. Outside of language, one learns to communicate through other means. This too is a kind of abstraction, one that transpires in the artist's own visual language, in which essence is gradually revealed through continual distillation and repetition. That essence is what Marsia calls a "deep feeling content."

In my video compositions I gather the marks into sequences of reflections and sensations coalescing into a meaning of the separation yet ultimate balance of inner versus outer experience, a synthesis of self, other, here, there. My work is full of experiential and deep feeling content. It challenges the fragmentary nature of our understanding. It honors the amazing structure of our surroundings.

There is something paradoxical at work here. One could reasonably see the video symphonies in the opposite way—as a fragmentation of the surrounding world, with the transposition of subjects more or less identifiable rendered into discrete marks: "abstracted." But this hypothetical perception follows from a belief in the possibility of *vérité*—of art an objective document of the world. But this is rarely what we seek from art or the people who make it. Art is always already a document of an artist's perceptions of the world. So, these videos are Marsia's way of representing life, as she sees it, hears it, and feels it. They are not wistful, nostalgic, banal, or easy; they represent a world that is boundlessly fascinating but difficult to apprehend. The artist

attends to this calling, and in the process she lends us her profoundly unhurried eyes and ears. We are welcomed into her chapel and encouraged to shut out the world for a while, in order to experience “the amazing structure of our surroundings,” as if for the first time.

Michael Ned Holte is a writer, curator, and educator living in Los Angeles. His recent exhibition, “how we are in time and space: Nancy Buchanan, Marcia Hafif, Barbara T. Smith,” at the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, was named by Hyperallergic as one of the top 50 exhibitions of 2022. His writing has appeared in periodicals such as *Artforum*, *East of Borneo*, *Poetry*, and *X-Tra*, and he has written monographic essays on artists including Charles Gaines, Shio Kusaka, Roy McMakin, Pauline Oliveros, and Steve Roden. He is the recipient of a Creative Capital Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. Since 2009, Holte has been a member of the faculty of the Program in Art at CalArts, and he currently serves as an Associate Dean of the School of Art.

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