

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Marla Hlady, *Still*, Christie Contemporary, Toronto, November 24, 2017–January 6, 2018.

During a period of cinematic research in the early 2000s, Marla Hlady came upon Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 sound-focused mystery thriller *The Conversation*. When asked how the film influenced her, she boldly declared, "I was infected" (Hlady 2018). While it took years for the film's affect to appear in her practice, the way the film carried sound and image in durational, performative and spatial ways claimed a place in her psyche. Now, 15 years later, her conversation with *The Conversation* manifests itself directly in the exhibition *Still*.

Coppola's film casts sound – its capture, filtering, discernment, archiving – and the technologies employed in carrying out these functions, as central characters in the narrative. Couched in the story of a surveillance expert's fraught obsession with protecting the lives of those he has been hired to survey, the allure of the film, at least for Hlady, lies in the tactility of sound conveyed within the seductive "audio porn" context of the 1970s analog world (Hlady 2018). A fetishized laboratory of spinning reels, dials, plugs, wires, gauges, and headsets, and the skillful ability of protagonist Harry Caul to tease out the threads of sound important to his investigation, are revealed. In Hlady's world, this depicts the studio – the place where material and sound meet, coningle and form unexpected relationships.

The works in *Still* staged three types of encounters between materiality and sound. Some works stayed still, one did not, and one pretended not to. The first, 37 modestly scaled works on paper from the ongoing series *Still (from "The Conversation")* (2016–17) (Figure 1), formed a cluster spanning two walls in the gallery. While a handful were framed, most remained unframed, and all presented delicately rendered, monochromatic combinations of printed stills extracted from *The Conversation* overlaid with finely hand-inked patterns and forms. These silent works aimed to capture auditive "events" experienced in the film. In gallerist Claire Christie's (2018) words, "The implied movement in both filmic image and drawn, sonic trajectories solidifies in the durational – a range of moments held still, but crackling."³ In these works, the instantaneous sensory bundles of the snapshots entangle with the pulses of mark-making, holding time and sound in an interstitial pause.

The second work embodied a lack of stillness in mesmerizing ways. *Momentary (Jack Tar Hotel 3 o'clock)* (2017) exposed the guts of a 1970s flip clock and mounted it on a finely crafted butternut wood base (Figure 2). Skillfully reprogrammed to cycle through a 24-hour period at irregular and erratic tempos, the clock took on a corporeal condition that echoed the quickening of pulse and holding of breath evoked by the tension in the film's narrative. Reaching 3:00 pm in each cycle activated the alarm, and one of several audio clips from the film sounded. Between the arrhythmic flipping of the numbered plastic flaps, the corresponding clicking and whirring sounds produced by the physical mechanics, and the occasional uttering of mysterious conversational fragments, this typically sedate object embodied anxiety and suspense.

The third piece, a video work also entitled *Momentary (Jack Tar Hotel 3 o'clock)* (2017), staged the illusion of movement (Figure 3). Viewed through an inconspicuous yet robust peephole in the gallery wall, the silent footage tracked a slow zoom toward and away from the adapted flip clock in the context of the artist's studio. Referencing *The Conversation*'s prominent theme of surveillance, this work playfully positioned the viewer in an investigative

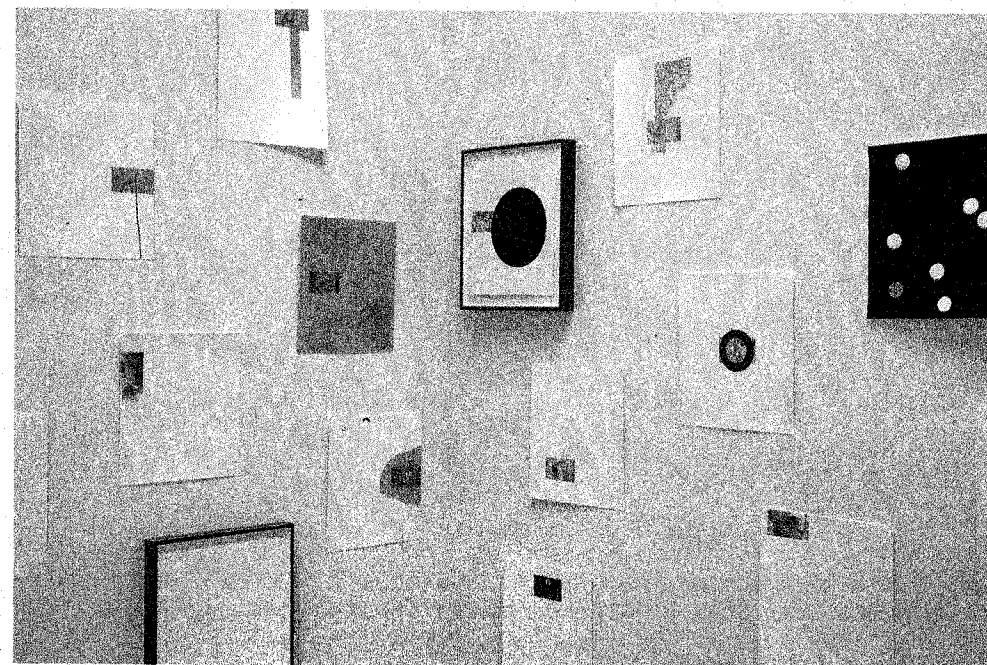


Figure 1. Marla Hlady, *Still (from "The Conversation")* (2016–17), drawings, archival inkjet prints, ink, graphite on paper, 11.5 × 10 in each, installation detail. Photo: Adam Swica, courtesy of the artist and Christie Contemporary, Toronto.

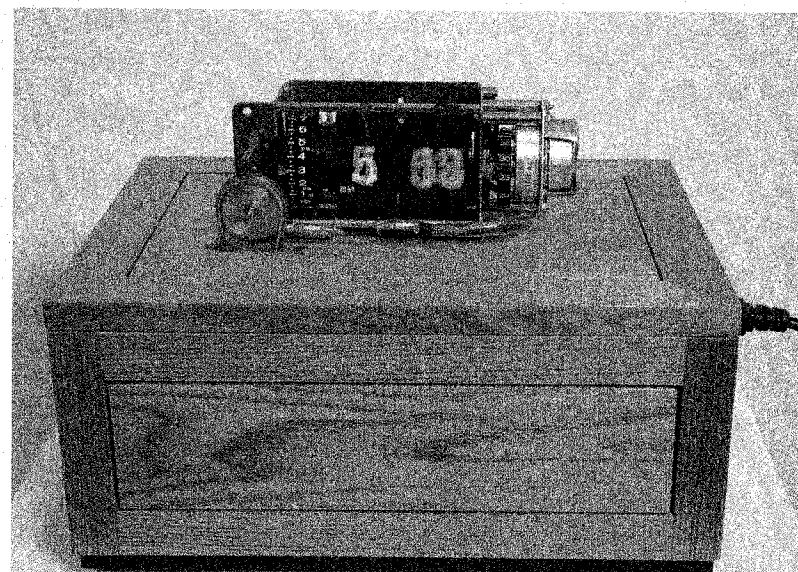


Figure 2. Marla Hlady, *Momentary (Jack Tar Hotel 3 o'clock)* (2017), found flipclock, found sound, custom butternut box, misc. electrical, electronics, 8 × 11.5 × 8 in. Photo: Adam Swica, courtesy of the artist and Christie Contemporary, Toronto.

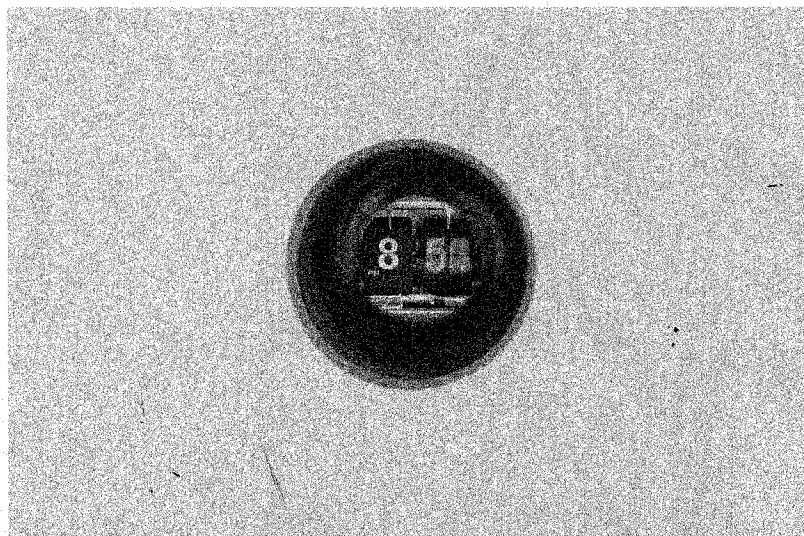


Figure 3. Marla Hlady, *Momentary (Jack Tar Hotel 3 o'clock)* (2017), 5:36 min. video, tablet device, brass pipe. Photo: Adam Swica, courtesy of the artist and Christie Contemporary, Toronto.

role. Here the slipperiness of time's beguiling behaviors could be privately and surreptitiously probed, disconnected from its inherent soundscape yet immersed in the sonic spillover of life on this side of the wall.

The themes explored in *The Conversation* provided a provocative subtext to the experience of Hlady's work in the architecture of Christie Contemporary. With its relatively small footprint, high ceilings and partial second floor operating as a balcony, a sense of surveillance percolated. The hard surfaces, typical of many white cube galleries encouraged sound to bounce actively. Conceptually, these conditions aligned with the content of these works. The alarm-activated sound bites in the flip clock *Momentary* went almost unnoticed in the bustle of the opening, requiring visitors to gather around the clock and wait intently to discern its messages. Hlady's work activated the gallery as a laboratory in which visual and auditory slices signaled and enticed investigation.

Most exhibition spaces challenge the effective display of sound works. Hlady, having included sonic components in her practice for decades, embraces these conditions with an ideological vigor. "Sound is messy," she affirms, "that is what makes it so interesting to work with. Not everything is available to the viewer immediately" (Hlady 2018). In a society that cultivates high visual acuity, aural awareness lacks attunement in many individuals. Brought to one's attention, sounds, their resonances, and alluring connotations contribute to evocative and powerful encounters. Hlady encourages the commitment some make to engaging in the nuances of expansive sensory experiences and values exhibition venues designed with sound works in mind.

While sound may be difficult to control, the physical manifestations of Hlady's pieces demonstrate do-it-yourself mastery. Having acquired not only the tools but also the skill sets and knowledge with which to employ them, she approaches the custom fabrication of components of her work with an intimacy and pride belied by what may be perceived as cold and mechanical in its outcome. From the turning of an aluminum coupler on a lathe, to the milling of a slotted bracket, to the design and assembly of an electronic circuit to network a series of motors, or the routing of a circular opening in a humble plywood

box – Hlady cherishes the capacity to remind the material world of its uniqueness and, in turn, exercises her own. Mock-ups are tested and tweaked until they find their rhythm, know their role, and can confidently perform.

With another flick of a switch, however, sound shows up and brings chaos with it. Sometimes the mechanics alone animate the sonic experience; sometimes the introduction of recorded audio clips complicates the story. Either way, this is where an entanglement with the uncontrollable is given voice. The tight proximity of contemporary urban life with its continual sensory infusions and overlaps seeps into and out of Hlady's frame of reference. Life, in all its relations, works its way in. A solid-state world reveals a vulnerable and fragile underbelly that honors a very human desire for authenticity.

There is nothing random about the outcome of Hlady's labor. Intentionally pushing to gain capacities in unexpected territories, and paying close attention to liminal modulations of tone and resonance, testify to the artist's commitment in seeking out nuanced and complex forms of expression. With her hands engaged in the material and her senses attuned to the ephemeral, the works Hlady produces pulse and exhale. Still surprising, still evolving, still not still.

Disclosure statement


No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Panya Clark Espinal is a multi-media installation artist currently studying Criticism and Curatorial Practice at OCAD University. Through site-specific installations, exhibitions, and public commissions, she aims to bring renewed intimacy to the act of looking while exploring issues of authenticity, appropriation, reproduction, collection, and display (www.panya.ca).

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