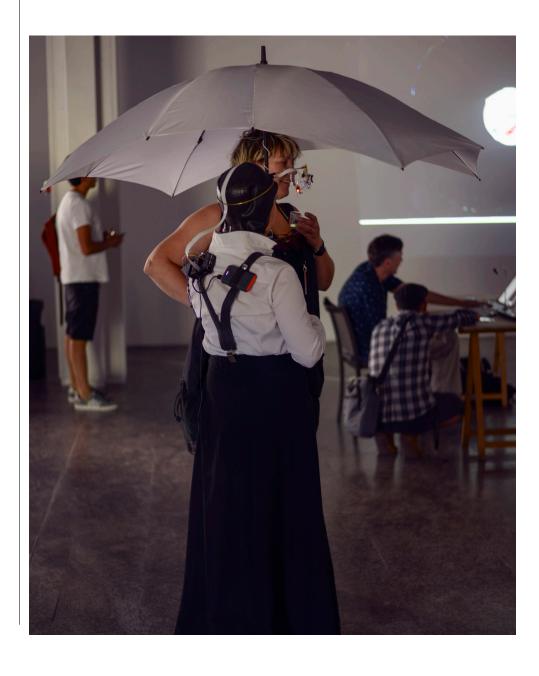**Graziele Lautenschlaeger**
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Self-portrait of an Absence

Keywords: Eyeborg; Aesthetics of Disabilities; Sound Art; Performance; Public Space; Shared Intimacy.

Abstract:

Self-portrait of an absence (2016) is a participative performance based on the partial visual impairment of the artist, who has a blind eye. Technically, the artwork consists of an eye-tracking system programmed to generate and process sounds according to data collected from the asynchronous movements of both eyes. The artist offers passers-by in public or semi-public spaces an observing-listening aesthetic experience under an umbrella, where sound-emitting loudspeakers are hung. The artist's initial motivation was curiosity to discover something about the apparently random behaviour of her blind eye. This impetus was reinforced by the coincidence that Vilém Flusser, whose writings have influenced her understanding of electronic and digital media, was also monocular. The performance was created as a methodological tool for her practice-based PhD research on photosensitive matter in media history. It is an experiment that addresses the confrontation between organic and machinic elements (eye and camera) and the possible paths in light-to-sound translations.

PRETEXT

"This is because the eye, a small white globe that encloses its darkness, traces a limiting circle that only sight can cross. And the darkness within, the somber core of the eye, pours out into the world like a fountain which sees, that is, which lights up the world". (Foucault 1977: 44-5)

I discovered that I am monocular when I was five. My blind eye has been a black box for me, an alien body inside my body. How can one play with an eye that cannot see? I started by imagining ways to play with its inner darkness and finished by envisioning a device to listen to its foreignness. The wish to share this experience and this particular way of perceiving the world emerged as an obligation, an urge to express. The body organizes the world to organize itself.

1. ENCOUNTER

Wearing a special costume that embeds the necessary electronic devices, a sort of strangeness is evoked in public or semi-public spaces among passers-by. I visually and corporeally invite those who demonstrate interest or curiosity to participate in a shared experience, by means of offering them a place under my umbrella. Once the visitor is taken in I trigger the first part of a soundscape to be produced in real-time during the interaction.

Pre-recorded overlapped stereo voices greet the participant and introduce the proposal: "Hi! Welcome into my intimate space. Since I was born I have a blind eye. Do you also have a blind spot in your body? This experience is about sensing and making sense in absence. I know what to see means. The worst blind person is the one who wants to see. Would you like to hear the sounds of my blind eye? Will you follow me?"

If the participant agrees to join, I press the next button to start the first sound mode based on the asynchronous movements of my eyes. It sounds like an electronic percussive instrument. The more asynchronous my eyes are, the more broken the rhythm being played is and the higher the pitch gets. I look softly at the participant trying to establish eye contact, looking for minimal complicity. Interestingly, few people are able to hold eye-contact for longer than a few seconds. I play with my eyes

for one to realize the difference between the eyes' behaviours and to make it clear how their movements and the sounds are related.

I may offer the umbrella to the participants to hold. I may also give them the choice to trigger the next sound mode.

2. PROMENADE

With the umbrella in their hands, the visitor is committed to play. Physically attached to my accessories, the visitor is simultaneously free and responsible for collaboratively suggesting the path of our shared promenade. Curiously, few people feel comfortable determining our destination. I trigger the next sound mode to stimulate the development of the shared observing-listening exercises.

A longer audio cable connecting the equipment on my back to the loudspeakers hanging in the umbrella allows me to leave the protective umbrella and orbit around the visitor. Visual contact is no longer emphasized. They can listen through my eyes. It sounds like the chirps of birds, which are distorted with bitcrushing and downsampling effects, according to the asynchronous movements of the eyes. I observe the surroundings, either following moving objects or drawing the contours of immobile ones. I scan colours and their shades. I play at focusing in on objects and backgrounds. I may get distracted and the eyes just hover. The audible distortion effects reveal the machinic origin of the sound and verisimilitude is broken. Nature and technical culture are merged.

When I feel we have spent enough time in the current sound mode I switch to the next one. Another observing-listening exercise is programmed with harmonic combinations of four musical tones that incite free and dance-like movements. As I continue to orbit, the random combinations of sound provoke minute movements by my body. Distortion from asynchrony is still there, not emphatically distinguished, but incorporated within the sound composition.

3. FAREWELL

I let my body flow until feeling a closing moment in which I can return. I ask for the umbrella back. Looking at the participant's eyes with a thankful smile I press the last button of the sequence: "Thank you very much for sharing this walk with me. I hope you have enjoyed it as much as I did. I wish you a wonderful day!"

Once the playful possibilities of the program have been exhausted, I restart the search for the next interested participant.

4. MAKING OF

Self-portrait of an absence premiered at the *Design Transfer Berlin* in October 2016, on the occasion of the exhibition and symposium *Musical instruments in the 21st Century*, organized by the 3DMIN research group from the *Universität der Künste Berlin*. Programming was essentially developed by and with Edgar Zanella Alvarenga, Radamés Ajna da Silva and Dominik Hildebrand Marques Lopes. Wearable accessories were designed in collaboration with Amélie Hinrichsen, Stefan Schwabe and Caterina Renaux Hering. The performance coach was Lina Gómez.

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