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Girl Talk and Hold Music: On the Sculptural Poetics of Chat

Girls talkin' got ya all caught out there
Why you thinkin' that it's all about ya
Forget she told me everything about ya
But the girls are talkin', the girls are talkin'
—TLC, "Girl Talk"²¹

The weaker sex, the speaker sex [...]
—Betty Carter, "Girl Talk"²²

The girls are talking, the girls of every gender. The word "chat" derives from birdsong, a necessarily feminized onomatopoeia. Sometimes, coalescing around a particular figure, a Harvey Weinstein or a David France, the power of this chatter becomes partially institutionally "visible." But it's going on, intimately and ornamentally, all the time, and it is chatter's specific evasion of a certain mode of "political speech" that interests me here.

Carolyn Lazard's work, *A Conspiracy* (2017), consists of 12 white-noise machines installed in one of the neon green elevators at the New Museum. Both the sound and look of these commonplace beige-white domes, often found outside of therapists' offices, have been relatively unchanged since the 1960s. Arrayed in a grid on the ceiling, settings tweaked to create blurred intensities and dispersals, their nondescript familiarity undercuts a superficial resemblance to what might be called "sound art." *A Conspiracy* has more to do with the vestibular, peekaboo space of the elevator, where discreet conversation tends to dwindle. As the doors open and shut on changing arrangements of riders with different relationships to the museum's various interiors, a soft bank of sound closes around the little groups, cushioning and conditioning their conversation or silence. A mode of reproductive labor that both refreshes and exhausts, chat must itself also be cared for and reproduced, its condition maintained.

Upstairs, in another cushioned space, Wu Tsang's *Girl Talk* (2015) plays on a loop. Maroon wall-

to-wall carpeting is scattered with floor pillows in a matching shade; on a screen in the corner, Fred Moten twirls in slow motion, adorned in prisms, beads, sunlight, and a long shawl, as serpentwithfeet, who has described their sound as drawing on Brandy and gospel, sings an ethereal cover of Betty Carter's version of "Girl Talk":

*We like to chat about the dresses we will wear tonight
We chew the fat about our hair and how our neighbors fight
Inconsequential things men don't really care to know
Become essential things that women find so apropos*

The sweetness of girl talk is a kind of persistent indirection, a curly or circuitous movement, decorative and essential, in which ends are entrusted to endless means. Recent work by Jessica Vaughn engages the specific detour that chat extends. Vaughn uses the anachronistic form of the phone chain as a specifically sculptural material, invoking a black feminine performance of chat that both shapes and recedes from display. Begun in 2015, this body of work makes sculptural use of surplus materials from Chicago public transit: decommissioned train seats, cracked vinyl from school buses, and irregular trimmings of brightly patterned upholstery. Like office carpeting, these fabrics are specifically anechoic materials, meant to absorb, hold, and buffer the sound of the vehicle and its riders.

After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005 (2016) consists of 36 worn-out train seats and backrests, paired and mounted flat against the wall. Scuffed, shiny, abraded, the material yokes the feel of public transit to patterns of movement in the racial and economic landscape of the city. The work, presented as abstract sculpture, tugs between the recognizable ubiquity of this velvety material and its striking displacement as abstract form. The resource of the worn bus seat becomes lush specifically as a function of its use and apparent depletion. It becomes surplus at the moment that it is discarded.

A major component of the work, and the reason it interests me, is another kind of necessary surplus and detour: the phone chain and series of delays by which Vaughn acquires these materials from the city and its contractors—a task of labyrinthine and apparently enjoyable complexity. Beginning with cold calls placed

to city agencies, Vaughn follows branching channels of formal and informal requests, chatting, asking questions, seeking contacts, and describing her work. These conversations do not appear visually in the finished sculpture, but they are its necessary condition.

The work depends upon these phone calls, often to other black women working in administrative jobs, as Vaughn also does. These discussions are, she has said, “parallel sites for the artwork, as well as the material condition of its production.”³ In the rich, repetitive textures of phone chat, the project must be described, explained, and imagined, warmed to and worked around. It’s not just that the phone chain is a condition and material of the work, but also that the sculptural work, as yet unmade, is a pretext for making these calls.

The black feminine space of these serial conversations—vestibular to both the workday and the gallery space—is also a site of the entwined exhibition, production, and reproduction of the artwork. If, in the gallery, the phone calls do not appear, so likewise, in Vaughn’s chatting up of city workers, the sculptures do not appear, or more precisely, they appear as reproductions. The poetics of the phone chain intervenes in the very idea of the exhibit as display. The phone chain introduces an errant, processual thickness to the possibility of accessing the artwork, a kind of hold music, which is fully available neither in the gallery nor on the telephone.

Through this mutually occluding involvement of sculpture with poetry, an economy emerges. All of the discarded or remaindered material Vaughn seeks is surplus, both ancillary and essential to the racial and geographic operation of public transit. The chatting that Vaughn must do along the way is also a kind of essential surplus, excessive to both the framework of exhibition and the operation of government. Both public exhibition and public administration give way to a game of withholding and disclosure played on the underside of what might be considered “public.”

A surplus of chat—and the particular evasion it offers to display and disclosure—is the substance, material, and structure of some of Hannah Black’s

work recently on view at Chisenhale Gallery in London. Black transcribed conversations with friends, telling them in advance that she wanted to talk to them about “the situation,” a prompt that each interlocutor interpreted differently. The resulting book draws on the inherent ambiguity of the phrase, its delicate and sometimes comic gravity encompassing the register of “politics” (*can you comment on the situation...*) and gossip (*so, about the situation with so-and-so...*). Its referent is always between us, allowing us to talk without explaining.

The Situation is made of unmarked but unmistakable vocal shifts; we do not know exactly who is speaking. The book is a vaguebook, even as, like all vaguebooks, its content is beguilingly specific. This internally differentiated togetherness offers a specifically black and feminine demurral of the protocols of properly “political” speech and “dialogue” of the sort that was demanded from Black after her much-circulated open letter to the 2017 Whitney Biennial curators, when she was often accused of “censorship” or promoting the destruction of artworks.

Twenty thousand copies of *The Situation* were printed for the Chisenhale show and stacked in a big irregular block; already “censored” by the artist’s and her interlocutors’ brief redactions, some of the books were, in turn, fed to shredders in the exhibition space, giving the lie to any dichotomy between speech and censorship, art and its destruction. The shredded books were scattered on the floor and used to stuff several shaggy “teddies”—“transitional objects”—who sat on the floor, stoic and a little forlorn. Shredding spreads and expands the text, making it voluminous and messy, at once bigger and smaller than before. Intimacy is not a question of scale, it turns out, but of form. I can’t help thinking of the shredding as a kind of culinary preparation, the way gossip is a dish, or tea, overfilling, too rich or delicious to be contained.

¹ TLC, “Girl Talk,” *3D* (Arista Records, 2002).

² Betty Carter, “Girl Talk,” *Finally, Betty Carter* (Roulette Records, 1975).

³ Conversation with Jessica Vaughn, 26 March 2016.