

GALLERY@CALIT2
EXHIBITION CATALOG N°8

OVERHEARD

GALLERY INSTALLATION
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INTERVIEW

BY SUSAN HODARA*

*SUSAN HODARA is a freelance journalist who writes frequently about the arts. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Communication Arts, Harvard Magazine, Wesleyan Magazine and other publications. She is also a memoirist whose pieces are published in anthologies and literary journals. She is currently collaborating on a memoir about mothers, daughters and women working together. www.susanhodara.com.

Several months before the opening of "Overheard," the artists Wendy Richmond and Michael Chladil were immersed in the creative process, experimenting with the components of their upcoming exhibition.

Wendy is an artist, author and educator whose work investigates the overlap of public and private space in the 21st century. Her exhibition, "Public Privacy: Wendy Richmond's Surreptitious Cellphone," was first shown at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego in 2007. Her latest book, "Art Without Compromise," was released in October. She has written "Design Culture," her column in Communication Arts magazine, since 1984.

Michael, a musician and an engineer with a particular interest in prototyping, interned with Wendy from 2007 to 2008, while he was a graduate student in the Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University. They explored their mutual interests in two areas: the creative process and the effects of juxtaposing visual and aural elements with physicality.

With "Overheard," Wendy moves from the visual image into the realm of text and audio. The show also extends her working relationship with Michael. They sat down to share their thoughts about their intentions, their challenges, the larger context of the work, and what gallery-goers might hope to experience.

SUSAN HODARA [SH]: Describe "Overheard."

Wendy Richmond [WR]: "Overheard" is a multimedia exhibit consisting of project-

ed text and audio that appear in varying degrees from silence to cacophony. The material is based on overheard cellphone conversations that I collected over several years in a Starbucks near the apartment where I lived in midtown Manhattan. Like my prior work with surreptitious cellphone videos, its underlying theme is public privacy.

SH: You worked collaboratively on the creation of this exhibit. How did "Overheard" come to be, and what were your respective roles?

WR: When I was asked by Calit2 to present an exhibit at gallery@calit2, I recognized a two-pronged opportunity. First, it provided a deadline to complete the body of work I was already working on, focusing on overheard cellphone conversations. Secondly, the exhibit presented a chance to create a concrete show-able project with Michael, with whom I'd been collaborating on conceptual work for a couple of years.

Michael Chladil [MC]: My role is the tool-maker. I make the technology that allows Wendy to do her experimentation. It means listening to her and then translating what she wants, and also anticipating what she might need. For example, Wendy said she wanted to have multiple layers of conversations and sounds. There were a number of ways I could have provided that, but the way I chose was to set up a system that would allow me to adjust the parameters of the sound without having to go back and edit the sounds themselves.

WR: What's becoming more and more apparent to me is that Michael understands

the way I work, not just because we've worked together for a long time, but because it's his natural way, too. I don't want to know exactly what's going to happen in this exhibit. What I want is a palette of elements that we like and that work, but also the ability to move stuff around, play with it, see what can happen. Michael's tools inherently give me the flexibility to see things I might never have thought of trying. I enjoy the surprises I am able to get from working with him.

SH: What does "Overheard" entail?

WR: Let's talk about it in terms of the elements involved. First we have the components, which are visual, aural and interactive. Visually, we have huge projected typography and digital eight-by-ten-inch screens that display text. Aurally, we have recorded voice and sound. And we have Michael's rope&pulley, which allows visitors physical interaction. Next are our tools, which are the delivery system. The tools are the pieces of technology that Michael has developed, and the equipment necessary to use them, like computers, projectors and speakers.

MC: The tools are the combination of what I write and the environment I'm writing in, which is the programming language Max/MSP/Jitter. The graphical nature of this language allows me to sketch ideas quickly and revise them later, which is very important for our process.

WR: We also have our palette, which are the permutations that we — and, in some cases, gallery-goers — can play with. These include the size, spacing and transparency

of the typography, the loudness and direction of the sound and the number of simultaneous visual and aural projections.

MC: With the rope&pulley, it's the mappings of the action users take when they're pulling and what it affects. That's part of the palette.

WR: And then there's the content, which is what the show is about. In "Overheard," the content is overheard cellphone conversations and sharing public space.

SH: Talk more about the content in "Overheard."

WR: I think it's true for a lot of artists that they don't totally know what a body of work is about until it's done, and maybe until it's been around for a while. But they do have an intention.

A lot of my work is about public privacy, and asks the question: How do urban dwellers share public space when each of us is alone in our private bubble? If you live in the city, you see this all the time — people packed tightly together, but alone in their private space. I've found this really interesting to observe. My last body of work was observing it visually, through surreptitious cellphone videos. In this work I'm observing it from an aural perspective.

MC: We've been leaving the public sphere since 1979, when Sony introduced the first Walkman, and we've been invading the public space since the early '70s, when people were carrying around boom boxes.

WR: Yeah, I wrote about that in my book, in



the chapter called "The Internal Retreat from Public Space." I'm fascinated by the role personal technology plays in the way we share dense public space. Before, our private bubble was just staring off into the distance and thinking. In contemporary society, our individual bubbles have been exacerbated, or intensified, by all our little devices — our iPods, cellphones, BlackBerrys, laptops. Then there's the Starbucks phenomenon — people going into crowded cafés with their laptops and their headphones and working in public in their little bubbles. We can get to a point where we're totally unaware of the space that we're in. We travel to a distant land. My intention is observing this interesting phenomenon that is around us all the time, that we get pissed at, that we ignore, that we complain about — and then that we turn around and do ourselves.

SH: Unlike your previous exhibits, "Overheard" contains no images. Why?

WR: Yes, it's all type and sound. There are no pictures. When you're on a cellphone, you're in a weird non-space where you go to the mind's eye. In the exhibit, when you just see text and hear snippets of conversations, you begin

to imagine. How is this person dressed? How old? You want to picture who's talking. You try to fill in the gaps. That's an important part of this exhibit — the pieces that are missing, that you don't see and hear.

SH: Talk more about the rope&pulley.

MC: The rope&pulley in its most basic form is a way of manipulating digital content by moving it forward and backward. In "Overheard," we are using it to manipulate projected text and sound interactively. I created the rope&pulley for my Master's thesis at New York University. It was developed for a different purpose: to satisfy an urge to move with music.

WR: One of the things that attracted me to the rope&pulley is that you have to move with it. At a certain point in my career, I reached a point where I was really annoyed at the limited physicality of the computer.

MC: And I feel the same way. It's not overtly stated, but we share this common irritant. It's another reason Wendy and I work well together.

WR: To put it in a more positive light, it was the desire to do something more physical with technology. I like technology, and I like movement, and what I love about the rope&pulley is the physicality of how you interact with it. The way we work with personal technology today — cellphones, BlackBerrys and so forth — sometimes it comes down to just our thumbs. With the rope&pulley, I love the idea that you have to haul away.

MC: It's mostly oak, and the rope is dynamic

climbing rope that was donated by a climbing gym. It feels better than the rope I bought at the hardware store. The rope&pulley was designed using a computer. I crafted the initial versions out of cardboard to get the function, and then had the pieces milled. I assembled them myself.

WR: In "Overheard," the rope&pulley is the vehicle for physical interaction. It lets you play with the conversations. You can make the words move slower or faster; you can make the sounds louder or softer. You can run it in reverse. When you play, you see new stuff. It's fun!

Also, playing with the rope&pulley lets you abstract the conversations so that you listen to them more carefully.

MC: And there's another side to this. The rope&pulley is a content creation system. You could probably make a show that looked like "Overheard" using a few DVD players and projectors. What's different about the rope&pulley is that it's a real-time tool. It's a workflow tool for doing these kinds of things as rapidly as you can think about them.

WR: To clarify, the rope&pulley serves two functions. One is its role in the gallery, and the other is its use when Michael and I are working together. It lets me say: what about this, what about that, what about this, and boom boom boom boom, I can see it. If I wanted to see what those ideas looked like using, say, keynote, well... forget it. In that sense, the rope&pulley is a way for Michael to help me experiment with what we want to show.





SH: What are some of the challenges you faced while working on "Overheard"?

WR: When you're developing an exhibit, you get so involved in what you're making, what it looks like, that you can forget about the actual content. Is it entertaining? Besides the rope&pulley, which is fun and engaging, is there drama? What is the story here?

This is not a play, with characters who interact. We are presenting snippets of conversations. Some are dramatic, someone is talking about a loved one being in the hospital. Others are quite mundane: "I'm on 58th. Where are you?" We had to ask: Do people respond to more dramatic con-

versations? I've overheard so many conversations and written down a lot of them, and much of what is included here is deliberately less dramatic. I've chosen the comments that you might make yourself tomorrow.

Another concern was the diversity of cultures we are representing in our recorded conversations. They represent a particular kind of diversity that you find around 59th Street and Ninth Avenue in Manhattan, where you have Lincoln Center, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the Julliard School, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Time Warner Center, Fordham University, the Museum of Arts and Design, St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital, and a ton of doctors' offices. There are bits of those places in the conversations. It's where I happened to be living at the time. It's the Starbucks I happened to go to each morning. If I had started the project where I live now, in Brooklyn, it would have been entirely different.

SH: Wendy, in your Communication Arts columns and in your

new book, Art Without Compromise*, you write a lot about the creative process. Can you discuss how your thoughts about the creative process came into play in the development of "Overheard"?

WR: Yes, I am probably more interested in the process than the product, particularly in how not to smother creative seeds. It's about how to maintain a balance between remaining in a state of not knowing all the answers when you're working on a project, and moving forward toward a final product. You want to stay open as long as you can, because if you decide too early what your end result is going to be, you will go down that path, things will become more and more precious, and eventually you'll look back and say, Damn, I didn't even try this and that.

And there's another part of it, which I call "setting up and letting go." You do need your tools and your direction, but if you are rigid, if you insist on knowing exactly where you're going to end up, and you resist experimentation because it might not work, then why bother at all? I want to be surprised. I want to learn from my work.

MC: I came at it a little differently. I was tired of the way I had been working corporately, where we'd spend a lot of time on the design of our products, but ultimately, at the end of the process, it was always a letdown. We knew there were flaws in what we had made, but we had no chance to correct them because they had to be shipped. I wanted to be working on something that didn't have that letdown feeling at the end, when the majority of the feedback was about what was wrong with the product. I'm not interested in the creative process

solely from the perspective of becoming an artist. I'm interested in being able to self-direct my work when the opportunity presents itself, and in being able to enjoy the process of creating.

WR: Even when you are creating art, you are creating a product. I call this the "Creative Process Loop." Observe, reflect, articulate. Observe, reflect, articulate. You go through iterations.

SH: In creating "Overheard," what mattered most to you?

MC: For me there were two aspects. Making things is of paramount importance to me, and what matters most is that what I am making gets used. Only then can I understand how it needs to be refined so that it gets better. The second part is the safety net offered by working on this show with Wendy — experiencing the creative process that we talked about and that I wanted to learn about, but not going through it by myself.

WR: This show let me live out the theories I believe in, particularly maintaining the balance between knowing and not knowing. We did very specific things that forced us to observe, reflect and articulate — to follow those actual stages. They were useful. Playing out these theories was very important to me.

What also matters so much is that there is joy in the process. I know it's going to be painful. I know it's going to get stressful. I know I'm going to be worried. But there has to be joy. Those moments of beauty and surprise that we come upon unexpect-

edly — making the exhibit is the excuse for them.

SH: What matters most to you about the end result, the exhibit that is "Overheard?"

MC: It has to work. And I mean more than technically, because that can be unsatisfying in itself. It has to work culturally, too, in the context of what it is.

WR: For me, what's most important is that the show is engaging in many ways. It should be beautiful to look at, and fun to play with, and hopefully it makes people think.

SH: Describe the experience that gallery-goers will have.

WR: It depends. It will be different for everyone, which is great. They will watch, they will listen, they will play. There will be times when it's quiet and not much is going on, and then there will be more and more overlapping visuals and voices and sounds. The experience provides a range between silence in the visual and aural sense, and utter cacophony. And I will throw in one more thing that pertains to the rope&pulley: there will be silence in terms of interaction, and cacophony in terms of interaction.

What I like about being in the gallery for a certain amount of time is that you will hear a voice alone, then you will hear that voice with other voices, and maybe catch it again alone later, or hear a different part of the conversation. Because of the repetition, you start to develop a familiarity with

some of the conversations and a relationship with certain characters.

And unexpected things happen. You might see one phrase on a screen that connects to a completely different conversation that you hear. The longer you stay in the gallery, the more layers you'll experience, and the more you'll create your own show. I hope that visitors will become more aware of the layers they experience in their own lives. After they leave, they'll hear what they always hear, but they'll do a double-take and think, I hear this all the time and I never noticed it before.

