

Art Guide Australia

21st Biennale of Sydney: Oliver Beer

By Sheridan Hart, March 22, 2018



“Compositions for Mouths (Sunara and Alina)” [2019]. Colour print on aluminium. Oliver Beer, Composition For Mouth (Songs My Mother Taught Me), 2018. Image © Oliver Beer.

Some sounds are made, others are found. To sing or to play music is the most established way to bring sounds into being; but there are also hidden notes, which are fundamental and native to particular spaces. These are summoned with vocal exploration and careful listening. Over the past year, Kent – and Paris-based artist Oliver Beer has been discovering such sounds in Australia, with a Sydney residency and an upcoming film screening at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the Biennale of Sydney.

Beer’s residency unfolded under the sails of Jørn Utzon’s Sydney Opera House, whose hold on the Australian national psyche is as conspicuous as its winged façade.

Over a month in late 2017, Beer mounted an aural survey of the building’s innards: singing his way around rehearsal spaces, stages and storage rooms. “It was [Biennale curator] Mami Kataoka’s idea that I should be able to use the building as an instrument,” he says. “The competition between its role as a place of music and art and its national symbolism is a complicated one. Its musical potential is multifaceted, almost limitless.”

The artist found himself drawn to both unassuming and familiar chambers. For one recording, lone singers summited four of the building’s soaring sails. Ensclosed between roof and ceiling, the singers harnessed the acoustics formed by the proportions of each curved spire. The polyphony Beer is amalgamating from these recordings seems to emanate directly from the building’s iconography: “The bass [singer] and I sat at the pinnacle of Shell A2, the highest roof: perhaps the most charged, visible square metre in the country.”

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Deep in the belly of the Opera House, Beer developed a choral composition, to be performed in 2018.

Located in a modest corridor, audiences would be forgiven for forgetting they were inside the symbolic seat of Australian music and architecture. Yet Beer found therein a “cathedral-like” acoustic. “It sings a beautifully tuned, clear B- at and a D- at.” The space is not usually public and aesthetically it’s “brutal”, yet such banalities have no bearing on the fineness of its voice.

Beer’s method for locating resonant frequencies is intuitive. With an even, long, sliding note – a glissando – he pierces the silence. At some certain pitch, peculiar to each space, his voice connects. Imagine sonic waves, rebounding from the walls at perfect angles to bathe the room in unmitigated sound. “When you find it, your voice starts to leave your body. It’s taken on and amplified by the architecture. It’s as though your voice is a fingertip, and the room is a wine glass.” Beer charges architectural space with value according to sound: beauty, function, cost and history recede. As we move through train stations, lobbies and stairwells, “the sounds we put out are reflected back, but not in a neutral way, in a coloured way. Every space has its own palette. The most banal of passageways can create music as fruitfully as an auditorium.”

It was during his residency that Beer began recruiting a choral phalanx who would form the basis of a video work for the Art Gallery of NSW.

Composition for Mouths (Songs My Mother Taught Me) is a filmed vocal performance. In pairs, four singers used a new, physical vocalisation technique. Locking their lips, each pair formed a single, collaborative vocal cavity, breathing and reverberating together. “I asked them to find each other’s resonant frequencies, like I’d done with architecture,” says Beer. As two voices converged, the singers produced the phenomenon of ‘beating’, a “violent, interesting and almost percussive” throbbing effect, caused by the friction of adjacent frequencies. Composition is both a two-headed instrument and a radically intimate duet.

To write the score, Beer interviewed his singers, asking for their earliest memories of melody. Their answers indicate Australia’s multicultural musical heritage: a children’s hymn; an Indian raga; medieval composer Hildegard; an atonal indigenous songline. “It was important that the music was tied to the people performing it,” says Beer. “That single principle was enough to push me further than I’d gone before musically.”

The tinderbox of Beer’s residency has sparked recordings, films, live performance and composition, each idea spurring the next. This “gesamkunstwerk” has begot a 2018 exhibition at Anna Schwartz Gallery and a permanent sound installation opening next year at MONA. (One imagines between MONA and the Opera House, Beer has already traversed the figurative Olympus and Hades of Australian culture.)

Wherever he works, Beer pursues that transcendent nexus between space and sound, which defies the prosaic by being both fleeting and unwavering.

“Our ephemerality and the minutiae of daily life are put in contrast with this unchanging, indifferent musical law that surrounds us.” Like mathematics, the sonic shape of the world is immutable, mysterious. Provided it’s standing, Beer calculates, Sydney Opera House “will be singing the same notes in 300 years”.