ALMINE RECH

Taryn Simon
Assembled Audience

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Taryn Simon's Assembled Audience

By Daniel Marcus

On the radio applause sounds like the fire that flares up with a loud hiss from the sacrificial pyre.

—THEODOR ADORNO

The rise and fall of applause—cheering, clapping, hooting, whistling—emanates from the entrance to Taryn Simon's installation Assembled Audience, suggesting to visitors that they have arrived in the aftermath of a performance or during the raucous punctuation of a speaker's oration. Entering the installation's lightless interior, however, one quickly realizes that the applause is the main event: no words or images intervene to contextualize each successive bout of clapping, and the audience is never represented as such. Nor is it the same audience each time: with each new round of applause, the makeup and spatial orientation of the crowd changes in shape and scale, evoking gathering spaces as intimate as a repertory theater and as vast as a stadium arena. Over time, the sonic barrage begins to overwhelm the senses, the staccato of clapping becoming a wash of white noise: a transfiguration of culture into nature, calling to mind the rhythms of a heavy rainstorm (or, per Adorno, the blaze of a bonfire).

While many gestures of human enthusiasm can be pinpointed to specific regions, and even to particular towns and villages, applause seems to have no distinct point of origin. For writer Elias Canetti, the expression traces back to rituals of collective dissimulation, serving to concatenate individual gestures (stamping feet, gyrating bodies, clapping hands, etc.) into a larger and more imposing mass: "a single creature…with fifty heads and a hundred legs and arms, all performing in exactly the same way and with the same purpose."1 For Adorno, whose interest in applause coincided with the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, the gesture marked "the last vestige of objective communication between music and listener," temporarily suspending the rules of alienated spectatorship by permitting onlookers the role of active, noisemaking participants. As an exercise in collective mythomania, applause is most convincing, he argues, "when it is the expression not of a personal response, but of a ceremonial function"2 —a gesture of pure social conformity, in other words.

Echoing this notion of the ritual function of applause, and following on Simon's recent installation An Occupation of Loss (2018), an immersive performance involving an international cast of professional mourners, Assembled Audience extends the artist's investigation of public rites and myths into the domain of collective adoration. Working with a team of Columbus-based producers over a one-year period, Simon recorded applause from one individual at each event—concerts, sporting events, and political rallies—held at the city's three largest venues: the Greater Columbus Convention Center, Nationwide Arena, and The Ohio State University's Jerome Schottenstein Center. Selecting and combining audio tracks using a computer program, Assembled Audience creates an endless array of synthetic audiences, each encompassing attendees of different events (among them, Entrepreneur Expo 2018; the Ohio Credit Union League Annual Convention; a Donald Trump rally; and a Katy Perry concert) and divergent political, ideological, and cultural allegiances. Aggregated at random, the audio tracks never repeat in the same configuration: the same audience never assembles twice.

Simon's manipulation of applause by digital means, assembling and dispersing audiences ex nihilo, dovetails with centuries-old practices of demagogic crowd management. Early accounts of applause emphasize its potential to be counterfeited: in the Roman Empire, hired ringers, often called "claques," were commonplace—a phenomenon reported in 86 BCE by the orator Cicero, who describes "the crowd of spectators in the theatre and at the gladiatorial games, [who] pour forth their purchased applauses [...] at the caprice of a few directors."3 More recently, in Adolf Hitler's Germany, applause served the Nazi Party as a potent weapon. Equipping urban centers with loudspeakers, Hitler, Hermann Goering, and other party orators broadcast their speeches along with recordings of cheering crowds, "enveloping [listeners] in a unified entity, a fatherland," as a recent study suggests.4 While the manipulation of public opinion often takes more insidious— and less audible—forms in the era of Twitter and Reddit, to the tune of bot-generated retweets and up-votes, the advent of a digital public sphere has hardly diminished the role of modern-day claques, which can be purchased as needed from firms like Extra Mile and Crowds on Demand, specialists in "protests, rallies, flash-mobs, paparazzi events and other inventive PR stunts."5

In its most common form, manufactured applause bleeds into the ordinary experience of spectatorship: hearing others clapping compels us to clap in turn. What does it do, then, to separate the sound of applause from its accompanying spectacle, framing it as an object of attention in its own right? For Adorno, the spectacle of performed applause— as when stage actors burst into scripted cheering— demystifies the ritual, reflecting back to the audience its own, involuntary passivity. "Such applause, coming from a distance, is disconcerting; the applauding actors on the stage appear to be ghosts from mythical times."6 Something similar happens with Assembled Audience: Although the names of each attendee and the dates and locations of each event are listed on a wall of the installation, the randomized combination of audio tracks effectively obscures these particularities, decoupling the sound of clapping from its individual source. As a visitor, it is hard not to feel oneself implicated in Assembled Audience: as a fellow member of the crowd, as the object of mass adoration, and as a passive consumer of artistic spectacle. The sense of self-recognition is all the more unsettling insofar as the sonic collective— the illusory "we" of each assembled audience—unites a potentially combustible range of ideological subjects, conjoined in involuntary solidarity.

In its homogenization (and recombination) of disparate audiences and interests, Assembled Audience pays homage to its geographic setting, a city—and an economy—shaped in large part by the worldview of mass-marketing strategists. As the installation's locus, Columbus has long occupied a privileged position within the field of manufactured opinion. For decades, Columbus—nicknamed "Test City U.S.A."—has been considered a snapshot of the nation's demographics. Located in the heart of the most accurate bellwether state, Columbus is a critical gauge for predicting political outcomes and testing new commercial products for companies including McDonald's, Victoria's Secret, and Kroger. Every successful presidential candidate over the past two decades has campaigned at one or more of the venues in Assembled Audience.

Presented for the first time in the city of its creation, Assembled Audience resonates with the changed circumstances of public life, presciently forecasting the isolation of individuals during the pandemic. Formerly packed with crowds, these same gathering spaces, now quieted by COVID-19, have been repurposed for eviction trials, police trainings, and a field hospital. “The applauding actors on the stage appear to be ghosts from mythical times,” writes Adorno. Those times increasingly fade from memory; with their passing, the spectacle of applause has largely vanished from our public culture (one does not clap at the end of a webinar). Restoring the ceremony to its full potency, Assembled Audience reminds us, among other things, of its revocable status. Applause is not a necessary condition of the spectacle: the show goes on without it. Sports matches are contested in empty arenas (albeit sometimes with recorded crowd noises); sketch comedians play to the camera’s unblinking eye; both mainstream political parties took their 2020 nominating conventions online, jostling for attention in a limitless Zoom-space. Silence is the sound of unmitigated alienation; it is equally the melody of refusal.

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1. Elias Canetti, Crowds and Power, trans. Victor Gollanez (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 32.

2. Theodor Adorno, “A Natural History of Music,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music (London: Verso, 2002), 65.

3. Marcus Tullius Cicero, The Orations, vol. III, trans. C. D. Yonge, M.A. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), 208.

4. Greg Goodale, Sonic Persuasion: Reading Sound in the Recorded Age (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 62.

5. Crowds on Demand website, https://crowdsondemand.com/ (retrieved September 21, 2020).

6. Adorno, “A Natural History of Music,” 66.