



The Voice I Want from Myself: An Interview with sair goetz

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, welcome to the Gallery!

sair goetz is a non-binary artist based in California, whose work exists at the intersection of bodily performance, video, installation and signage. Selected in partnership with Battersea Arts Centre to be supported by the Aural/Oral Dramaturgies Project, sair goetz's work meets the remit of this research in a number of interesting ways.

Their video piece *Me and My Army*, originally made in 2011, deploys feminist art and theory to reenact and give voice to Mrs Alexander, the largely marginalised and forgotten character played by Adrienne Corri in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 version of *A Clockwork Orange*, whose rape sets the action of the film in motion. goetz's multi-channel video piece *hold yr tongue* (2017), originally conceived as a one-to-one performance, continues the exploration of sexual violation, this time attempting to give a verbal testimony of an experience while at the same time holding one's tongue around a selection of objects. The developing interest in voice, silence, sound and more recently ventriloquism is finding its way to a brand new piece *The ABCs and XYZs of LMNs*, currently in development, which is an exploration of trans- and queer-phobic scientific rhetoric.

In the conversation that follows, sair goetz shares the specificities of their journey towards performance art via a combined interest in technology, politics and art theory. They generously reveal the provenance of specific works from their catalogue by dissecting personal experiences, offering intriguing reflections, and introducing new ways of thinking about orality and aurality.

This conversation took place by Zoom on 31st May 2020, between London and San Francisco.

[00:02:18] POINTS OF DEPARTURE

DR: sair, thank you very much for your time and for agreeing to talk to us about your work. I've been trying to refresh my memory just looking at your website. Of course I saw some samples of your work and we talked about your work when we originally met. What we normally do in these conversations is we try and understand the artist and their way of working by reference to where they come from as an artist. So what your journey has been, what formative influences have shaped the way in which you work as an artist and, what training has informed it or has caused you to resist it or to rebel against it, what in your cultural milieu in some ways has determined your aesthetics and your methodologies. If we go back to those early formative experiences, where would you place your point of departure? What was the important thing for you that you did do where you, kind of, began to think about expressing yourself as an artist in a particular way?

sair goetz: My mum is fond of telling this story of I was, I don't know, around six years old, or something like that, and helping her clean out the car and pulled out a tassel that had fallen off of something and a candy wrapper, a cellophane wrapper, and put them together and started speaking through it as if it was a character. And the candy wrapper was, like, the wings of this character and the tassel was the body. And the playfulness that art can allow I think that that as my point of departure. I've been thinking a lot lately about this idea of something that's heliotropic, meaning like a sunflower, something that is following the sun. A lot of my work lately has been very much about organic matter, like, looking into what does it take for something to grow? And one of the other things about that candy wrapper scenario that I think is really emblematic for me is that on a visceral, core level it is important to me to examine wastefulness, like, wastefulness is something that really motivates me. Waste, in general, really motivates me. So, a lot of what I've done in my life has, as an artist from a time period of when I was making sculpture to a time period when I was doing only performance to a time period when I was doing only video, it was mostly about using the scraps of what was around and playing. The only thing



that is necessary in order to create something out of nothing, out of the scraps, that are just the by-products of daily life, is a lot of imagination, and imagination comes from play. So that is the most general summary that I could possibly give but, like, for example, this project this project *The ABCs and XYZs of LMN*, about lemons, has brought me to a place of thinking about I eat lemons whole, like apples, and one of the things that I'm always noticing with artwork is that there's things that I just do in my life and I never think of them as being strange until somebody confronts me with it, reflects it back at me and says: 'Wow, that's really weird that you eat lemons like that.' And this has happened at every party that I've ever gone to in my life where there's a lemon, or every dinner, where you get a lemon as a garnish and you're supposed to just squeeze it onto the plate and then throw it away. Some lemons are nicer than others [laughter] but I can taste the difference between, like, an organic lemon and a non-organic lemon because I'm eating the rind. And organic is, you know, it's a buzzword, it's a catchphrase, it's a whatever, but something that I've been trying to critically examine in terms of my own relationship to consumption and climate change and that being part of a greater problem. So, when I'm doing something like eating a lemon and eating the rind I feel like I'm confronting what that lemon is all the way down. I can't forget that show and that I think is, like, the most important factor of this thing that I said about wastefulness is that if I'm using something I want to use something I use the whole thing. And I think that way about ideas too but it gets tricky, that actually is where it gets really tricky because sometimes I'm like: 'I would like to reference this', but to reference something also might mean, like, ingesting it or promoting it, which is very hard for certain materials that I would like to use. So one thing that I did in the project *Me and My Army* was that I was absolutely under the surface referencing *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which I did in theatre very early in my teenage years and I loved that play. I loved the idea of what is happening in the background when everybody else is on stage? Like, what is happening in that off-screen space? And someways I do think that is similar to that lemon rind, like, what is this thing that we're ignoring is the excess, is the temporary, is the throw-away,

[00:08:19] MEANS OF PROJECTION

DR: In what you've said so far, we've heard about a number of different strands that your work has taken. You had an artistic output as a sculptor, you just mentioned your early association with theatre-making, theatre practice as a teenager and so on, and now you're making performance that draws on a number of different media as well. I understand your academic training has been in the areas of arts and communications, arts and technology and so on – can you take us on that journey through those choices you were making as a young person? I might want to return to that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* actually, if you don't mind, because this is a project about dramaturgies and theatres – so, yeah, going back to those teenage years of doing theatre, what was that encounter like and where did it take place?

SG: I was a very shy kid, but I wasn't, but I was! I recently heard the expression 'ambivert' – so both an introvert and an extrovert and that's absolutely what I consider myself and even now, like, I shoot alone for the most part – I set up the camera, I perform in front of it and then I go look at the footage, do it again, look at the footage, do it again. One very formative moment for me was I had this theatre teacher, who I think was just, I think she was just a little irritated at how quiet I was. I was probably, like, ten years old, eleven, twelve, I don't know, something like that, and standing on stage and she was like: 'You need to project', and she could not explain projecting to me, I just didn't get it. And finally I was working with some tech folk because I was like: 'I can't be on the stage, I'll just help.' And at one point we were prepping something and I needed to say something to someone who was at the very back of this proscenium theatre, and I was on stage, so I didn't yell, I projected for the first time and this teacher turns around and she said: 'sair, this is it! That's what projection is. Do it again!' And she made me do it again, and I could feel it in my body that feeling when you are using your full lung capacity to speak. And I love that, I love it, but now especially living in the Bay area, we're, like, on top of each other, almost literally – I live with five people, we live in this place where it's, like, there's somebody right above me, there's somebody right above them, there's somebody right above them. We're all on top of each other all the time, separated by thin walls and the temptation to, like, curl your shoulders in and take up less space and to be quiet, and especially as someone assigned female at



birth, there's this, like, wanting to hide these feminine features that's, like, part of my physical life whereas, like, opening up, using my full chest is actually how I get the voice that I want from myself. And learning that was so hard. It was just an incredibly difficult thing, and I feel like I have to constantly re-learn it now. So these days there's only two spaces in the Bay area that I've ever been that I feel I can try to make work and one of them is in my partner's car because when I'm on the highway nobody can hear me! And the other space is in a giant studio warehouse. It's a studio inside of a warehouse: one side is an elevator shaft, on the other side is a bathroom, so there's no studios abutting it and I can actually work out loud in that space. And one of the strangest and most beautiful parts about that early life in theatre, actually, was that that is a space that I can enter in when there is an audience, but when there's a real audience it's a different experience than when there's a camera. And that is actually part of what took me into art and tech things. I actually started in 16mm film, which had no sound. I was really interested in what communication looked like without sound, and a lot of that meant shooting text and having – in a sense then I have gone far into this world of how did silent film-makers do text? I, actually, have a day job now where I'm working at an archive for type, for typefaces, so my day job has me regularly inside of: 'What does text look like on the screen? On page? On film?' And it's now, it's beside Zoom, it's all we have. There are these text messages and usually muted video. And that's the other thing: I feel like I moved into looking at the history of silent cinema – and got to ventriloquism, that's a whole other line – because I was constantly in this position of feeling like I needed to be able to function in a small space, in a controlled space, in a quiet space, and not bother anybody. So the not bothering anybody meaning, like: 'Definitely don't project your voice because you're going to bother your neighbour', was one of the things that, sort of like took me into film because I could work on film so quietly, and then it could be so big and loud. Like, if it's a silent film you don't need a rehearsal space where you can make noise, but you do! Like, this is where I'm at right now – I feel like a caged animal because I haven't been able to sing loudly. I think that idea, that 'good children are seen and not heard' idea was something I think I took a little too much to heart as a child and have been trying to unlearn ever since, and did it briefly inside of theatre but then realised that in film I could do both, although I miss that theatre pushes me towards it and I know that when I'm in front of an audience, I'm still putting on that – acting as an MC, you know, turns into this whole other self.

[00:15:45 to 00:16:48] Excerpt from *Take Requests* (2018)

DR: When you started working with 16mm film was that before college?

SG: In undergrad.

DR: And what was the actual undergrad degree that you did?

SG: There were three. So it was Visual and Media Studies, Documentary Studies, and Arts Through the Moving Image, which is their video programme. So I did all three.

DR: And what was that choice determined by? What did you imagine this was going to contribute towards your journey as an artist?

SG: Honestly, I think it was a little short-sighted at the time. It was very, like: 'I just want to take these classes and this is where the fun is', was a lot of it for me. And then also, a little bit of, like, at the time I was, like: 'Well, if I know my way around technology then I can be employed.' Coming from a very middle-class background that was a consideration. So I was like: 'All right, I will learn how to do basic coding. I will learn how to...'. and in grad school it was like: 'Okay, I will teach Photoshop and Illustrator and processing. I will learn how to program an Arduino, I know the basics of physical computing and robotics.' So these kinds of things were partly just interesting, and, returning back to that wastefulness question, one of the things that's always bothered me was if there was – I used to take stuff apart in high school, I would just find tech around and take it apart because I was like: 'What is this? What's inside that?' And I think I'm technically a millennial, so I am on that, like, older edge of them, but still I grew up having seen *The Matrix* and was very curious about what happens inside the black box of a computer. So I went into my undergrad with a little bit of like: 'I want to know these things because they're part of my contemporary world', and also a little bit of disdain for that, because I liked being physical, I liked taking up space in real space, which is a lot of what I think, kind of, brought me to this project, this question of like: 'Can I perform with the video?' And, these days it's like: 'Well, even if I'm performing with the video, it's still through a screen.' I have some questions about that but... But, yeah,



some of it was just practical and a lot of it was just curiosity. And I loved the faculty in the Film department. The classes were more fun. Experimental film was just mind-blowing to me and it was partly because there was, I could see a lineage. I think I was using Final Cut Pro at the time, and one of the teachers who taught editing had started her career working as an editor on 16mm, and then on 35mm, and then on VHS, and then had essentially spent her career growing up with film. And one day she gave this beautiful presentation about how all of the tools that you're using inside of – when I teach it, it's now Premiere usually – inside of Premiere, or Final Cut Pro, or any kind of video editing software online, all of that is coming from a language that was developed by hand. So 'to cut' literally was to cut. There's a thing called a 'ripple roll', and why is it called a 'roll'? Well, you were actually rolling the film. So some of it was just – a good teacher. Her name is Shambhavi Kaul. She was great at teaching me, somebody who really loved working with their hands, how to see the computer as just an extension. So some curiosity, some practicality and a good deal of good educators.

DR: And did you always envisage that you would be pursuing a career as an artist when you were doing this degree?

SG: Yes and no. There's a thing called 'magnet programmes' in the US. It was an attempt to counter white flight in the US. What they would be, would be an inner city school that was funded very, very well and they would bus people from all over the school district. So, in from the suburbs, in from another part of the inner city and they would fund it specifically for some sort of like career path training thing. And it's public, not a private school but just specially oriented towards something. So I had been into engineering, I like math, I like things that made sense, I still do. And love spreadsheets! I use them all the time in my work currently as part of the flow. And so I had been planning to be an engineer and when my parents moved to another state, I went to a different high school that was oriented towards the arts and, honestly, just discovered that art was so much harder than math. And at the time it was just the challenge, like, I was addicted to it, addicted to this weirdness of, like, knowing that I had made a piece that I thought was good and at the time not knowing why I thought it was good or not knowing how to do that again and, and now I don't try to do that thing again, but it made a difference at the time.

DR: What kind of art was that?

SG: I had to choose an art track in high school and I chose visual arts so it was drawing at painting at that moment. I'm not a good painter, never was, but I was doing collage work, which I guess I still do, actually. I think that that's not a bad way to talk about the work that I make, because it's a lot of picking vignettes from what I like, not really caring how many people get the homage, and knowing that, like, if I pick something up from a Kenneth Anger movie it might just be there for me, but that's part of how I orient myself as – when I'm performing for the cameras, like, thinking: 'Okay, now I am, I am a combination of Jean Dielman from *Jean Dielman*, the movie, and I am also Adrienne Corri from *A Clockwork Orange*, and I am also–', I can't even remember, like, just pick one of them and put it in – I still think of it as a collage of information, or of personality and knowing that those are the sticky notes around when I'm about to go shoot that scene.

DR: So when was it that you graduated from your undergraduate degree? Which year was it?

SG: 2011.

DR: 2011. And then you did an MFA in Art and Technology, and actually there is quite a lot of engagement with theoretical thinking – you describe your work as being about theory and practice. So, was that already a feature of your interests during your undergraduate studies – what was the choice about doing an MFA about?

SG: I actually have been considering on and off going to do a PhD because art and technology is where I felt the interesting theory was. Not that there's not interesting theory in other things but that was... A lot of the people that I think are doing really interesting, radical theoretical queer engagement are working in art and technology fields. And there's some local people that I could give you as an example that are local to the Bay area, like, Dorothy Santos, somebody that I'm a big fan of, or Micha Cárdenas. Micha – I saw her work when I was an undergrad and listening to her talk about why she makes games, and how that for her could be a space to explore what radical queer community could look like, or a future – it's just that those were the people in the art that I thought were paying the most attention. Not all of art and technology by a long shot, but those are the conferences that got my brain



buzzing. I like performance conferences too, I've been to a couple, but it's always with this, like: 'Well, we have to confront this. Technology is just part of everything now, it's part of all of it and if we aren't thinking about it, it's using us.' And so one of the most interesting books that I've read recently is by Jenny Odell, it's called *How to Do Nothing: Resisting Control in the Attention Economy*. I'm misquoting the subtitle, but it is this question of, like: 'Well, if I have Instagram on my phone I will be on it for at least one hour a day', so I don't have Instagram on my phone. Because I don't want my whole life to be in that space. I actually, in graduate school, had a major physical problem because of all of the looking, all of this position of the spine when you're looking down like this. Theory is what got me into film. I loved film theory because it was so much about just: 'How do you communicate? How can we think about the way that it impacts an audience? But also how do you control?' I was very bothered by film, I still am, I still don't watch that many without a lot of cushioning of my life, because I think film is too powerful. I don't like how powerful it is. I don't like being, necessarily, I don't like being taken on a ride when I don't know where it's going. And an emotional ride that – the emotional ride that film takes you on is something that I wanted to engage with, so I started reading film theory. And one of my favourite essays is from Mary Anne Doane [1980] and she talks about how the voice works on screen. So what is it when somebody's off-screen and you hear their voice, and how does the sound manipulation create a presence of that voice. So, like, the voice of god versus somebody whose voice is faded left. Those questions were so interesting to me, because they helped me break down what was the idea of authority. And where does authority sit in a space and, as a maker, when do I want to claim that? But also 'can I escape it?' has been a very major question for me for a long time. So dialogue being absent from a lot of my work is something that I've toyed with for a long time because I just have a lot to say but I don't know that that's a place for it. So I write essays alongside of things frequently.

DR: At what point did you move to the Bay area?

SG: After grad school – that was in 2011.

DR: What prompted this decision? Was it part of an artistic choice or was it simply life circumstances?

SG: Yes. I had a fellowship, the Dedalus Foundation Fellowship, right at the end of graduate school, and so I could go anywhere in theory. And the Bay area was, kind of, a bizarre choice because so many people I know were like: 'Ah, go to Berlin, ah, go to Philadelphia, ah, go to Chicago', and I love those places very much but there was a space here, actually, and my day job is now working for this space that I wanted to be, I wanted to research here. That's really what it was, was that the Letterform Archive was just so interesting. I had come on a visit to the Bay and did a short visit in the Letterform Archive looking for – at the time I was looking for people's type decisions in film. So in my video that's on my website *Me and My Army* which was my piece as video for grad school, I did a bunch of research at the time on typeface that was used in *A Clockwork Orange*, which was what that piece was about. And then I stumbled across this whole set of materials in this archive revealing a tendency of people to put bodies into the alphabet. And I was just fascinated, completely fascinated by, by this trend. I actually just wrote a piece, a short essay [goetz 2020] about this trend at the archive, but not just at the archive, just in the history of people writing and printing in the Latin alphabet anyway. So I was really fascinated with this because I think for me the whole thing about silence and voice and silent film, is just the disconnection between what is being expressed and the body itself. And that's ventriloquism too – it's just this disconnection and then reconnection of, like, allowing the body and voice to be separated or projected or put into someone else – I remember, I think in undergrad was the first time that somebody was, at the time they were like: 'Ah, Web 2.0, let's talk about that in theory', and nobody ever says those words anymore, but they're like: 'Okay, that 2.0, that's like Twitter where it's not just people publishing on websites, it's social media.' And I remember one of the things that was so remarkable to me about early web stuff was 'copy and paste', just the basics. And that fact that you can, it is easy to take another's words, to take another's voice, and use it and say it's your own.

MAKING ME AND MY ARMY (2011)

DR: You've mentioned *Me And My Army* as being your graduation piece.

SG: Just one of them.



DR: One of them. Maybe we should talk about it a bit more but maybe for the benefit of the listener as well. I don't mind if you describe it, if you tell us a bit more, in a bit more detail, how it came about, why, what you intended to do with that?

SG: Yeah, I maybe should have just started here because it definitely sums up a lot of the things that I've said so far. So, I mentioned earlier that part of the reason that I got into film theory was because I felt like film was too powerful. And part of the reason that I felt that film was too powerful was because I was a voracious reader as a teenager, as a kid and as a teenager, just worked my way through every dystopian novel that's ever been written, pretty much, like, I was very obsessed and I loved *A Clockwork Orange*. And I loved that book, because of the way that you got to learn a language because a language was invented inside of it. And so one of the things that's interesting to me about that as a book is that you are inside the mind of Alex as the main character, but all of the things that he does are described essentially from the view of a sociopath, because that's what the character is. There is no empathy for any other character, for any of the harm that he does, none of that. So reading that book, it's horrific but it is still – it's not a horror that I am asked to participate in personally, which is maybe is the danger of the book too. But I thought it was clever and was a pre-teen, and I liked movies so I watched the movie as a twelve year old, which was a bad idea I think because it was really upsetting. It was really upsetting and *Me And My Army* is probably a decade's or more worth of processing of what seeing that movie did to me as, like, a young person assigned female at birth. And at the time, without any, kind of, vocabulary to talk about transness, about gender identity, at that time just operating in the world, being seen as a young woman and there's nothing in either the book or the movie that even close to address what it is to be a woman in that world. And it is perhaps one of the most objectifying pieces of literature that I've read but – yeah, so there's no sympathy or empathy for women in that space. And the movie, I think, is worse because it plays with where you identify yourself. So one of the things that I've written about that piece was that – and this is why I say I have a theory/practice thing – because writing about other work helps me understand what I need to do, what I need to do in response. I had one teacher one time, I had asked him: 'When you find out that someone made an artwork that you really, really, liked and that you think: "Ah, I wish I had made that"?' he was like: 'Oh I never think that. I just think: "Oh, now I don't have to do that. Somebody else did it, I'm free to do something else now".' So my biggest problems with *A Clockwork Orange* was partly the movie itself.

[00:36:12 to 00:37:47] 'Singing in the Rain' from *Me and My Army* (2017)

It is constructed so that you identify with this sociopath, you actively sympathise with him. It's also constructed so that you in the moment that Adrienne Corri is being sexually assaulted in the very beginning of the film, you identify with her husband who is bound, but you identify with him just so that you can watch this happen, which just, it kind of, just isn't necessary. So the gratuitous violence of that moment is upsetting to me but also that character, that male character, gets a name: he is Frank Alexander. And Alex, you identify with Alex the whole movie, but this character who is actually the linchpin of the whole movie, without this character being sexually assaulted you don't have the rest of the movie – Alex never gets found and he never gets put into this brainwashing device – so without her you have nothing. But she doesn't have a name, she has no first name and she has no last name, she has her husband's last name, and I was so upset by this. But the thing that really got me about *A Clockwork Orange* was how all of these faculty, all of these people, just kept showing it over and over and over again without any sort of regard to what that does to the mostly young people and often, like, young women in the audience who, if they haven't experienced sexual assault, statistically they are likely to in that time period. And having experienced it myself, it's like it is not something that I really want to see in a film class. Not to say that we shouldn't show these movies but it was also not couched, it was not put next to something like *Jeanne Dielman*. And that was my real goal with *Me And My Army* – I wanted to take this movie that is genuinely a great movie, it is well constructed, the soundtrack is brilliantly made, the way that it manipulates you into actually liking this character is really powerful – upsetting but powerful. So I thought it was a brilliant movie and I just wanted to do something for myself that would allow me to talk about it with people. Because I was realising, over the years I realised that every time I went to some event and got talking with some film-maker guy – I was in these spaces where you're the only not-cis guy there and – I mean, constantly, working in technology and also in film, and they would talk to you about – the number of times I've just had some guy sitting and talking



to me, I was like: 'Oh yeah, what are your favourite films?' and he'll say 'A Clockwork Orange', and I'm like: 'All right, I will never trust you again!' [Laughter.] And, but – but, but, but I want to be able to, like, not immediately go into a mental hole with that. I didn't want to have to go to the bathroom and recover myself in order to continue that conversation. So *Me And My Army* became this film for me – it was almost like a manifesto of, like, this is who is behind me whenever I am confronted with misogyny, confronted with sexism, confronted with this mistreatment, and confronted with just sheer ignorance of the people talking to me and considering this to be, like, a valid way to speak. Anyway, the reason why it got made, when and how it did, was that Adrienne Corri died in 2010, I think, maybe it was 2009. But this is, kind of, really roundabout – but it was actually because Carrie Fisher died. So Carrie Fisher died and I was upset about that, and went into this whole thing, and didn't really realise that Carrie Fisher was the daughter of Debbie Reynolds. When Carrie Fisher died I just started thinking about how much I cared about her as a person, as an actress, but also just as a person, and I was like: 'You know what I don't know? I don't know the name of the woman who played that role, whose you know, "apparent" sexual assault on screen meant so much to me and hurt me so much. Who is she? What was her life?' So I just looked her up: her name is Adrienne Corri, and she didn't have a name on screen, like I said, so I was like: 'I really just want everybody to know her name. It was two minutes of her life.' And I started doing all this research to find out stuff about her and started reading her obituaries, the same way I've done with Carrie Fisher, and I found this weird moment where she described herself as Debbie Reynolds in relationship to Alex, to that character, because of the *Singin' in the Rain* thing. So I looked into *Singin' in the Rain* and I re-watched *A Clockwork Orange*, which was hard. And then I watched *Jeanne Dielman* again because I think it's one of the best revenge movies that's ever been made and I love it, I just love that film. Chantalle Akerman had also died some time in that time period so I was just thinking a lot about her as a film-maker and she's a continuously inspiring figure to me. So I looked into it and Adrienne Corri's obituaries ranged from being 20% to being 80% about, like, wordcount only, about *A Clockwork Orange*. She was in several other films as a leading person and this was two minutes, two minutes in a film, and I was upset that so few people knew her for anything else. She was also an amateur art historian, she wrote a novel – she had a life. And I wanted to get to know her as best I could, and since I couldn't really get to know her, I decided to put myself in her body as much as I could. So I made her costume for that scene. I decided though that – I think I described earlier *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* there's this, like, off-screen space, and so I was thinking, like: 'What was her day like before that? Like, what was her day like after that? Like, they just leave apparently, and she dies not long after, is the plot point, but, like, what – what did she do right after that?' So I kept thinking about all of the amazing works of feminist art work that I've seen and mentally collected over the years, a lot of them are performances, a lot of them are videos, a lot of them are music or books, just things that have rooted me, have grounded me when I've felt like I was floating off into the world of the patriarchy. And I wanted to, like I said, build an army of these people for her. And so I think I did that. I reenacted all of these people and, like I said earlier, I felt it as a collage of Jeanne Dielman, Adrienne Corri, Valie Export, like, trying to put these people in the same room – Chantal Akerman but Jeanne Dielman as the fictional character in that room – and just see, like, what happens when they get to be together... Does Adrienne Corri's character die? I don't know, probably not, but like – I've showed this movie at a bunch of film festivals and one of the things that always happens is that I get to say that Adrienne Corri over and over and over again and everybody leaves knowing her name. And it makes me so happy, and actually this, the ventriloquism research has, sort of, turned into a thing about Terri Rogers so that little bit of, like, documentary background, also, from undergrad has constantly come back in. Because I always do a lot of research whenever I'm making something, and some of it's, kind of, biographical, some of it's scientific. Terri Rogers will be the person that I tell you about next, but–

DR: Great, great. I can't wait! Yes. So when you made it in that academic context, did it have the installation form that I've seen on your website, this iteration of it with the scissors hanging under three screens. Was it conceived as an installation from the start?

SG: It was. I mean, since then I actually did a re-edit of it in 2018 because it was being shown at SF MoMA at Crossroads, and I couldn't do an installation in that space and, and I also just didn't want to. I wanted it to be on the big screen and I had shown it as a three-channel piece in theatres and then I just decided to re-edit it. I missed getting to see the text flash more frequently, I missed that, but I also



– when I re-edit it that way the figure got to take up more space on screen and I just really loved that so much that, yeah, it felt worthwhile, but I do miss the scissors! I carry those scissors with me everywhere I go, actually! They're just in my mobile studio kit.

DR: So that is a returning to the materiality that also informs your practice. And I noticed that actually that is still a feature of some of the works that I've seen on your website – so some of these are performances and some are described as multi-channel or single-channel video loops, intended to be exhibited in galleries, presumably. Do you have a phase when you're, kind of, focusing on either live performance and then going back to the more, kind of, multi-media work or does it go in parallel for you?

SG: I think it goes in parallel, but also, I'm less interested in gallery in general than I was. I think lately I prefer live performance and screenings to making installations at the moment. I value installations because of the multi-channel aspect of them. I still do them but I don't pursue doing them as much as I pursue doing live work.

DR: What does the multi-channel aspect of it afford for you?

SG: They can talk to each other. That is really what it boils down to. I get to see them as multiple figures that have a relationship to each other. The other thing that I like about multi-channel work on a certain scale that I very rarely get to do, especially in the Bay, is I like the way it takes up bodily space. I like standing in – if *Me And My Army* is on screen for a proscenium theatre space, then the character's a lot larger than everyone in the room and I like that. I mean, there is a part of me that's just attracted to things like colour-filled painting – if you're right next to a gigantic red canvas, you feel that. And multi-channel work can do that. And I also love that you have a little more room to play with sound, to play with where sounds are coming from, but it's the kind of thing that needs a lot of support, a lot of institutional support to be able to do that in the way that I want. And whereas I can take some of the same material, make a single-channel video, and then it just sees more people, more people see it, but really it sees them is, like, how I tend to think of it – they get to be introduced. Yay! Because every time I show my work somewhere I try to go because I love the Q&As, they're very exciting and inspiring to me. So I love multi-channel work for the ways that it can communicate with itself. And multi-channel work is part of what got me into film, so I'm, I have like a deep fondness for it.

DR: How so?

SG: When I was living in North Carolina and I got on a train and went to Washington DC to go to – I think this was in high school, actually – was the first time that I ever went to a really, really well-funded museum, and I went to the Hirshhorn Museum, which at the time was showing a thing that was called *Realisms*, I think that was the name of the show. And I saw *Mother, Father*, which is a Candice Breitz piece and it was a six-channel conversation between different mother figures in movies. There were six of them, some of the actresses that are coming to mind are Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, a few other people, famous movies – Julia Roberts from *Stepmother* I think was one of them. They were having a conversation. Sometimes they were talking to each other and then sometimes they were talking together as a chorus, and I was just so fascinated by the dynamic of, like, it felt like an internal conversation and then would switch and become something – it's almost as if your mind were divided into six characters and then occasionally they agree so then you act on that one. Yeah, Candice Breitz has always been, like, a major influence on me, I love her work. Partly because she – I think she's just really fun – fun and sometimes very funny. I feel, for me, to be really motivated for a piece it needs to be, like, somewhat equal parts anger and comedy. Then I want to work on it because it's cathartic and also I'm having a really fun time. Then I'm willing to spend hours and hours, days, weeks, years on it.

[00:53:30] MAKING *HOLD MY TONGUE* (2016) AND *HOLD YOUR TONGUE* (2017)

DR: I'm aware that your work is quite autobiographical in some ways and so I'm not sure what are safe questions to ask and what are not, so–

SG: You can ask me whatever.

DR: One moment I wanted to look into, or two pieces I wanted to ask you about together, was *Hold My Tongue* and the *Hold Your Tongue* piece. One of them is an interactive live performance, that's *Hold*



My Tongue, and the other one is *Hold Your Tongue*, which is a 26-channel video loop. And are they interrelated or is that just a coincidence that they have a similar name?

SG: One followed the other. So the one-on-one performance was kind of a weird thing. So I made that before *Me And My Army* and I was re-enacting the conditions of a sexual assault that actually happened to me. But I was also using it as a way to tell people in my life about it because I hadn't, at that point, I had – I told one person and... It was a very, it was intense and it was problematic because like, I was constantly frustrated by the fact that the... Common story: the person, my assaulter, if that's the word, was somebody that people knew, didn't live anywhere near me at the time but that people knew through the art world. And I was like: 'I just don't feel comfortable.' I couldn't – it was frustrating not being able to talk about it. And to provide some context to – because it happened right before I went to grad school, like, a few months before I went to grad school – and I got there just, kind of, reeling with, like, advisors who knew this person and we would talk about him because his work mattered and it mattered to me. It still does, but... So *Hold My Tongue* and *Hold Your Tongue* were two different approaches to the same material. *Hold My Tongue* was a piece in which I wrote prompt cards and these prompt cards – I would go into somebody's space, say their office or their studio or their house or whatever, and I had pre-arranged it, I would say, 'Would you do a performance with me? It'll take about 20 minutes. I'll pick you up and I'll drop you off and the performance will take place in my car.' And I would come to their place, hand them a card that said: 'I will not be speaking, except when I say my part in this role', and then I would lead them into my car. On the front of the prompt card would be an instruction like 'Follow me'. On the back of the prompt card would be some sort of statement, if I remember correctly – it's been a few years. I had people put on gloves just so it was less weird, and then I would have them hold my tongue like this [*talks while holding tongue outside of mouth*] and then I would talk to them like this. And in talking to them in that way I would tell them the whole story, whatever, whatever came to mind. And I was recording it. Oh yeah, that was it, another thing that one of the prompt cards said: 'You will be recorded.' I was wearing a GoPro on my head and I had a sound recorder H4. And the GoPro, all it would really see is the tongue, the tongue being held, and very little else. So you can't see the faces of anybody, you can't see my face, you can't see theirs, you can see a little bit of what we're both wearing. And then – so basically what I did was, I picked people up, I drove them to somewhere and stopped and they would hold my tongue, I would tell them the story, and then – also true, as it was a re-enactment, was that we would get out of the car and we would hug. And that's part of the story but in the real thing that happened to me – the hug was not a good thing. And in the telling of the story the hug was a great thing. And so... With many of the people that I did it with I would then go on a walk with them and we would talk about what it was, about the context of it, in some cases I told them the actual real story out loud. But I felt that this decompressing afterwards was very crucial. And finally I stopped doing it when somebody told me that it really upset them. And I asked her why and we spent a long time talking about it and she was the only person who had – she was a dancer, she is a dancer and a friend, and we talked about what it was to do a performance outside of the context of a performance space and how, like, the lack of known start, the lack of known end, meant that there was, like, some extra vulnerability that I was asking for and that I was giving too. So it felt, kind of, equal but that one, that one moment made me stop doing it. And then – but it didn't feel done. I mean, it did shift my relationship to the content a little, which is important to me, but it also gave me a little bit of a framework for thinking about what it was to, like, speak out loud without being intelligible. And then I became very interested in – I had been doing alphabetic work for a bit before that, but the alphabet pieces that came after it were really kind of focused... When somebody makes a work that's based on the alphabet it's usually to structure something that can't really be structured. And there's no real way to structure trauma. I don't think that that has a good structure! And, I never want to reenact trauma. That's why I feel like my work usually ends up being really celebratory and fun, even when it's not easy, or easy to watch. I struggle watching some of my work. And *Hold Your Tongue* became a very different piece to *Hold My Tongue*. And there's a little bit of footage from *Hold My Tongue* that is in *Hold Your Tongue*. But it was not really a joke, but almost a joke, in that *Hold Your Tongue* was – it started with 'A – hold your tongue with an abecedarian film', 'B – hold your tongue with a book', 'C – hold your tongue with a clamp', 'D – hold your tongue with a doughnut', and what I did in this one instead of individually talking to people in real life, what I did was I picked an object and I picked 26 people to address.



[01:02:35 to 01:04:44] Excerpt from *Hold Your Tongue* (2017)

Then in the installation version of it, I actually had a label on it saying who each one was addressed to, but in their initials – so ‘To D.G.’ or ‘To L.M.’. So each one of them has a very different tone and, like, ‘Hold your tongue with Q-tips’ was one, that one was just, it’s just really silly, like, I was laughing the entire time. Hold your tongue with ice was so hard, it’s just physically hard. And ‘Hold your tongue with a ring’, ‘T’ is what really gets me because it was ‘Hold your tongue with your teeth’, and even me watching myself do it is, like, I do this empathetic thing where I’m, like, I hold my tongue like that watching it. A lot of where that was coming from was that I was curious just about this, like, addressing thing, like, if I’m addressing a camera and I know who it is and it’s very different each time what happens. So it still had to be one-on-one, it still had to be to somebody, because otherwise I didn’t know what to say, [*laughter*] because there’s nothing to say! It doesn’t feel like there was something to say like: ‘Oh, a traumatic thing happened to me’, but with each of these people – like, with ‘Q’ I was laughing the whole time because the person I was addressing was a dear friend who had also gone through similar things and I knew that the way that she would want to handle it would be making up stories and joking. And then another one was addressing the actual person and that one is just, like, it’s brutally honest and vicious but nobody can understand it, so it’s okay! But it’s subtitled. I played with the footage on and off for years because I never really think – especially because my work, I often make it for installation and then it turns into these other things. I’ve used material from that in performances, I’ve used material from that as short vignettes that are going in between other people’s films, that’s the most recent iteration of it, actually. And I don’t, yeah, I don’t see the life of a footage as limited to a single project. Not now, not digitally, it just doesn’t seem to be crucial.

[01:07:26] SCALES OF ORALITY

DR: So this interest in orality that occurs in your work works in very different ways, you know, both in terms of the interest of voice, off-screen voice and on-screen voice that you mentioned earlier as being influential in terms of the essay that you read. In this case the actual physicality of the mouth and working with it in performance. And then also the ongoing interest in ventriloquism. Where does it come from for you, this interest? Are you aware of the way in which it keeps recurring, or is it entirely incidental?

SG: I mean, there’s one very easy, accessible thing, which is that I like to talk. I like verbally processing information. I think that when I’m really stuck on something, talking it out with people is part of it. But I think I can actually sum this up even better, just with a quote. I think it’s Lyn Hejinian, I think I’m mispronouncing that last name. I think, it was *Notes from a Reading Circle* or – that was happening in San Francisco in the ’70s. It’s like a short essay-ish thing called ‘*Who Is Speaking?*’ [2000]. And in it she says that – I may be misquoting but I think this is the right place – she talks about when you say words out loud that they just dissipate into the room, and the sound reverberates for a little while but then it’s gone. And I think the thing that I’m so interested in about speaking is that it can be there and when you’re speaking to someone it doesn’t really go away entirely when it’s gone. So I tend to think of it as, like, something that’s fading, you know, like when you breathe into a cold night and you can see your breath just, kind of, go away but it’s there for a while. That’s why I like silent film is that when you put text on screen there’s a duration that has limit. And when you say words out loud there’s also a duration but you don’t know the limit of the impact of those words.

DR: Yeah, it’s interesting because it’s a dialectical interest, because silence is also very important.

SG: One of the things that I’ve noticed about myself as an artist is sometimes I’m just not that interested in hearing myself speak.

DR: I would like to latch onto one particular phrase I found from the documents on your website where you talk about how your work is a lot about amplifying marginalised voices.

SG: Amplifying marginalised voices is something that I never do by myself. That is something that is something that I participate in with other people. I mean, I would say that silence is much more a part of what I would call my own practice. Amplifying is something that is work that I do in supporting organisations that I am part of, because I’ve always thought of myself as balancing between trying to



make some palpable change in the world and also trying to process it. And, I think that one of the things that – I used to say to myself that: ‘If I could write it down, if I could make the work into a sentence then I don’t need to make the work’, because that’s a moment for something else. So if I say, like: ‘Here is a marginalised voice’, I don’t need to do anything except give them the mic. And, yeah, so the work that I’ve done around that has mostly been with places like CTRL+SHIFT Collective, organisations that are in my community. So I think my own work is much more about silence.

DR: And then of course it goes into this, kind of, territory, especially since you’ve been describing your current interest in how we watch videos on our phones with the sound off but with the titling – I’m also thinking of some of the other works that I’ve seen just recently as part of Covid-19, where what seems to be happening is that works might be exploiting the orality of the digital sphere, but this orality, you know – chat bots talking to each other as in Annie Dorsen’s work, or you know, we saw a German artist do something similar as well, which is speaking to the audience through the desktop and through the text boxes in the desktop, this move towards digital orality that is a kind of silence in itself, but at the same time it is communication. I don’t know to what extent you are doing this with theoretical input from any reading that you might be taking into consideration, or whether it’s still on the intuitive level for you?

SG: Right now this, this particular thing – it’s intuitive, but not. I find that when I’m reading a lot of theory, all I want to do is write and that I just write essays. And I like doing that, I very much do. But I feel like I spent at least half of May and April just working on this blog post that’s going to come out. That one is not actually that theory heavy but sitting inside of writing is a very critical space and reading is also a very critical space, but when I’m working on making something I have to see it in the periphery. So the theory is there but it’s right here, instead of right here. So I think that’s what it’s like – ask me in a year!

DR: Okay, okay [*laughter*] that’s good! I know that you need to go as well but before you do go, there are two things that we could possibly touch on and this is the interest in neo-ventriloquism, as you called it, and possibly this new piece that you’ve mentioned already that is in development currently and where is it, what stage are you at with it, and – maybe for the benefit of the listener again you could just contextualise it a little bit, what the intention was? Yeah. Yeah.

SG: Sure!

DR: So, this is *ABCs and XYZs of LMN*.

SG: Sure, yeah. Sure. So *ABCs and XYZs of LMN* is a project that’s taking a similar approach to similar content but from completely different directions. So *ABCs of LMN* is the ABCs of lemon, which is a scientifically informed, sort of like, kids’ television show about lemons. So about the acid, about how, how you can use lemon acid to make a battery, how you might cook with it, what it does to temperature, how do you grow a lemon, what kind soil do you need to grow a lemon. Like, the very basics of lemon as a physical, existing object. And then the *XYZs of LMN* is an examination of the verbal English concept of a lemon, of what it is to be a lemon, or have a lemon, meaning something that is in some way broken or unfitting. The *XYZs of LMN* is what I think of as ‘the ‘queer way in’, the queer path to lemons. And I think I mentioned earlier that part of lemons becoming part of this vocabulary is act of eating the whole thing. And one of the facts of being a gender non-conforming or non-binary trans person is the, I would say, regular frustration with feeling partially seen. And there’s a quote in the book that I made recently, that’s three pages, and it says: ‘A whole lemon under one roof of your mouth.’ And I think that it, sort of, sums up where the *XYZs of LMN* starts from, which is this idea of – to eat a whole lemon is a commitment, to the like, refreshing brightness of that flavour, to the texture of the rind, to the acidity as it’s going into your mouth, and what do you do with the seeds is a question that I ask myself, because I don’t eat the seeds. So I don’t eat whole lemons, I suppose. But that commitment to something that is not typically found or eaten. Yes, it is edible, yes, trans people exist. You can love us, but can you love all of us, the whole person? And I’ve toyed back and forth with just how autobiographical this piece can be, or should be, because, like, no trans person can speak for all trans people, of course, not by a long shot. And I think that one of the things that is really particular about this is that, is that it’s the: ‘Well, what kind of lemon are you?’ [*Laughter.*] There’s a lot of varieties of lemon – that’s another thing that’s going to go into ABCs. It’s like: ‘Are you a Meyer lemon? Are you a Yuzu, which is not technically a lemon? Are you – I don’t know, what are you?’ But to be something



that doesn't fit. It still has these approaches that are coming from, say like, children's television, like – a lemon hat, I'm making a lemon hat! Costuming always cracks me up, it's my favourite part. I make my costumes, it's part of the fun. Like, one of the things that you don't see so often is a trans person that is, like, a news anchor, so that's one of my characters. And what happens – but also, like, how would you know? Like, yeah, I mean, some of us we can, like, maybe see each other on the subway and, like, maybe give a nod, but also you don't want to give a nod because if you nod at that person and you're like: 'Oh, I think that I can tell that you're trans', and, like, you might be telling them that they are insecure. Like, not emotionally insecure, I mean physically, like they might be in trouble.

DR: And what form will the piece take?

SG: What form it will take is a really good question. So, my initial hope for the piece was that it would be a two-sided piece that would take the same, that would have the same soundtrack and that the spaces of silence would be shared but in different contexts. So perhaps, for example, if you are hearing crickets on one, and if you're looking on ABCs side what you are hearing is actual crickets, maybe it's a shot of crickets, maybe it's just a night where crickets have context, they are diegetic crickets. And, then on the XYZs side maybe you're just looking at somebody who's facing an audience and what you're hearing is crickets. And so one of the things that I haven't really talked about in terms of film theory is that I love reading about sound, like, diegetic sound. How sound functions in a film is very interesting to me and one of the things I had been planning with this piece was that I would be a sort of third party next to the work, occasionally, say, you see a person speaking on the ABC side, you see somebody on the XYZ side lip syncing that same thing. So the way that, that audio can fluidly move between different video contexts was part of the focus of this piece. At this point because of Covid, I get to work on those things but understanding where they will land is not something I know. Most of the, you know, exhibitions are cancelled unless it's something that I'm gearing towards Zoom, which I'm not. It's not impossible but I don't think that I want the first iteration of this piece geared towards Zoom. So I'm currently thinking of it as something that will be made and then shown. And it may be shown as two separate pieces, it might be shown together in a split screen depending on how shooting goes. There's lots of options but I'm not sure.

DR: And can you just characterise how this idea of ventriloquism works in relation to this piece?

SG: Well, there's really, there's two sides of that and one of them is just, like, is that way that ventriloquism is a good way to talk about, say, lip syncing. The idea of one voice occupying another body is very interesting to me. And I'm also interested in the way that ventriloquism has functioned through history in terms of things like exorcisms and prophecies, the Oracle at Delphi, these kinds of things that while it might not be ventriloquism the way that we think about it in 2020, it's still the act of, say, a voice of authority coming through a medium. And even though I may be, I mean, at this point I'm almost certain to be the only character visible on screen, or not the only character, there will be multiple characters, but the only body visible on screen, I also have not ruled out the idea of other people's voices, but also other digital manipulations of my own voice. Digitally manipulating my voice is something that I've been doing for a few years now, some in live performance with just a Yak Bak actually, which is like a 20-year-old toy. So at the moment lip syncing my voice, lip syncing my own lowered voice is part of what I'm up to, but also doing live looping, that's something that I've done in several performances. But the other thing about ventriloquism that I think is very interesting is another, sort of like, biographical, not autobiographical but biographical, fact which is there was a ventriloquist on British TV in the '60s named Terri Rogers who was a trans woman, extremely passing trans woman, you would never know meeting her, but she had a dummy that was male and ventriloquist gender switching is just normal, that's just part of ventriloquism – and the idea of the ventriloquist being the proper person and then the dummy or the dummies enacting some sort of risqué life to get outside of some sort of, like, I don't know if this is just British thing, but 'properness', getting outside of that to say what they really think, and also to enact a very bizarre sort of, like, class conversation between the ventriloquist and the dummy. But the thing that is so interesting about Terri Rogers, and I keep watching her films or what documentation there is of her, over and over again, is that it's like an affirmation of her femininity how uncanny it is to see her male dummy speak. Because she's quite good and when her dummy speaks to her it completes the illusion of ventriloquism because her voice control is so good. Her voice, her own bodily voice is – I don't have the vocabulary here – her own bodily voice is



so feminine and her dummy's voice is so masculine that it is almost impossible to believe that they are coming from the same person. And any doubt that you might have upon looking at this trans woman, which you probably just wouldn't because she doesn't 'look trans' at all, any doubt you might have looking at her is dissipated by her dummy. And one of the things that she does in one performance that is on YouTube, is she says – or she introduces the dummy and then the dummy says: 'Ladies and gentlemen and those of you who are not quite sure', and then continues to go on. And that moment feels like an anchor for me right now for, for this piece, the XYZs side of the LMN project has become very focused on Terri Rogers – whether or not that's a fictional Terri Rogers that I'm making up, or what little I may be able to find out about Terri Rogers the real person, I'm not sure.

DR: Now it actually seems crucial that you have to come to the UK! [Laughter.] Yes, thank you. I think that seems like a good place to finish because it's been quite a rich conversation.

SG: I really haven't talked or thought about my early, early theatre experience in a very long time so I'm really glad that you asked about it today because it's grounding.

DR: Great!

Transcription by Tom Colley

Clips Summary

[00:15:45 to 00:16:48] *Take Requests* (2018)

[00:36:12 to 00:37:47] 'Singing in the Rain' from *Me and My Army* (2017)

[01:02:35 to 01:04:44] *Hold Your Tongue* (2017)

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