

Kevin Beasley. Energy Accumulates

by Rose
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(I)

I made my first visit to Kevin Beasley's studio in the spring of 2013. It was really flush inside, full with things being undone and made together. He cradled one in his hands, something like a rubber bladder coated in aqua gunk with dozens of straws poking out: a head, a stone, a seed. I saw foam, feathers, epoxy, underlay; materials clustered, burst, stretched, connected, and frayed. Clothing is ubiquitous in his work, fibers that accrue secretions, folds, and stains: another layer. An acute sensitivity to things – their structures and molecules, how they fit in your hands, and lodge in your brain – was palpable.

Beasley's concern for objects correlates with his interest in sound. He is drawn to both for their somatic immediacy (*(((thud)))*), their ability to act as conduits for embodied feeling, individual and collective. Some early, important work took shape on his family's farm in Virginia, a place thick with personal history. Through a series of private performances and soundings, he explored land and shelter, embedding objects with microphones to catch frequencies and generations. These sounds continue to reverberate in Beasley's more recent work, emitted by speakers in new sculptural forms. He likens this relay to the children's game of telephone, phrases whispered and caught in distorted fragments: "there are traces and remnants of its sonic deliverance, the way it came out. Even though something is lost, there's a totally different kind of articulation, through all of these little bodies." Loosen. Scrape. Reconstitute.

Informed by these early experiments, Beasley has developed a series of responsive in situ sound works. Recordings gathered on location are processed, altered, and mixed with other samples and effects in complex, multi-channel scores. Performing live, Beasley attunes each composition to the architecture and environment that it emanated from. Immersive and enveloping, the sound transforms: senses are heightened, space seems to expand and contract, and moments are condensed. The effect could be likened to bas-relief: information, inverted and superimposed, creates another dimension.

(II)

When we started speaking about potential sites for a new sound piece in Cleveland, Beasley and I kept circling around the Cozad-Bates house, an empty, derelict mansion that sits across the street and down the block from the Museum of Contemporary Art. Built in 1853 by a prominent abolitionist family, it stands still, loaded and anachronistic in the midst of a rapidly changing neighborhood. Beasley was wary of the site as a relic, weighed down by historical narratives: "its greatest potential is as an active generator of thoughts, ideas and experiences. So how do we consider the history of a site and contextualize it in a way that

Untitled (Just watch), 2015 (opposite page) Strange Fruit (Pair 2), 2015 (details) Courtesy: the artist (p. 114) Courtesy: the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York; Photo: Jean Yong (p. 115)
Performance view, Movement I: DEF/ACHE/CRYSTALLINE/SLEEVE, May 16, 2014, Whitney Biennial, 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (March 7 - May 25, 2014)
Courtesy: the artist and The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Photo: Paula Court (p. 113)





also becomes a part of its history, or rather, where we are aware of the shape and form of that history we are creating?”

On site visits he spent hours in the house with recording equipment, listening, shifting weight, picking up low lows – rumblings, echoes. He roamed the surrounding streets, observing daily rhythms and rituals, overhearing conversations, attending to the background. The resulting composition, *And in My Dream I Was Rolling on the Floor* (2014), developed in four parts corresponding to sunrise, high noon, sunset, and night. These intervals provided entirely different tones and temperatures to soak in, emphasizing the durational aspects of the work. As dawn broke on the day of the performance, people filtered into the house, wandering sleepy eyed through the open, rough rooms. One section of the piece consisted entirely of birdsong, filling the space and growing louder with the light, making the brick walls seem diaphanous. From room to room the eight-channel composition was split and woven; as you wandered the tone of it shifted, you felt it differently. A match lighting. Air being sucked out of a room. Dropping. Seeing. The clattering rhythm of train tracks. Haunting, stretched out chords of a church organ. Footsteps. A child describing his dream.

Moments in the composition felt very clear; others much more complicated, dense, and layered with samples and synths into waves of sound, a morphing script of atmosphere. There was aloneness and oneness; sound felt so deeply in my body that I felt like a conductor, shaken. Afterwards, re-wired, different things felt possible. That is it, the most essential thing, the work moving outwards and through things and shifting what it touches. “Sound has the ability to be located and to come from somewhere very specific, but then descend into this abstraction and you can’t describe why you’re into it. Certain chord changes in music just make people cry. It’s powerful in a way that we realize we need in order to survive.”

(III)

A little over a year later, I took the overnight bus to New York for *An Evening with Kevin Beasley* (2015) at the Guggenheim. Entering the familiar lobby to take a seat on the floor, I noticed deep, fizzy sounds filling the air, hovering in the chatter of the assembling crowd. Above, Beasley’s performance had already begun; he was activating his sculptures *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)* and *(Pair 2)* (2015), setting the subliminal tone, prepping eardrums. These call-and-response pieces were made to gather and transmit sound and touch to one another; contact and voice microphones protrude from roughed up Air Jordans, coated in slick globs of epoxy and expandable foam, dangling in clusters of speakers, rope, and wire. They look alien, made for some vital transfusion or scavenged energy system. (“I have ideas for a few works that in some way would serve as useable objects in a state of emergency...”).

Untitled (stack), 2015 (opposite page) Black rocker, 2015 (pp. 118–119) Courtesy: the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York Photo: Jean Vong
Kevin Beasley's studio (detail), 2016 (pp. 122–123) Courtesy: the artist



They spoke to one another across the void, in a building of organic forms (the ramp a nautilus-shell, the galleries divided like the membranes of citrus fruit). Beasley descended, caught in glimpses, and eventually took his place in the center of the crowd, surrounded by an array of turntables, modifiers, and computers. The sounds he mixed with were recorded by the sculptures over the course of the exhibition, incidental and intentional, a remembrance of their own display. Like us, they sleep at night.

For Beasley, the decision to *hang* these pieces was loaded: “sculpture is sculpture because of its relationship to the body. And hanging a body in American culture has a history, it’s very violent, it’s very deep.” Bright, neon chords secure these tangled masses to the ceiling with a noose knot, one of the strongest you can tie. This tether is not an apparatus, but fully integrated with the work; instead of pulling down they reach up, secure. Beasley likens their palette (crimson and purple) to grapes or plums, evoking Abel Meeropol’s poem *Strange Fruit*: “Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.”

These are complicated objects: violent yet generative, fragile yet rough, branded yet singular. Most importantly, they are *live*. Inviting contact, speech, noise, they draw on the insides (guts/gutting/guttural). The sounds are hard to hear, hard to distinguish by listening, better felt in the body. “I’ve been thinking a lot about absorption... what happens when you’re just not being heard, or that type of utterance doesn’t reach the other side of the room. Or, it reaches the other side of the room but it doesn’t carry. It’s too fragile to even bear the weight of something. Because that is a condition that I think is happening... What it means for a body to absorb something, what it means to be in a room that you are being absorbed in, how do you then feel in that condition?”

(IV)

In the fall of 2015 I returned to New York for Beasley’s *Untitled Stanzas: Staff/Un/Site* (2015), on the High Line Rail Yards, the northernmost and least developed part of the park. On arrival I was immediately struck by the openness, so much *air*, a bubble of relative stillness surrounded by motion: buildings going up, traffic under foot, cruise ships in the Hudson. There’s no interior here, no walls for sound to bounce off of, no containers for vision. Focusing on the sounds Beasley pushed out through the speakers lining the path was difficult; it was hard to distinguish composition from background, the unintended, blending and mimicry. This openness invites in murmurs, conversations, and movements – “That porosity was necessary for exchange. Like thinking about the pours of your body being necessary to release heat, release sweat.”

Beasley performed the work on three consecutive nights, in different breezes, under different clouds. Microphones interspersed with the speakers recorded sounds to be incorporated the next evening, a subtle accretion. Over the course

of the performances, I experienced disorienting drifts between micro and macro. Losing myself in a rhythmic, fuzzy trance watching a bee caress a blossom, imagining waves crashing into their cells; snapping back to large chaotic sounds, everything suddenly and unbelievably vast. In one particular moment of alignment a helicopter flew overhead and Beasley responded in real time, creating “this deep immersive, recorded, generated, and live and real helicoptered sonic space that literally was just bleeding into the air.” This volume, this cutting, seems to drag forward, pressurizing the instant as it passes, and then fades.

On the High Line, melancholy mingled with the transience, underscored by the inevitable change that hung in the air. There is something markedly inorganic about this cultivated wilderness, a hyper-commoditized space, packaged with a philosophy of idleness and beauty. But the bodies still breath. The sun always sets.

(V)

These performances feel like chapters, responding to each other as they do to their own moments, spaces, and conditions. They induce a sense of privacy within the collective in the same way Beasley finds remove for himself, casting attention elsewhere, even from the center of a crowd. But he is never far; there is a clear sense of things moving through him (mind, heart, hands). The fluidity of these episodes makes them hard to hold on to; I continue to have intense flashbacks, triggered by sounds that put me in two (or more) places at once; little scratches and breaks in temporal order. I’m struck by a profound awareness of continuum. Even while constructing an in-the-moment experience, the work introduces the past, stretches backwards, and it extends the other way too, on and on. And you recognize your body, your frequency, in the midst of it. Consonance and dissonance, and “Maybe you’re in a dream. The dream, depending on the moment you’re experiencing it in, it has a very clear and precise narrative, it’s really articulated, it’s very real, and it feels like a real space, something that you’re familiar with in some way, but maybe, then it isn’t.”