

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO SOUND STUDIES

Edited by Michael Bull

Taylor & Francis
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First published 2019

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
and by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[CIP data]

ISBN: 978-1-138-85425-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-72219-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Sunrise Setting Ltd, Brixham, UK

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MAPPING HEARING IMPAIRMENT: SOUND/TRACKS IN THE CORNER SPACE

Amanda Cachia

Introduction

Deaf culture and Deaf community builds the basis for Deaf activism, which aims to fight against deaf oppression. This oppression is enacted by a hearing culture that typically misunderstands the experience of the deaf or hearing-impaired person (such as the myth of a silent deaf world), and where a deaf or hearing-impaired person experiences discrimination in their everyday life, such as the failure of a hearing person in learning how to communicate with a deaf person, in hiring a deaf person for a job, or even in the lack of comprehension towards American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is oftentimes stigmatized, and not even considered to be a “legitimate” language that has its own set of variations, dialects, and phonologies. One of the goals of this chapter is to disrupt the mainstream preconceived and stereotypical ideas of the deaf and hearing-impaired experience, which typically assumes that they live a life of mostly silence, where they retain little to no concept of sound. This disruption of stereotypes is achieved through the work of the hearing-impaired artist, Darrin Martin. Sound is a medium in which Martin feels creatively comfortable: sound is not just a medium that he experiences on a daily basis, but he also carves out a relationship with the medium through his practice. Through his multi-sensorial encounters with sound, he produces new knowledge.

More specifically, this chapter will explore how the corner space is defined from Martin’s perspective as a hearing-impaired man. What are the sonic and algorithmic contours of this space as experienced through his ears? Martin is based in San Francisco, and makes video, sculpture, paintings, works on paper, sound installation and photography. Martin is interested in trying to connect the visual with the verbal and the sonic, and how those things are approached, through his use of various technologies, becomes generatively complicated by the artist’s own negotiated ability with sound. Martin identifies as hearing impaired and he tries to wear the best amplification devices his insurance can muster, and so he wears a Bone Anchor Hearing Aid – BAHA for short. The BAHA is an amplifier that is attached to a screw embedded into his skull. The BAHA takes advantage of the idea that vibrations travel through matter by using the resonance of his skull to send sound vibrations to his healthy inner ear on the opposite side of his head. Martin works extensively with sound through video work. This essay will analyze some of Martin’s video work in some detail, particularly work that focuses on his deployment of the sonic within the projecting space of the corner, in order to establish how he multi-sensorially connects the visual with the verbal and the sonic.

I suggest that Martin's powerful multimedia constellation of architectural and tactical gestures within the corner space intersects with notions of sound, acoustics, hearing and access that might follow French philosopher Jacques Rancière's model of "dissensus." Rancière's aesthetic rupture, or "dissensus," is "a conflict between sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'" (Rancière 2010). For example, perhaps it is the eardrum that is aggravated, when it hears a noise or a sound that is several decibels too loud, moving that particularized subjective body outside of its comfort zone. This space of "dissensus" might be considered Martin's typical embodied compass, given the disjunction between sound, location, and repetitive feedback that the artist negotiates on a daily basis. Like the politics of disabled bodies and their atypical forms in space, Rancière says that

politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the "natural" order that destines specific groups and individuals to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to public or private lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific "bodies," that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying.

(2010)

This so-called natural logic pins bodies to certain designations and to a correct order of the world, but politics – crip politics – invents "new ways of making sense of the sensible" so that there are new configurations between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, "new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities" (Rancière 2010). Crip politics in aesthetics creates a "dissensual" commonsense. It is here that Martin offers us a window into a new sensorial experience in the built environment through alternative perspectives and perceptions.

In this essay, I also argue that Martin's work extends the notion of "deaf gain." Originally coined by the deaf British performance artist, Aaron Williamson, the idea of "deaf gain" is to consider what is actually gained by the state of deafness, instead of focusing on what is ostensibly lost. The state of deafness itself is defined by a sense of loss through the framework of normalcy, where ableist society sees hearing as a prized possession. For example, deaf artist Christine Sun Kim acknowledges the power of hearing through the language she applies to the audist world, such as the notion of hearing as "currency," give the social value that hearing has, and "ghost," given that sound is a commodity that she cannot audibly grasp – it remains invisible to her, so to speak, or transparent. Here, she cleverly translates the typically ocular qualities of the ghost form into a striking audible mode, given it is the audist world that remains elusive to her, rather than the visual one. This major paradigm shift of definitions of deafness from loss to gain first thrust forward into deaf and disability studies rhetoric by Williamson and now supported by others, such as the authors of the large volume *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, Dirksen, Bauman and Murray, offers a powerful conceptual position in which the work of Martin shall gravitate (Bauman 2014). Martin's actions and objects, as expressed through sound, vision, and matter, offer articulate illustrations of this empowered and empowering neologism in Deaf Studies, disability studies and mainstream contemporary art histories in general.

d/Deaf Identity & d/Deaf Politics

Martin's hearing loss came later in his life. He first started having hearing issues in his late 20s, where he lost the hearing in his right ear and acquired severe tinnitus after his operation went wrong when he was 31. He also teaches, and he was/is always trying to hear that quiet person

in the room. When his hearing loss started happening, he developed a curiosity for American Sign Language, but he didn't ever pursue learning it. He has some deaf friends, but he doesn't really sign with them. Martin characterizes his relationship to sound as a nostalgic one. He said sometimes, through video taping, he can turn up the volume and hear certain sounds that he couldn't hear while he was shooting. For example, in the opening scene from the video "Monograph in Stereo" which was shot in a field of high tension wires near his mother's house, he discovered train sounds in post-production. The train is three miles away, and he used to hear it from his mother's house growing up. The sound of the train whistle at a distance becomes nostalgic for him because he now only has access to it through a mediated device. Despite Martin's challenging relationship with sound, the artist says that he doesn't particularly feel comfortable speaking about Deaf politics:

I have a feeling of inadequacy with the Deaf community not knowing ASL. Though I have had thoughtful and meaningful exchanges with people who are very deaf mostly through writing, interpreters, and their own abilities to read lips, I have to admit I am still very much in the process of sorting this all out. I am aware of some of the intricacies of Deaf politics, but I am hearing impaired and get by in the hearing world. I don't exactly feel comfortable in a fully hearing world either. I often don't know the location of sound and can become easily confused when my hearing aid settings are not right. However, I have trained many of my friends and acquaintances well.

(Martin 2014)

An important aspect to the politics of deaf identification is the term "Deaf culture," which uses a capital 'D' as a means to formally capture the set of learned behaviors of deaf people, who have their own language (sign language, of which there are many all over the world), values, rules, and traditions. Story-telling was an important means of information-gathering in Deaf culture, particularly in older times when access to broadcast media and public communication was curtailed for deaf people owing to Oralism. It is important to share Martin's story, and how he identifies with deafness or hearing impairedness, and even to the stigmatized word "disability." I do this not only in following the footsteps of disability studies, which values the disclosure of the lived experience of disability in order to find commonalities, strengthen identity and build voice within a community, but also in the tradition of Deaf culture, where people always like to learn information about each other so as to build connections. I also share Martin's story about relationships to deafness and hearing impairedness because this is the nature of his work itself, and how he is affected by deafness and/or hearing in different ways. I share these stories not as a means to over-emphasize Martin's background that might seem separate to, or irrelevant in relation to the work itself, but rather as a means to provide an important context and connection to the work discussed in this paper. Thus, I share Martin's background in a bid to connect his personal and professional politics with a wider deaf/Deaf cultural movement.

Synaesthetic corner frequencies

For the first example of Martin's corner-focused work, his single-channel seventeen-minute video, *Monograph in Stereo*, 2004–2005, employs documentary strategies and synaesthetics to convey a narrative regarding his struggle with his hearing loss. The work was made just four years after Martin's hearing began to be affected. He has used his own experience of hearing loss from a damaged eardrum (and the surgery which attempts to improve his hearing) as a jumping-off point for this artistic exploration. The work also stems from research upon the

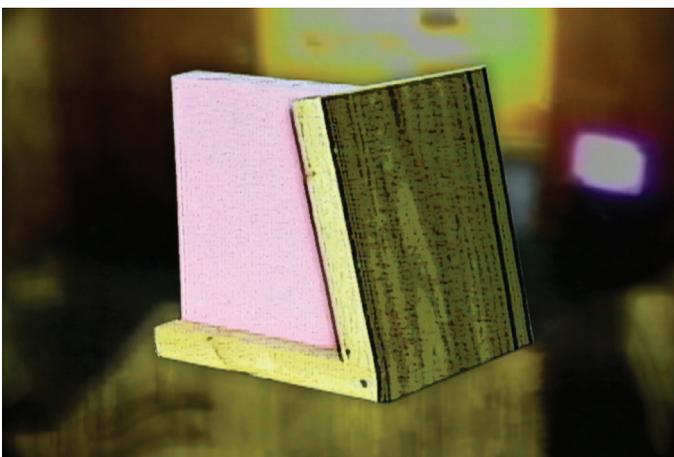
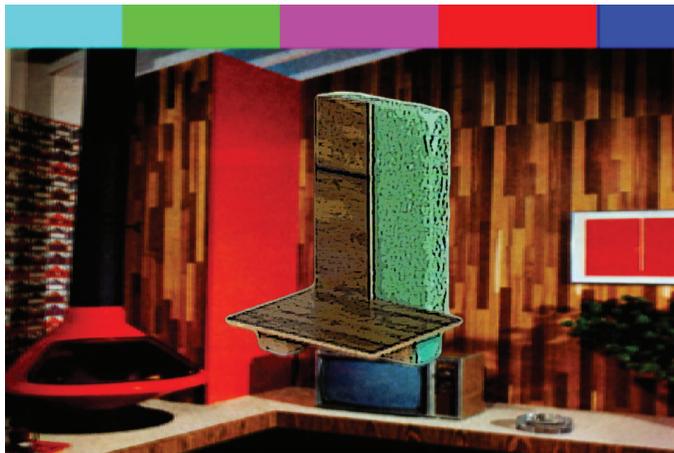


Figure 12.1 Darrin Martin, *Monograph in Stereo*, 2005, “Untitled (alphabetical letter of 26) overall installation” (image courtesy of Amanda Cachia) and two details of “Untitled (e of 26)” and “Untitled (x of 26)” (images courtesy the artist).

interdependency of the senses with an emphasis on the balance ascertained from binaural hearing and stereoscopic vision and the imbalance caused by their uneven degradation. In the video, images move amongst poetic reverberations of landscapes, interiors, and audiological exam rooms. The complex sound-score mixes tones from a hearing test, electronic music, ordinary sounds such as birdsong, and computer-generated voice reading texts about hearing and perception. The film is divided into several short sections with titles such as *Diagnostic* and *Corner Frequencies*. Martin succeeds in evoking the altered state caused by an abnormality in one's perception, but he also succeeds in using his unusual experiences as a catalyst for creating his own visual/sound compositions (Martin 2014). The artist says that he was also interested in bringing language into the mix, where he could think metaphorically about how fragments of sound build meaning, but that can also simultaneously be broken down to open up an experience that slips between definitions in similar ways that music or poetry may have the power to do.

What is especially provocative about the video is the repetitious nature of the artist's core signifier, the floating corner device, or leitmotif. Random poorly handcrafted corner structures made of wood or veneer flash across each frame of the video, lit up in bright colors. The colors characterize the synaesthetic aspect to the work, given that it is within the physical, architectural space of the corner in a room where the artist finds an advantageous hearing position, as it offers an enclave of sorts, where sound can be trapped. Given the benefit corners provide in terms of acoustic access, we might imagine that the colors that fill out the corner structures in Martin's video symbolize a sound. As the color flashes, so the sound transmits, filters, or vibrates. This movement of color might then be a metaphor for the positive receiving of sound through the artist's BAHA. Given that sound inhabits a transitory, ephemeral, and temporal quality, according to media scholar Douglas Khan, this may also explain why Martin's corners float over seemingly unconnected backgrounds filled with random rural fields, domestic interiors, floating cows, and an occasional pair of male naked legs (Martin 2014). In Gaston Bachelard's seminal text, *The Poetics of Space*, the French philosopher devotes a chapter on the mythology and trope of corners. He claims that the corner is a "negation of the Universe" and that it is a "half-box, part walls, part door" (Bachelard 1994). It is naturally intersectional, atypical, and composed of many seemingly disparate elements. The corner also inhabits stereotypical spatial deviancy for bad behavior, yet it is also one of comfort and safety, where one can hide. Martin plays with all of these ideas in this work.

Sounds continue to pass through all manner of landscape and place in this video, although these particular places and bodies also point to both the locations from the artist's childhood, growing up in a rural area, in addition to his identity as a gay man. Martin's hearing world is one that often incorporates gaps and distortion. Martin, too, has attempted to visually create this experience through the video, where a distorted image illustrates the interrupted access his body has with sound. For example, as we watch Martin's captioned video (where both dialogue and sound are described in great detail by the artist), one frame shows the artist in a medical room undertaking a diagnostic hearing test with a doctor, followed by a quick succession of frames that present the floating corners, cows littering a grassy landscape and pairs of legs. This very disruption of any logical and continuous visual narrative then resembles the acoustic disturbance that is part of Martin's daily reality. We see the artist raising his hand during the exam, to indicate to his doctor that he can hear a particular pitch or tone, and Martin has manipulated the image so as to blur the image with static. As Davidson says, "this visual static interrupts easy viewing and replicates the sensory shorting of neural transmission" (Davidson 2015).

Dissensus: dislocating sound



Figure 12.2 (left) Darrin Martin, *Monograph in Stereo*, production still, 2005; (right) Darrin Martin, *Monograph in Stereo*, video still, 2005 (image courtesy of the artist).

In addition to employing these synaesthetic strategies, the artist also gives us a clue as to how texture and the tactile world offer alternative modes of sensorial communication. For instance, some of the more abstract frames of *Monograph in Stereo* show odd landscapes made of the kind of bumpy foam rubber often used for soundproofing. While the rubber is meant to block out noise within an environment where sound is not desired by a hearing majority, the material of the rubber is actually quite appealing to the artist, not only for how pleasurable it might feel under the surface of one's fingertips, but also for how it can also transmit information that he is unable to decipher through the BAHA. The use of the material as a landscape is also provocatively suggestive of the artist's own world of sound inside the landscape of his head, which can be an equivalent to the interior of his head as literally soundproofed, thus his full spectrum of hearing is blocked off. Through Martin's unique soundproofed BAHA room, we are provided with an opportunity to explore consciousness and perception through the power of imbalance and disruption.

The architecture of the corner has historically operated as a powerful space for activating various ideas for many artists, but I'd like to especially briefly consider how the corner has been used in three different modes that resonate with Martin's work: first, for its formal physical properties, through the work of Russian constructivist sculpture, especially those that inhabit corner spaces such as the *Corner Relief* series by Vladimir Tatlin, followed by, later on in art history, the minimalist work of Robert Morris. Second, I'd like to consider how the corner has been used as a channel and a metaphor in which to reflect and activate other related social justice ideas, through the work of Adrian Piper and Chitra Ganesh. Third, the corner has been used as a space for playful and performative experimentation through the early video work of Bruce Nauman.

Martin has acknowledged the importance of the formal properties of the work of Russian Constructivists on his own work, especially that of Vladimir Tatlin. Tatlin's canonical *Corner Counter-Relief* (1914) was made, like Martin's corner make-shift structures, using fragments of found, used materials cut into recognizable shapes but re-shaped according to the compositions crafted by the artist's hand. Tatlin strategically used the corner in order to take advantage of the illusion of depth it could offer his painting, so that painting could, in essence, become sculpture, where the frame of the painting was extended out, stretched, and pinned using taut strings into various equally distanced points in the wall (Baier 2012). The corner acted as a type of edge or hinge of orientation, guiding the beginning and the ending of one medium and surface into another. By offering a transformation of two-dimensionality into three-dimensionality, Tatlin was activating a very early sense of the theatricality or performativity of sculpture that artist Robert Morris was interested in.

Morris himself created a corner sculpture, *Untitled (Corner Piece)*, 1964, where a piece triangular-shaped painted plywood rested on a floor, covering over the bottom portion of a corner wall. By covering over the corner space, Morris was drawing attention to the angularity of the structure – how the angle took up space, or as art historian Annette Michelson describes, how the angle obtruded upon and redefined the corner space (Michelson 2013). This sense of performativity, of objects taking up space in the corner, is powerful and applicable to Martin's work, where the corner acts as a space of corporeal tension with multi-sensorial properties, ranging from the visual, sonic, and tactile.

Adrian Piper used the corner to literally and poetically display one of her videos, *Cornered* (1998), which was screened on a television, and framed by an overturned table, which contributed to the cornering gesture of being locked or hemmed in, and three chairs for watching and listening as part of a larger installation she created at the New Museum in New York in 2000. In the video, a viewer will encounter an image of Piper staring back at them from behind a desk,

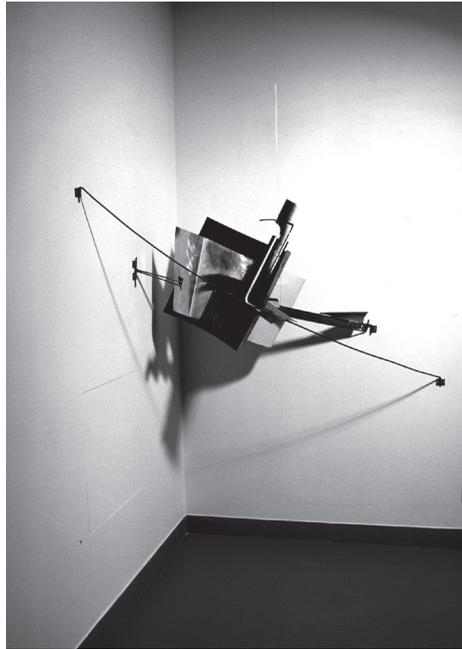


Figure 12.3 (top) Martyn Chalk, reconstruction of Vladimir Tatlin's *Complex Corner Relief*, 1915, iron, aluminium, zinc, oil pigment, priming paint, wire and fastening components, 78.8 × 152.4 × 76.2 cm (courtesy of Annely Juda Fine Art, London).

(above) Adrian Piper, *Cornered*, 1988. Table, chairs, monitor, framed birth certificates of Adrian Piper's father, Daniel R. Piper, lighting. Dimensions variable. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

also positioned into a corner, and she offers a monologue on how her body has been marked as black, cornering her identity into a very limited space (Bowles 2006). A review of the exhibition in the *New York Times* by Ken Johnson surmises that we might all experience this cornering sensation ourselves in our daily lives, where we are stigmatized owing to aspects of our bodies that draw unwanted attention (Johnson 2000). Piper invokes the physical dimensions of the corner as a mode of metaphorical limitation for her personal identity, which she claims here is shrouded in racist ideologies that she cannot escape (Johnson 2000). Her cornering of her blackness is a tight-fitting trap, much as the corner remains a challenging auditory physical space for Martin's eardrum and more symbolically for his identity as a crip, queer man.

Chitra Ganesh creates a large-scale 3D collage and drawing murals where she likes to portray bodies maimed, dismembered, and disabled, where the atypical body becomes a site of transgression as it continues to exceed its limits framed within the normative boundaries of the ocular and vision (Gopinath 2009). Often Ganesh will paint her murals onto walls that are composed of corners, and the artist will utilize these spaces so that her forms become unruly lines of sex and myth within her queer, feminist, disabled re-visioning project. For example, in *A Magician and Her Muse* (2011), a blue outline of a nude woman with a heavily-tattooed arm lays on her side against a bright florescent-painted pink and green background, looking upwards, as a long red, umbilical-like cord pours out of her mouth and spins and circles into the space, around the corner, and up past other figures and objects placed within the mural. The artist's corner-mural collapses any strict notion of "straight composition" by ensuring that her queer composition not only includes two sides, but she also centers the corner. Our gaze is forced to adjust to the rupture that the corner creates to the flow of what would traditionally be a flat wall or canvas surface. The flesh of the nude female figure on the right-hand wall of the mural is being pierced by five sharp daggers, emphasizing how queer, disabled bodies carry a history of wounding, marking, and scarring through violent acts inflicted upon them.



Figure 12.4 Chitra Ganesh, *A Magician and Her Muse*, 2011, mural (image courtesy the artist).

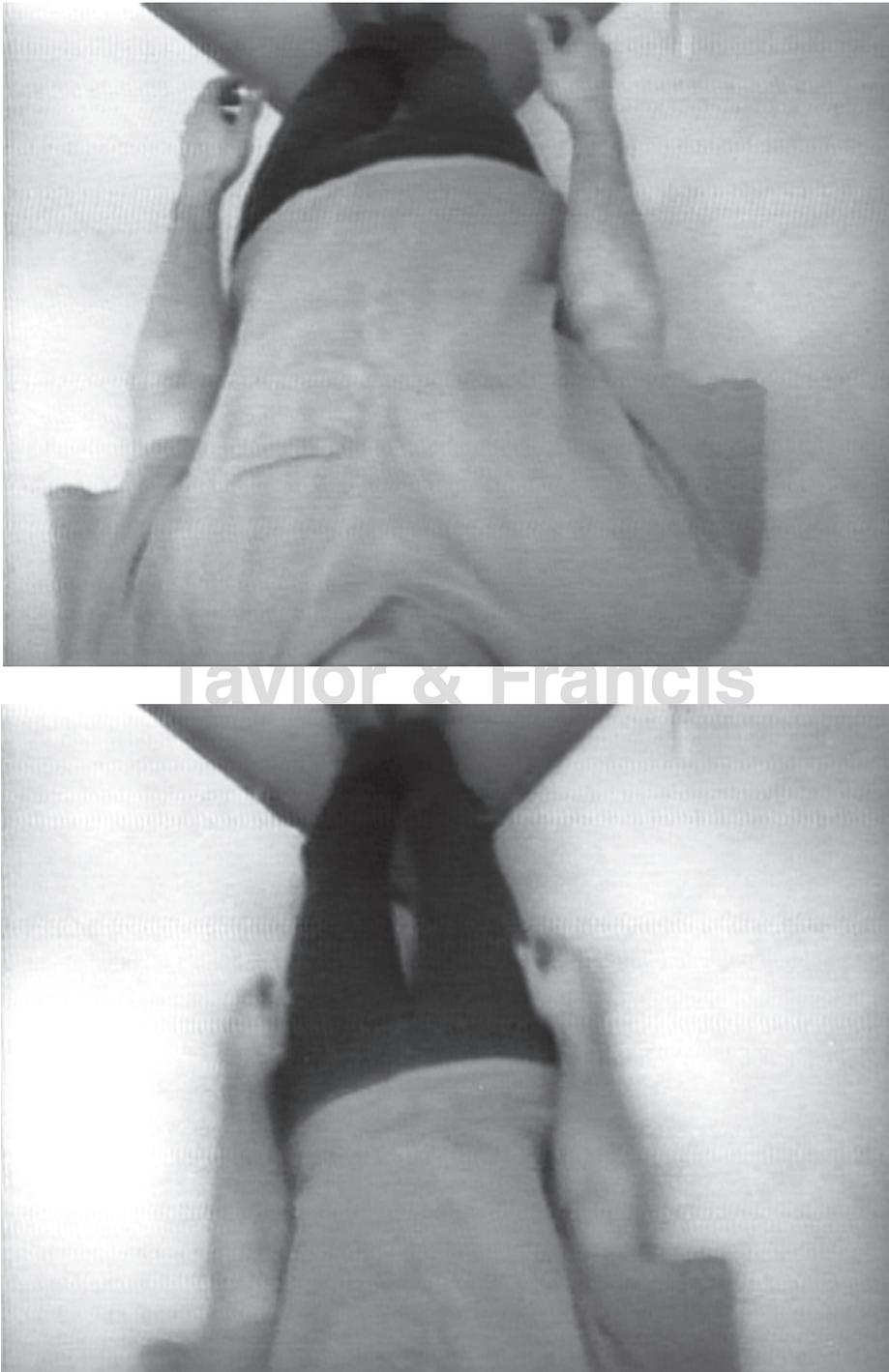


Figure 12.5 Bruce Nauman, *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 2*, 1969, 0:59, video stills
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.
© 2016 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Bruce Nauman's *Bouncing in the Corner, No.2* (1969) was part of the artist's larger performative series of experiments on his own body captured on video in the 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, art historian Amelia Jones talks of how Nauman's body acted as a type of hinge during these corporeal experiments, where his body acts as a flexible, indeed elastic, connector between "things, people, or concepts" (Jones 2010). This hinging concept recalls Tatlin's use of the corner as a type hinge or bridge, connecting the dimensions of painting into sculpture and back. Rather than any material object, here it is Nauman's body that acts as the three-dimensional, theatrical hinge, as his slight frame repetitively bounces, and ricochets back and forth, in and out of the corner in his video. Nauman's visceral habitation of the corner offers a fleshier and evocative illustration of Martin's own auditory occupation and obsession with the corner space – where Nauman literally gets into the corner and messes around with the space in all multi-sensory manner of speaking: Martin gestures at it through his own repetitive representation of its symbolic form in his many video and photographic compositions. Martin's bouncing, theatrical corner also suggests frustrations and challenges given its consistent

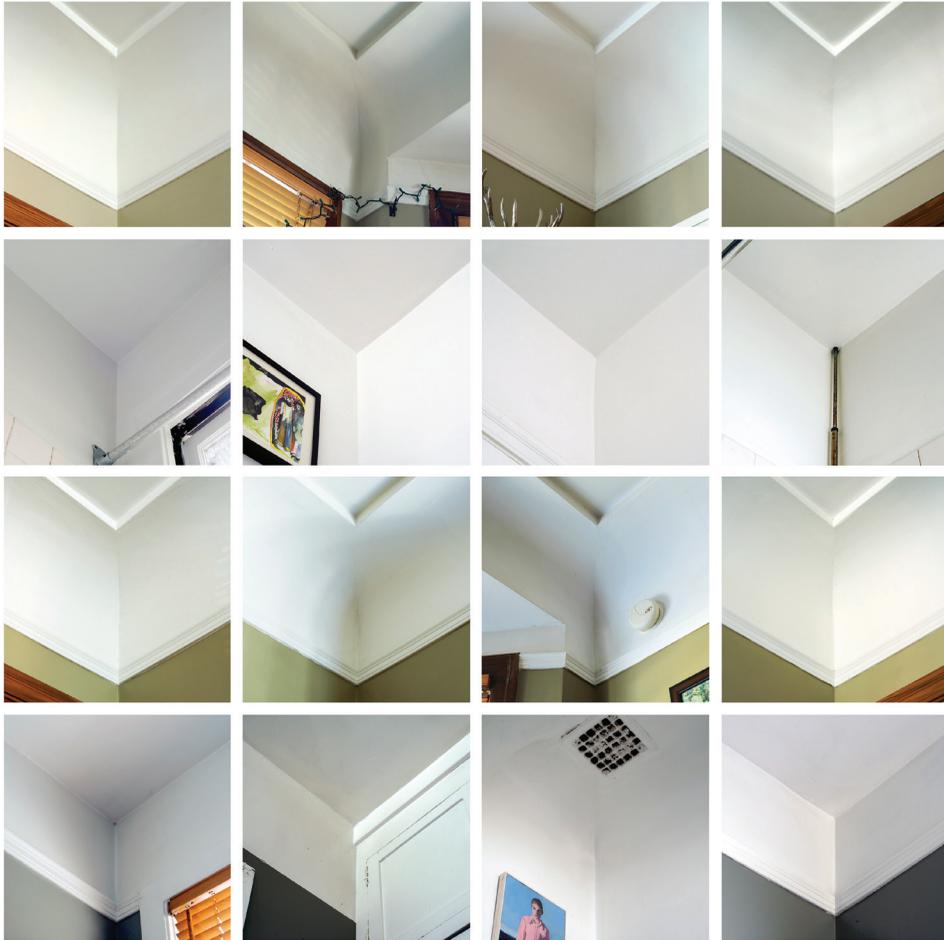


Figure 12.6 Darrin Martin, *Home Coordinates*, 2015, 19 x 19" square photograph each (overall size 88" square) (image courtesy of the artist).



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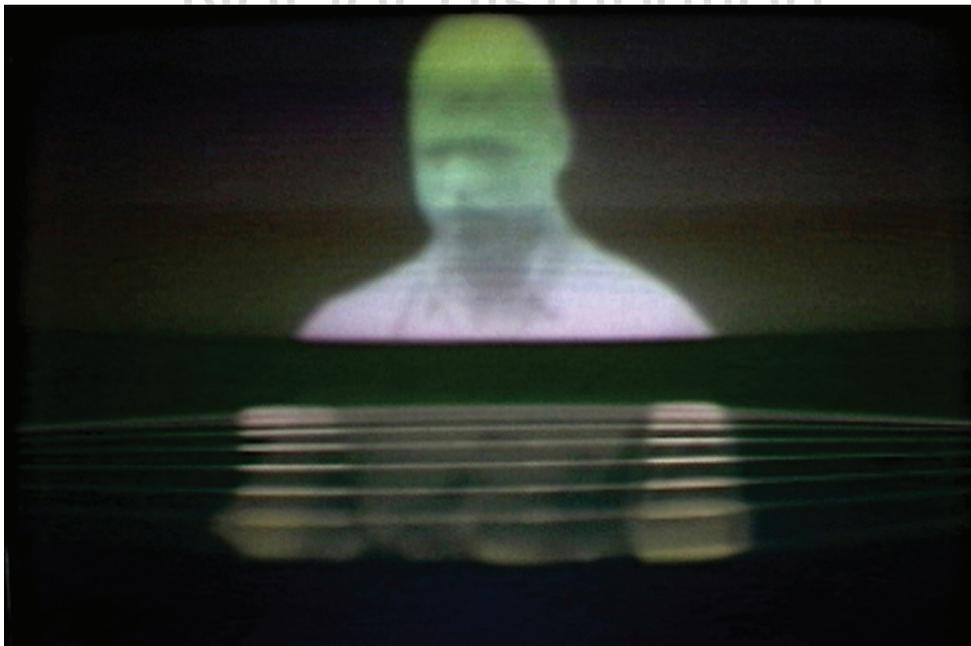


Figure 12.7 (top) Darrin Martin, *Semblance*, 2015 and (above) *Disembody Electric*, 2015 (image courtesy of the artist).

interrupted offering of the flow of auditory information as part of his daily life as a person with a hearing impairment, and also as a person who identifies as disabled and queer. The conflation of the corner's physical, conceptual and acoustic possibilities, demonstrated amongst all these examples, points to how Martin's work importantly contributes to its evolving discourse in contemporary art.

In several of Martin's other works, such as *Semblance* (2015), *Disembody Electric* (2015), and *Home Coordinates* (2015), the artist continues to employ the architectural device of the corner to guide his compositions, but also to experiment with its metaphorical qualities. In the video, *Semblance*, we see the artist's bust spinning in a corner space. The spinning motion actually emulates Martin's ideal acoustic space, where he literally has one ear on each side – from corner to corner, so that he can hear evenly, given that corners typically present hearing challenges for him. The idea of moving in and out of this space physically might emulate the direction and flow of his actual hearing, which is never stable or fixed. *Disembody Electric* conveys this idea further, although the spinning movement in this video is also accompanied by changing electronic frequencies, which affect the horizontal and vertical positioning of the image. In this video, we see the ghostly bust form of a man's body spinning around and around against a floating black background. As the man's body spins, the form and shape of his head, chest, and forearms is occasionally zapped into misrecognition as though it has encountered lightning. The sounds of experimental, electronic beats accompany the zapping actions as if causing the man to spasm. The artist created the exaggerated and dramatic manipulations of the man's form by sending a 3D scan of the image through a wobulator. He then tweaked the stability of the image by manipulating electronic frequencies through oscillators. An S-curve on Martin's bust emulates the form of dancing. *Home Coordinates* is a series of sixteen square photographs, 20" each. They are presented in a four by four grid and map the upper corners of each of the main living spaces of Martin's apartment (this includes the living room, bathroom, bedroom, and kitchen). Here, Martin is interested in how the four corners begin to unfold as they are butted up against one another, slowly creating an optical illusion through the language of geometric art. Importantly, the act of repetition, doubling, quadrupling, and unfolding through these corners also emulates how sound and acoustics dynamically reverberates and echoes through Martin's own eardrum, and also within rooms themselves.¹

Conclusion

Through his concentrated deployment of the projecting corner, Martin metaphorically alludes to the nature of communication itself, which is in constant flux, is always out of synch, and is full of gaps, holes, and misinterpretations and misunderstandings. This is part of Martin's daily engagement with sound. Martin demonstrates both Rancière's idea of "dissensus" and Williamson's concept of "deaf gain" simultaneously, suggesting that through a re-organization of the sensorium and especially the capacities of the eardrum, one will understand and experience space in new and profound ways. The vibrations, waves, and curves of Martin's acoustic world contribute to a definitive deaf sonic politics of the corner space that questions and broadens our ideas about how our corpus might begin to engage with private and public architectures of the body and the built environment, differently. More specifically, he offers us a palette of refreshing acoustic algorithms that dislocate and yet shape both the limits and alternative capacities of the eardrum and how that revised eardrum can define or be defined by the possibilities of the corner space. Martin's work ultimately offers a new model of creative access, aesthetics, and the sensorium, which broadens the availability of art to more diverse, hearing-impaired, and deaf audiences.

Note

- 1 Reverb is particular to the size of the space one is in during the act of hearing (which is why many sound editing tools spatialize their reverb filters from everything to closets to concert halls to outer space).

Further reading

- M. Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), contains a chapter entitled “Hearing Things: The Scandal of Speech in Deaf Performance” which provides another perspective on radical deaf performance. M. Friedner and S. Helmreich, *The Senses and Society* 7.1 (2012): 72–86, provides an excellent overview of the intersection between deaf studies and sound studies in the essay, “Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies.” S. Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2009) contains reassessment of sound art from World War II to the present. C. Padden and T. Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988), a classic text on d/Deaf culture, community, and activism in the United States.

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