

# VEINS

## Rita McKeough

curator Mikhel Proulx

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### RITA MCKEOUGH: SOUND OBJECTS AND DISOBEDIENT THINGS

**R**ita McKeough's installation, *Veins*, breathes. It fills the architecture with an artificial nature. Oversized, articulated wooden snakes writhe atop gigantic plasticized leaves. *hissssss zzzzzz* Tree-stump drums pound beats from the ground cover. *tat-tat-tata-ta-tat* A highway's dotted yellow line splits the architecture. Sandbagged side roads further sever the arteries through which nature's lifeblood flows. Large collaged animations of hybrid beings—an owl leaf, nest, snarl, elk tongue—sing out over the terrain. They chatter, howl and wail in unison, witnesses. *ooooh grrrrrowl ta-tat-tat-a-ta itchy itchy scratchy* The stumps beat out of time. *tat-a-ta-tat*. A cacophonous call-and-response song rises. Trains pulse along the forest floor dwarfed by a carpet of oversized fallen golden and green leaves. *chu-ug ch-ug chu-ug f-f-flutter-flutt-fluttter screech* More snakes slither, in pursuit, to and fro. *hissssss wack—wack—*

*wack ta-a tat grrrrrowl* Pumpjacks, black with oily excretions, raise and drop their heads to a singular rhythm. *wack—wack—wack ch-ug ch-ug* Piles of cut-off branches and twigs huddle with old friends. *hissssss itchy scratchy itchy wack—wack* This land, this body, screams and moans. *scratchy grrrrrr itchy itchy scratchy tata-ta-tat f-f-flutter-flutt-er* We listen. We feel for our voice, for our agency, for another road out.

Since *The Artificial Marsh* (1977) at Calgary's Dandelion Gallery, McKeough's animated objects and performance personae have been bridging the gap between the fictional characters in her feminist narratives and the real-world contexts of her audiences. Starting with *Defunct* (IKG, 1981), McKeough has combined installation, performance and sound to maximize the spatial and phenomenological affects her work might have on its viewers. Her works during the late 1980s and 90s—*In bocca al lupo—In the Mouth of the Wolf* (1991), *Take it to the Teeth* (1993), *Dancing on a Plate* (1997), and *Shudder* (1998) to name only a few—grew in complexity and scale to create collaborative, multi-vocal sound and performance environments about prescribed gender roles and violence against women. Since the 2000s, McKeough's intersectional feminist narratives, which foster empathy and a desire for agency, have expanded to encompass interspecies relations and ecological concerns. To this end, McKeough has increasingly shared her performances and installations with what she calls "performing objects": electronic sculptures, tree stumps, snakes, and pumpjacks that perform with her or autonomously, as in *Veins*.

*Veins* offers a space for dialogue about the ecological risks and economic realities stemming from pipeline expansion and the transit of oil and other toxic resources across the land by rail. It is a room-scaled interactive environment with a multi-track audio piece that layers prerecorded and live sound performed by objects in the space. In his *Traité des objets musicaux*, 20th century electro-acoustic engineer and concrete musician, Pierre Schaeffer,

coined the term sound-object to describe a primary unit of recorded sound equivalent to a unit of breath, articulation, or gesture. A sound-object is an acoustic action that concentrates listening.<sup>1</sup> Schaeffer's sound-object refers to the physical-material source of the sound—in this instance, the stick hitting the tree-drum—and the unique sonic qualities this produces outside of a score. Given their temporal and ephemeral nature, McKeough would not necessarily consider her audio works sound-objects, but I would argue that the way she builds a new language in her audioscapes, component-by-component, breath-by-breath, beat-by-beat to heighten the viewer's emotional and psychological experience of the installation, has much in common with Schaeffer's sound-object.

McKeough uses sound to transform space. In *Veins*, she creates a multi-dimensional immersive space where each sound is uniquely located spatially relative to the other objects, sounds and people in the space. She treats the material source of each sound as singular. In other words, each object has its own voice and location from which it speaks and interacts with others to define the space. Using a servo controller, McKeough manually played and recorded each tree-drum while listening to the pre-recorded sound that accompanies the hybrid creatures in the animations and the relentless *boom boom boom boom* of the pumpjacks and pipelines. Composing the score in-situ, she developed a responsive sound vocabulary and unpredictable syncopated rhythms that exist in opposition to the regularized mechanical beats she uses to signal modern man's ravaging of the earth. On behalf of the land, the tree-stump drums pound in protest; they call out to be heard.

Listening, we stand mute giants in this landscape with an aerial view of the impending chaos brought on by human conflict with a wild and persistent nature. McKeough is primarily concerned with the affects of sound on her viewers; its visceral, embodied, affective nature. This can also be said about each installation element and the complex environment of *Veins* as a whole. A prop, a puppet, a kinetic sculpture, a robot, McKeough's often humorous characters borrow from all of these types of performing objects, but are none of them. Like her sound-objects, McKeough's installation elements elude easy identification. They are hybrids: part made, part found; part nature, part culture; part animate, part inanimate; part subject, part object. The stump drums, snakes, and leaves exist beyond mere representation, beyond function, to take on a life of their own. They are uncanny, affective things. Singing hybrid plant-animals and drumming stumps quickly subvert normative subject-object relations that so often privilege culture over nature. Since we can't necessarily name these things, or predict their rhythms and actions, they become much more difficult to contain, to control, to oppress. In McKeough's world they regain their agency and challenge the omnipresence of our own. In *Veins*, McKeough crafts a subversive ecology in which concentrated listening and crucial political conversations can take place.

— Diana Sherlock

1. Schaeffer, Pierre (2002). *Traité des objets musicaux : Essais interdisciplines* (in French). Paris: Éditions du Seuil. p. 271. See also Brian Kane. "Pierre Schaeffer, the Sound Object and the Acousmatic Reduction" in *Sound Unseen: acousmatic sound in theory and practice*. UK: Oxford University Press, 2014.