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# UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

62 Miles of Girl Talk

**THESIS** 

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Art

by

Silvie Deutsch

Thesis Committee:
Professor Jennifer Pastor, Chair
Professor Mara Lonner
Professor Monica Majoli
Professor Litia Perta
Professor Connie Samaras



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### **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

62 Miles of Girl Talk

By

Silvie Deutsch

Master of Fine Arts in Art

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Jennifer Pastor, Chair

62 Miles of Girl Talk is an immersive sculptural installation that performs the act of processing the vertical distance between the ground and the edge of earth's atmosphere in monofilament. The 62-mile line is tightly strung from one wall of the room to the other, a gigantic harp that comes in and out of vision. This sculpture is hard to see from certain vantage points: it's an entity that disappears from view from one space in the room, and then shimmers into vision from another. The piece's sculptural impact as a large-scale, looming, architectural structure begs visitors for immediacy: to walk through it, to touch it, and interact with it, allowing the viewer to be present. The instrument invites musicians and viewers to pluck, bow, and strum its strings; a band of musicians composed a piece for the instrument as a

performance. Accompanying these sounds are recordings of whispered conversations that chronicle and re-perform the transcribed conversations that resulted from the repetitive, laborious process of making the instrument with a team of young women. Through repetitive processes from spool winding to welding, the piece investigates a history of "women's" work, and the instability and fluidity of gender as understood through fundamental acts of making. Gender and labor are as fluid and relational as a string: they only are given shape by their shifting attaching points.

### **62 MILES OF GIRL TALK**

62 Miles of Girl Talk is an immersive sculptural installation that performs the act of processing the vertical distance between the ground and the edge of earth's atmosphere in monofilament. The 62-mile line is tightly strung from one wall of the room to the other, a gigantic harp that comes in and out of vision. This sculpture is hard to see from certain vantage points: it's an entity that disappears from view from one space in the room, and then shimmers into vision from another. I engineered the triangular, symmetrical structure of the line to create a space of pause and presence. The line enters the steel frets on the walls at an angle that was not too acute to be imposing or alienating to a viewer, nor too obtuse to disappear into the architecture. The piece's sculptural impact as a large-scale, looming, architectural structure begs visitors for immediacy: to walk through it, to touch it, and interact with it, allowing the viewer to be present.

The instrument invites musicians and viewers to pluck, bow, and strum its strings. Soft pink light tints the room like a haze. Violin bows lay on the table, along with combs, guitar picks, and hooks for the musicians and viewers to play with; a band of musicians composed a piece for the instrument as a performance. Accompanying these sounds are recordings of whispered conversations played out of four ear-level speakers at the gallery's corners, so that viewers can openly eavesdrop. These recordings chronicle and re-perform the transcribed conversations that resulted from the repetitive, laborious process of making the instrument with a team of young women.

My work investigates the history of "women's" work, as a way to better understand my own identity as a maker. This entails performing historically gendered acts of making that span from soft to hard in repetition, from winding spools to industrial welding, that culminates in a large-scale environmental experience that involves many co-laborers and collaborators. I use the word performance because we are not measuring an unknown distance; we already know its measurement. It is an act of processing material. The spool is an object that holds a distance in it: it contains a

wound up line. I wanted to process a distance that I thought of as immeasurable or impossible to imagine— too much to take in. In my work, I am trying to make sense of feeling small within an abyss of things unknown: making sense of awe. I wanted visitors to feel small in comparison to the vastness of our atmosphere, the gaseous envelope that surrounds the earth, because I wanted them to experience awe and wonder. 62 miles above the Earth's sea level marks the Karman Line, and commonly represents the boundary between the Earth's atmosphere and outer space. At this distance above the weather, you can no longer hear sounds.

I used monofilament both for its sound-making properties—it is identical to the strings on a ukulele or nylon stringed guitar—and for its relative invisibility when strung as a single thread. The material is relatively transparent alone, but substantial in mass. I saw this as a metaphor for the social nature of my practice: I do not work alone, but as a group. Working with a theatrical lighting designer I lit the instrument in a warm pink glow to further complicate the viewing space and to invite viewers to play the instrument.

The line was measured onto spindles that were modeled after spools used for hand winding in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when thread was wound by hand. The spools imply a transitional state of use-function, the potential to be unwound, a workspace. The use of the spools addresses issues that exist within highly technological societies like ours—a renewed interest in hand crafting and tactility in response to digital screen culture—and most of the world where objects such as these spools suggest economic survival, conditions of labor, and a very non-romantic presence of the endlessly busy hand. For myself and the team of young women I worked with, the act of winding became a thing to do while feeling, and in this case, feeling together, like a group meditation that culminates in a mountain of labor done.

62 Miles comes out of feeling connected to ideas expressed in Affect Theory, "the visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing that can serve to drive us toward movement, thought, and ever-changing forms of relation" (Gregg and Seigworth, publication abstract). This school of thought puts forth that feelings are not something that exist outside of academic research, and that spaces and objects teem with feelings. 62 Miles makes audible the feelings of its

makers, as well as making the space it inhabits itself felt through touch. Writer Ann Cvetcovich looks further at more contemporary practices of crafting that emerge from the "insidious slow death spawned by neo-liberal capitalism" and the "epidemic of feeling bad" (168). In a globalist world, processes of making consumable things are far away from American perception. This has resulted in a loss of intimacy and a dismal, unintentional way of being in the world. The bodily movements of making things and interacting with materials are hidden from common experience. In my work, I use repetitive, performative acts of making to regain this intimacy lost in the globalist shuffle. Cvetcovich puts forth that crafting is a form of "body politics" that "fosters ways of being in the world in which the body moves the mind rather than the other way around" (168). While making 62 Miles, the conversation meandered while engaging in repetitive actions of craft. The methodical movements of the body working became a vehicle for feeling.

I recorded the collective process of women winding the spools with discrete clip-on microphones, echoing an oral tradition that has happened for centuries. What was originally intended to be a document became a restaging derived from a document.

Our words became a performance, which alludes to the performance of gender in a wider sense. Reading a script is theatrical and highlights the constructed performance of our reality itself, and the way in which gender is socially constituted through language and communication. The phenomenological theory of "acts," put forth by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Mead, among others in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, investigates how one constitutes reality through language, gesture, and symbolic signs (Butler 270). In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler writes,

"When Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes woman," she is appropriating and reinterpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition. In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, if gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted social temporality. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (270).

Butler is describing how gender is unstable — a performance in itself, stylized acts that are believed and re-performed over time. The act of performing requires an audience, and selves cannot be made internally, but only through the legibility of an "other", or an audience. I find that I cannot make work only internally, the work must involve and entangle myself with multiple bodies (others), sharing in the experience. Like the instability of gender, my work allows instability within myself to be shared and tied down as it interweaves itself with a community and allows for sharing and learning.

In my work—sometimes alone, and sometimes with others—I perform many actions that fall all along a spectrum of gender, if one is to think of work as historically gendered. In 62 Miles, I made 1200 welds to produce the "frets" of the instrument; I wound 246 spools with young women while we talked about sex; I hung a 40 foot, 160 pound pipe 15 feet in the air; I transcribed the word "like" 1394 times; I experimented with distortion on guitar amps. Through these stylized repetitions of acts that can be categorized as representing not one but a spectrum of gender, I make plain that labor can't be gendered. A single body can do them all:

fundamentally, work is work. As humans we are asked to perform acts that fall all along a spectrum of gender, and undo the norms that are put in place, and keep difference fluid and open.

Eva Hesse said in 1970, "If something is absurd, it's much more exaggerated, more absurd if it's repeated" (Nixon 11), and I attempt to do the same. Eva Hesse was responding to the impersonal, grid-likeness of minimalism, a bit like me. My father is a minimalist sculptor and I grew up seeing very "masculine," monumental, abstract gestures in steel and stone as examples of art. My response has been a disruptive subjectivity: making magical, theatrical environments that are viscerally conceived worlds of play and wonder that question and unmake the gendered structures we depend on. The environments I create come from the belief that the best work comes from joy, awe and play, and I seek to create spaces of play and awe for my audience because I see life as a struggle that play can make lovely and joyous.

To manifest 62 Miles, I worked with four young women at UC Irvine, ages 20-22 years old. They are at a point of transition in their lives—the beginnings of

adulthood responsibility. Just as these young women possess an instability around how to be in the world, the terms defining them are not stable. Historically, both genders are written into the history of the word "girl;" it referred to a young person of either sex in the 1300s. For Second-Wave feminists in the 1970s, the word "girl" was banished, because of the associative negativity surrounding it. "Girl" was weak, saccharine, giggling and sexualized. From the nineties until the present, "girl" returned full force, reclaimed by women as a fluid, powerful concept as in Riot Grrrls, Guerilla Girls, 'You go girl!,' and Girl Power. Neither the word nor the concept is stable. Gender and labor are as fluid and relational as a string: they only are given shape by their shifting attaching points.

While sifting through the audio recordings of the gossip, certain themes arise. The conversations are full of references that locate us within our pop cultural, technological eras and geography. I notice the difference in the way I use technology and the way the girls do; they talk about Snap Chat, texting and Tinder. The thing we talk about most is love and sex, positioning ourselves as desiring subjects, which goes beyond sexual orientation. Many of their statements, while not questions, end

in an upturned questioning intonation. This way of speaking, our new post '90s dialect, summons common perceptions of insecurity, even when the speaker speaks with authority. However, the question marks at the ends of non-questions and modifying statements with saying they are, like, what they are, might refer to an uncertainty in language that is embedded in language itself (Gorman). The questioning sound of a non-question highlights the fact that being (and being for an other) and communicating are acts of questioning, of calling out. To be with and for an other, one expects the other to be there. The recordings are made up of questions that question the stability of the structures we depend on, like gender and language.

My art practice has changed over the course of my twenties from being a solo, meditative process, to working within the hierarchies of traditional theater, to being a collaborator, to becoming the facilitator of a team of people. In all of these forms, I witness group dynamics and assess my own role within the group. When I began, I was self-conscious of the amount of labor I was asking others to perform and the exploitative histories accompanying textile labor and women. I asked myself how I could make my studio an equitable environment for the students helping me. Not

wanting to take advantage of them, and acknowledging their essential role, I took interest in their lives and recorded our conversations. While very personal, the sound piece gives their feelings a public voice, which they wanted to share.

In the fall leading up to the creation of 62 Miles, I collaborated with my friend Kira Akerman to make an installation Intimate Immensity (2014) for Prospect 3, New Orleans. We projected animations onto an abandoned house where we were outsiders, both to the city and the neighborhood itself, a segregated housing project. I quickly began to realize how exclusive the art world is, and malleable ways in which different bodies inhabit spaces, both public and private, depending on ones identity. The piece allowed us to confront our feelings together— to have difficult and emotional conversations —and talk to other people in the neighborhood. The project unexpectedly turned into a narrative about race, class, and accessibility to contemporary art. When Akerman and I talked to the festival curator Franklin Sirmons about our experiences, his first comment was, 'did we have a moderator'? Why, we wondered, can't we just talk face-to-face with people? Why is art about

maintaining a cool distance from others? Although *62 Miles* is not in a public space, it is a conscious step toward creating a feeling of intimacy in contemporary art.

To consciously create this intimacy, I wanted to ground my thesis in public feelings. The discussions I had with the people from the New Orleans neighborhood were generally not about art. I found connection talking about music, and sex, crushes and relationships. In 62 Miles, I built on these themes to try to subvert the exclusiveness of the art world. I think that most anyone can connect to crushes and relationships, and the interactive, playable nature of the instrument is an opening for people of all ages and levels of education to participate.

62 Miles is influenced by and simultaneously departs from the genre of Process Art, a movement in which the process of creating a work is its principle focus. Like Robert Morris' Box with the Sound of its Own Making (1961), a wooden box with a tape-recording of the hammering and sawing that went into its making (Molesworth 25), 62 Miles is an instrument with the sounds of the conversations that happened while making it. The process artists I am departing from include Chris Burden, Sol

Lewitt, Richard Serra, Gordon Matta Clark, among others. They assigned themselves tasks and then performed them—turning the presentation of a work of art into the language of "tasks performed." Most of these action-based works relied on documentation, and the photographs were banal, deadpan, and often were made by men and depicting men with very little emotion or visible personhood. By mimicking the strategies of post-Industrial Capitalist values of production and efficient labor, the artist is concerned with embodying an American work ethic, while critiquing it and its modes of production: the assembly line, the mindlessness, and the replacement of mental labor with manual labor. In Chris Burden's Honest Labor (1979), the artist dug a ditch over a period of three days. The end result is "useless:" a purposeless ditch. The process of digging holds the value. Burden does an "honest days work" without producing a commodity or object.

Actions and processes have made meaning in *A Different Engine* (2014), as well. In this piece, I made a sculptural environment out of abstractions of industrial looms, with strings shooting through the holes of punched cards. To make this piece, I had to walk and wind the 14 miles of string with a team so that each thread did not get

tangled and could be strung through each hole individually. The specific distances needed for each sculpture totaled 14 miles. The piece similarly was about the action of walking, winding, and measuring with a team of young women. For 62 Miles of Girl Talk, since 62 miles was too far to walk in time for the show, I developed my own rudimentary motorized winding machines using cordless drills. By necessity, I found I was reenacting a shift from hand labor of the late Craft/Cottage Industry (pre-1750s) to what became the Industrial Revolution (between 1760 and 1840). The Industrial Revolution used large groups of people in repetitive tasks in assembly-line style. 62 Miles and A Different Engine point toward transition between craft and industry. In A Different Engine, the spools were wound by hand. In 62 Miles, we used mechanical means to wind them.

In making a playable instrument, I realized quickly I wanted to work with trained musicians. The band of 5 musicians, young men ages 19-24, performed by playing an experimental music piece they composed on the instrument. Using various modes of experimentation including props like violin bows and combs, the musicians devised together a systematic score that they follow and a short composition they

perform. At the opening they performed 3 times, once an hour, for 15 minutes each, over the course of the 4 hours. Some of the musicians were UC Irvine undergraduate students, and some were their friends, coincidently all male. In my experience of leading both groups separately, I found little difference in topics of discussion: love, relationships, sex, music, drugs, alcohol. Boys, girls, it didn't really matter: the concerns were consistent.

These four young men take turns plucking the large instrument rhythmically, some sliding fingers down strings so that the pitch goes from high to low. Certain parts of the instrument echo and sound underwatery and haunting— these notes act as a timekeeper. There is something both industrial and silly to the sounds, like a rubber band vibrating. The voices of each musician feed and respond to one-another, similar to the gossip. You can hear the whispers of chatter from the corners of the room in the spaces of silence. "He's so weird." "Do you wanna be in my Snap?" "Do I wanna be in it??" A guy in a Jack Daniels cap hits his violin bow against the side of a string on the instrument's end, making the string sound like giggling laughter. We call this technique "Laughing Bow." The audience listens from inside the triangular

harp, looming 15 feet above them. A curly haired guy dips his hands in a bowl of water and rubs them on clusters of strings, they sound loud, almost like an old car horn from a VW Beetle.

In making an instrument the length of the Earth's atmosphere, I'm referring to a rich history of avant-garde music and art that makes the Earth audible. Alvin Lucier, whom I studied with at Wesleyan as an undergraduate, made *Music on a Long Thin Wire* (1977), a very long wire that went to the moon and back that's vibrations were amplified with contact microphones (microphones that pick up vibrations from objects). These same microphones were used to pick up the vibrations of the plucked and bowed strings of my gigantic harp, so that visitors and musicians' touch could be heard.

Pauline Oliveros is one of the central figures in experimental and electronic music. She developed what she calls the "sonosphere," an idea that embraces an outpouring of energies that includes the magnetic, electrical, electromagnetic, geomagnetic, and quantum, and the acoustical, and refers to the sonic envelope around the Earth.

When she first named the term, she said, "It interrelates to everything else: the atmosphere, the stratosphere, the magnetosphere, and so forth...From the sonosphere you should be able to map an overview of waves that are waving, the waves are out there and they're waving" (Kahn 174). 62 Miles quantifies the atmosphere in sound, and thus, too, is a sonosphere. The barrage of energies: feeling energies, sonic energies, visual, shimmering energies, are all included in my thesis work, visually, sonically, and affectively.

In 1987, Oliveros created Echoes from the Moon, an installation that reflected and received radio signals off of the moon's surface. When it was performed, four hundred people lined up to "touch the moon" with their voices (Kahn 181). In 2007, artist Katie Paterson created Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon). In this work, she bounced Morse code signals of the score of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata off the moon and then re-transcribed the echoed information back into musical notation, which was then played back on a player piano (Kahn 186). In 2011, artist Jason Dodge made a series of folded pieces of fabric entitled Above the Weather, in which he asked weavers from various countries

the weather" and choose strings "the color of night." In all of these works, the distance from us to something unreachable is addressed as something that can be made smaller or more graspable. Reaching up to the moon, or to space, and trying it fold it into a woven fabric or a piano piece, or in my case, an instrument, allows this uncertainty and longing, the limits of being human, to become a graspable, palpable thing you can touch or hear or see.

Installation artists that create immersive large-scale environments that manipulate how people feel or perceive, such as James Turrell, Pippilotti Rist, and Olafur Eliasson influence my work. In his *Skyspaces*, a series he began in 1970 and still continues to make, Turrell creates enclosed spaces with ceiling openings to the sky. These spaces are often kiva-shaped and are spaces to contemplate the sky above. In *Gravity Be My Friend*, 2007, Swiss artist Pippilotti Rist invites visitors to lie down on their backs on soft hills of carpeting, to look up at ceiling projections of tree leaves, replicating the experience of lying on a soft hill below a tree on a sunny day. In 1993, Olafur Eliasson made *Beauty*, which was a curtain of misted water sprayed from a

darkened gallery ceiling, with a spotlight shining on it at an oblique angle.

Depending on the position of the viewer, a rainbow can be visible through the mist, and grows and fades in intensity as the viewer moves throughout the space. In all these works, these artists make time fall away, and focus on phenomenological experiences that give a viewer pause from their every-day world. It is in these slowed down experiences that encourage a viewer to be emotionally present as well as more intimate with her environment. I hope to similarly create contemplative spaces for wonder in my work.

In my work, I try to reveal the teeming energies, history and potential that I believe vibrate within objects, environments and the world itself. I believe that art cannot live separately from these energies and feelings, and that art has the potential to communicate a visceral feeling, and change the pace, light, and perception altogether, in which a person may view the world. Life is ongoing. I question the stability of the structures we depend on. Through making and unmaking, I address the importance of unmaking what I know.

# **IMAGES**



62 Miles of Girl Talk, 2015. Installation view.



62 Miles of Girl Talk, 2015. Installation view.



62 Miles of Girl Talk, 2015. Audience Interaction.



62 Miles of Girl Talk, 2015. Audience Interaction.

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