

## Silence / Debris / Duration: Two works by David Merritt

*“Music is the seam between hearing and not hearing: for everything revealed there is something else occluded. Often the very process of revealing cloaks that other thing. It is like a blueprint with all the text written in another alphabet, or a text printed on a substance so intractable that it slips from your fingers the moment you hold it up for inspection.”*

Philip Sherburne<sup>i</sup>

## Overture

*Blueberry Hill. Take this Job and Shove It. Teardrops in My Eyes.*

Song titles are indexical and fragmentary—a short-hand for the music they represent. With just a few suggestive words, song titles can identify, classify, categorize, and summarize their subjects, their genres, their emotions, and their meanings.

Over the last few years David Merritt has been collecting and categorizing song titles—all the love songs ever written, the top eleven heartbreak songs, the top ten songs of one-night-stands, and others. His collection fills binders of space. The titles are repetitive, overwhelming, ironic, and at times sadly funny in their similarities and lack of originality.

Merritt’s drawing, *hey* (2009) and silent video *wah ditty* (2007) are two works that use lists of song titles as their vocabulary. The lists trigger our memories and draw connections between our personal knowledge and our relationship to popular music.

## Electronic Residue

With the advent of digital recording technology in the 1990s, a new genre of electronic music (often referred to as Glitch or Microsound) developed. Many noise and electronic sound artists became interested in working with the “artifacts” or “extra-musical sounds” that were traditionally regarded as unwanted by-products of the digital recording process.<sup>ii</sup> Paul Hagerty describes Glitch as, “music constructed from digital debris, errors, processing of normally extraneous sounds (microphone sounds, electronic connections, cuts, evidence of editing).”<sup>iii</sup> Simply put, music composed from noise—the pops, the clicks, and the cuts that are usually removed from the final product.<sup>iv</sup>

Combining these sounds with electronic sine waves, digital editing and software sequencing, artists such as Alva Noto, Pan Sonic and Oval create music that is born out of failure. They work with this unwanted sound residue to create a music of leftovers that is manipulated, organized, and transformed into new compositions—compositions that often challenge notions of traditional pop music through its denial of closure and resolution.<sup>v</sup>

This sense of residue, of creating work that is somehow related to but extraneous to the production of popular music, is central to Merritt's recent work.

*hey* (2009), is a large 2-panel graphite and watercolour drawing. The image is subtle, and from a distance it looks like a swarm of insects. Are they locusts? Bees? It's hard to tell, but this swarm appears to be moving from the right hand side of the image to the left hand side of the image, gaining momentum and numbers as it converges on an unknown target. The experience of this work is encapsulating—its scale fills your periphery, and the erratic movement created by Merritt's graphite marks make it seem as though the image is humming. Everything feels like it is in a state of flux.

As you move closer, the drawing slowly reveals itself. What initially appears to be a swarm of insects are actually thousands of hand-written fragments of cursive text such as *lordy lordy, draftboard, mr. yesterday*. This text grows out of a miniscule red bubble on the left hand side of the image. At the centre of this red bubble, is the word, *hey*. And it is the word *hey* that holds the image together. It acts like a tether to secure, to link, to tie down, and to establish a relationship with the swarm of graphite text fragments tied to it.

But what is this relationship between *hey* and the cursive text?

Over the past few years, Merritt has been collecting every song title premised by the word, *hey* (*Hey Jude, Hey Baby Baby, Hey Good Lookin'* etc.). And much like the Glitch artists who collect and manipulate residual sounds of recording technology, Merritt harvests these song titles and uses them as the raw materials for his compositions. The titles he collects are mostly Western and from the last 100 years of recorded music. They are easy to find, and in fact, much of his collection is culled from online databases such as Allmusic, Rhapsody, and RCS. These song titles run the gamut of popular music: Jazz, Country, Swing, Rock, Soul, Pop, Metal, R&B, Hip-Hop, Disco and Balladry.

In the drawing, *hey* acts as a device to frame the cursive graphite text. It allows us to organize and compare the myriad of ways this small exclamation (*hey*) has been employed—as a command (*hey you get off my cloud*), as an ode (*hey mother*), as a salutation (*hey hey travellin' man*), or as a call to arms (*hey I love the air force*).

But a straightforward reading of this drawing is not possible. The lines tangle, overlap, and swell into a knot of connected paths across the paper. There is a constant merging, contradicting, and cancellation that takes place. And although Merritt has made specific choices about how the text is organized, the drawing overwhelms us with its sheer abundance of information.<sup>vi</sup> Songs, artists, genres and our memories are constantly trying to assert themselves as we experience this image. We are constantly being repositioned, distracted, and led away. And, once again like the Glitch artists, Merritt's *hey* denies a sense of closure to our experience.

### **From Silence**

***I was sufficiently indignant at the moment, but have since been glad, for I was thereby put upon the notion of collecting a number of cylinders with records, and have been***

*touched with indescribable sensations, sometimes thrilled, at hearing the silence of this Eternity broken by those singing and speaking voices, so life-like, yet most ghostly, of the old dead.*

M.P. Shiel<sup>vii</sup>

Originally written as a serial fiction for the *Royal Magazine* (1901) and later expanded into novel form, M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* follows the lone wanderings of Dr. Adam Jeffson, the sole survivor of the first successful expedition to the North Pole.

Upon returning to Europe, Jeffson is devastated to find the entire human race has perished. The cause? A mysterious, peach-scented, purple cloud of Cyanogens.<sup>viii</sup>

After eight years of travelling, Jeffson finally returns to his home in London to find his fiancée, friends and neighbours frozen in the moment of their demise. In need of candles, Jeffson breaks into his neighbour's apartment, and in the darkness stumbles and unknowingly knocks a gramophone to the floor. The dormant gramophone begins to play, and for the first time in almost a decade, Jeffson is confronted with the sound of another human's voice. Shocked, he retreats in fear from the apartment only to return the next day to discover that it was not a human voice he heard, but rather the gramophone spitting out the last few revolutions of its hand wound charge. Jeffson becomes enamoured with these recorded voices and for several days binges on as many recorded cylinders as he can find.

It is this scene in *The Purple Cloud* that comes to my mind when watching *wah ditty*.

*wah ditty* (2008) is a silent, 15-minute, text-based video. On a black screen words such as *da, hey, doo, zip, la, ba, boom, and hidi* fade in from black, to red, to grey, and to black again in what appears to be a series of syncopated beats across the screen.

But gradually the words start to become familiar. Our mind starts to make sense of them. There is a pop song rhythm to the video, and we realize that Merritt might be playing or performing for us because these "words" that appear on the screen are not just "words" but nonsense song titles from the hit parade: *Boom She Boom, Boom Shak a Lak, and Boom Chica Boom*.

And as soon as these words are read as song titles, they cease to be silent. In fact, they become quite audible. We hear these words as the songs they reference. We mouth the titles as we would Karaoke text. And our experience is similar to that of Jeffson and the gramophone in *The Purple Cloud*. Our silent reading is fractured, and we are haunted by a collage of recorded voices from popular music's past.

### **Duration**

In her essay, *Video Installation and The Poetics of Time*, Eleanor Heartney looks to Henri Bergson's treatise of *Time and Free Will* as a way to begin her discussion of perception

and time-based media. In this treatise Bergeson discusses two common ways to experience time: linear time and duration.

Heartney describes linear time as sequential in that “...moments are laid out one after another, like a beads in a chain, leading from a remembered past to an anticipated future.”<sup>x</sup>

Alternatively, duration is much more complicated. Heartney suggests that with duration, unlike the succession of linear time, “time and space, past and future, are fused with a continual present.”<sup>x</sup> Bergson favours duration as a theory because it challenges the notion of time following a “prescribed path” and suggests that lived experience is “infinitely elastic.”<sup>xi</sup>

This idea of the elasticity of time and a perpetual present is consistent with how a viewer may experience David Merritt's work.

In both *wah ditty* and *hey*, Merritt montages referential text to collapse chronologic history. The lists of song titles in each piece blend with, cancel out, and vicariously converge with our own experiences and memories of the songs.

There are points where we run across song titles we know, and it doesn't matter if they are our favourites or our guilty pleasures— or songs we've heard at the mall or songs we actively hate. The point is we're taken somewhere else, somewhere outside the work, to the places and people we associate with the songs and even to the sound of the songs themselves. In this way, Merritt's works become sound maps that we navigate with our own experience and our own memory.

But how else do we experience time in these works? And how do these experiences differ?

Video is a durational medium—it presents its imagery, its subjects, and its narrative over time. It is a transient experience, and as viewers we constantly compare what we remember seeing to what we are seeing.

In *wah ditty*, words appear on the screen, change colour, and slowly fade to black. At times, the screen becomes congested and it is hard to keep up. Words cancel out words and the experience is fleeting. As viewers we get caught up within its flow and must let it take the lead. But some words will have more resonance than others, and we take notice and hold onto them. Like walking down a busy street, we might not remember every detail of our walk—the people we pass by, the types of trees that line the sidewalk, or the time spent walking —, but discreet details like a horn honking at an intersection, or a seagull eating a discarded sandwich, or even the smell of the traffic stick with us and become the reflected memory of our experience.

*hey* is a drawing. It sits flat to the wall. Its scale is large, and its text is tiny. We are unable to take it in within an instant. It slowly reveals itself over time. But unlike *wah*

*ditty*, we are able to temporarily retrace our steps from where we were to where we are. There is a chance to linger, to compare, and to categorize the fragments we accumulate. But it's easy to get distracted. Our eyes are constantly scanning, and being diverted, and like the experience of *wah ditty*, we will eventually become subsumed, lost within its web of words, and the residue of our experience will be our fleeting moments of discrete recognition.

## Swan Song

Popular music is something we share as a culture, whether we embrace it, are actively opposed to it, or are indifferent to it. It is ubiquitous, and by choosing to work with the titles of popular music, Merritt taps into our common knowledge.

There are many entrances into Merritt's work. Where you pick up a line or a word is almost arbitrary. And it's easy to get lost. But there is a certain reassurance in getting lost or stuck between words and going down pathways that seem vicarious. It is our familiarity with the material—the chance to arrive somewhere new or momentarily return to the past that keeps us going. Merritt invites us to linger, to remember, to forget, to be sentimental, to fill in the blanks, and then to move on.

David Poolman

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<sup>i</sup> Philip Sherburne, *Click/* posted on <http://www.mille-plateaux.net/theory/index.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> Paul Hagerty, "Cut," *Noise/Music, A History*, (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 189

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> In his 1999 essay, "It Was a Bug Dave: The Dawn of Glitchworks," Kenneth Goldsmith characterizes Glitch as, "music that embraces the death rattle that a computer makes when a virus overtakes it; it's the sound of tin foil in the microwave."

<sup>v</sup> Hagerty, p. 191

<sup>vi</sup> David Merritt (email correspondence) In collecting and organizing the song fragments in *hey* Merritt writes, "Among the general lists, there were categories I collected the titles under—such as non-western names, Judeo Christian names, Mistery, Proper Names, Place Names, Insults, Animals, Insects, Objects, Colours, Food, Transit, Doubles, Nonsense, Music referenced, etc., though not always drawn together. It was all loose enough in their linkages when rendered. Moving from left to right —*Hey...*  
*Intro...Jude/Joe...* on through names, *Judeo Christian, and religious references (Allah, Jesus, Yahweh, etc.)*, eventually dividing into top and bottom feeders as it thickened (aspiring above: *Blue Bird, Sun, Star*,

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*Superstar, Jet Pilot, Mr. President etc; and despondent below: Lonelyheart, Loser, Crackhead, etc.* with sundry flagging streamers of thought moving through the middle.”

<sup>vii</sup> M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (Bison Books: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 143

<sup>viii</sup> John Clute, “Introduction to the Bison Books Edition” in, M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud*. (Bison Books: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp. viii-ix

In his introduction to this edition, Clute suggests that the purple cloud is a punishment for man’s transgression of reaching the North Pole. He compares it to having, “given into the power of ‘Adam’ to stretch an impious hand to the ‘Tree of Knowledge’.”

<sup>ix</sup> Eleanor Heartney, “Video Installation and the Poetics of Time,” *Outer and Inner Space: Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, Jane and Louise Wilson and the History of Video*. (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts: Richmond VA, USA, 2002), p. 14

<sup>x</sup> Ibid

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid