

*it dropped down their minds / for at least one day you
should continue to think calmly*

1. by voice and object

The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Condolence Ceremony begins with a message delivered by a death cry and the presentation of a dark wampum string of quahog shells. Both voice and object are passed as an initial act of grieving performed to clear the mournful blockage of the eyes, ears, and throat, where grief is trapped. In the multi-stage ceremony, mourners and their 'Clearminded' counterparts exchange further wampum and physical and verbal acts in mutual, reciprocating condolence.¹ This prompt synchronization of experience allows the living to remember the dead as past, rather than in perpetual mourning, and allows the dead to maintain a voice through the 'requickening' of their social roles into members of the living. Importantly, the Condolence Ceremony is an event: a limited experience in which the individual mourner can resist ongoing, nullifying melancholy and claim his or her subjectivity through memory of the dead.

2. voice as object

...the moment the other hears it, the moment it assumes the place of its addressee, the moment the other is provoked and interpellated by it, the moment it responds to it, scream retroactively turns into appeal, it is interpreted, endowed with meaning, it is transformed into a speech addressed to the other, it assumes the first function of speech: to address the other and elicit an answer.²

In *A Voice and Nothing More*, philosopher Mladen Dolar argues that the two standard uses of voice—"the voice as the vehicle of meaning; the voice as the source of aesthetic admiration"—must be considered along with an "object voice."³ Here, Dolar's limit concept is clearly drawn from Jacques Lacan's theses of the 'object-cause' of desire, the traumatic unattainable cause of desire. In this third form of usage, voice "does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, and does not solidify into an object of fetish reverence" but acts as a hanging remainder—outside of signification—that may offer access to one's own subjectivity.⁴ Dolar asserts this complex relationship—between the voice's conveyance of meaning, its presence in the aesthetic distinctions of accents, tone, timbre, singing, and screams, and the voice as a residual entry point to the understanding of one's own individual psychic experience:

it epitomizes something that cannot be found anywhere in the statement, in the spoken speech and its string of signifiers, nor can it be identified with their mutual support. In this sense the voice as the agent of enunciation sustains the signifiers and constitutes the string, as it were, that holds them together, although it is invisible because of the beads concealing it. If signifiers form a chain, then the voice may well be what fastens them into a signifying chain. And if the process of enunciation points at the locus of subjectivity in language, then voice also sustains an intimate link with the very notion of the subject.⁵

3. a) object: gesture

Critic Jonathan Crary's recent essay *24/7* outlines the cataclysmic threat of globalized techno-consumerism on sleep. Crary postulates that "sleep counters the deathliness of all the accumulation, financialization, and waste that have devastated anything once held in common."⁶ His text ruminates on sleep as the only part of daily contemporary life—whether social, political, sexual, or spiritual—that cannot be co-opted by the persistent, cyclical envelopment of monetization. Moreover, Crary points to the "larger systemic colonization of individual experience" and "the remaking of attention into repetitive operations and responses that always overlap with acts of looking and listening" made through our assimilation to technological devices—cameras, laptops, Smart Phones, tablets.⁷ In his view, it is not the content passively consumed on these devices—messages, videos, photographs—but the devices themselves and their applications—through gestures of touch, sight, and voice—that "eliminate the useless time of reflection and contemplation" and signal "the relentless capture and control of time and experience."⁸

3. b) object: experience

A portion of Crary's argument is teased out through Bernard Stiegler's intricate thoughts on perception and consciousness in our "hyperindustrial" period of time-based media production and circulation. Stiegler contends that we are psychically connected through the shared cultural experience of "industrial temporal objects"; that is, dispersed technical material such as popular film, video, television, and recorded music as a "morphogenetic" archive. For Stiegler perception is filtered and standardized through

all forms of objective memory: cinematogram, photogram, phonogram, writing, painting, sculpture, but also monuments and objects generally, inasmuch as they testify to me about a past that I have not necessarily lived myself.⁹

Our "mass synchronization" in an archive of consciousness retained through selected and assembled remembered experiences "entails a loss of subjective identity and singularity; it also leads to a disastrous disappearance of individual participation and creativity in the making of symbols we all exchange and share."¹⁰

4. *it dropped down their minds / for at least one day you should continue to think calmly*

Greg Staats' installation at Trinity Square Video, part of an annual Artist-in-Residence program co-presented with the Images Festival, includes multiple single-channel video works, a live video installation, a photographic series, and a wall-mounted vinyl text work.

Three video works occupy the entry space of the gallery. *376 – site condolence* (2013) presents the recording of the corner of a wall where light and reflection are modified into blue abstract shapes reminiscent of Joseph Albers colour and

form tests. These castings of light and alterations in shape are accompanied by a male voice reciting short statements in Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk). *liminal disturbance 3* (2010) features a similar voice-over complemented by processed video recordings created through analogue-electronic modulation and feedback of visual and audio signals; here calling to mind, in equal parts, 1960s psychedelic poster art and early videos by Lillian Schwartz. *Fire* (2013) is developed through similar investigations of the disjuncture of sound and image, though employs straight, unprocessed video of a burning matchbook: the sounds of breathing and audio feedback peaks are matched to the movement in the recording. The Kanien'kehá:ka spoken in *376* and *liminal disturbance 3* is presented along a wall with English translations—in the installation of this vinyl text the letters of the source and translation nearly overlap.

In a large area of TSV's main gallery space Staats presents four photographs with a video on a rounded, standard-definition monitor. *at the edge of the woods, where submerged bushes tremble, skyworld, and stirring ashes* (all 2013) are luscious digital images printed to the scale of wide-screen monitors and documenting landscapes in cropped views: the canopy of a pine tree, reeds in a lake, the hole in a damaged roof against an expanse of blue sky, and the charred remnants of a fire. Each photograph was taken on the land in Six Nations, where both Staats' childhood home and his grandfather's home were located. Each mines visual iconography of The Great Law of Peace, one of six historical epochs of Haudenosaunee history and defined by a period of establishing righteous (good mind) relationships between humans. Staats' digital images are contemporary interpretations of these historical symbols: the seemingly casual happenstance of in an image of the underbelly of a pine tree that his grandfather planted suggests a shift in time—the present removed by two generations and into the eternal promise of the Great Law that as the tree will always be green, peace will never grow old. Staats' documentarian eye offers such an allegory, not as a saccharine hope, but rather as a generous reality, one that admits reciprocity in the same breadth as the firm knowledge that this land—Crown Land to which Haudenosaunee are now given title—is an expropriated space.

The eponymous, *it dropped down their minds / for at least one day you should continue to think calmly* (2013), is a densely compiled, collage essay constructed of video recordings of landscapes and objects shot on what appears to be early digital videotape. The fragmentary images in the video—an abandoned house, the edge of a forest, bundles of sticks, a wampum string caressed by a hand, a hive of bees, a snowy graveyard—are accompanied by further disconnections between image and sounds; while some clips retain their native soundtrack, others are augmented by audio unassociated with the visual material presented onscreen—the bare roots of a tree moan with a grating echo, bees crackle like burning fire instead of buzzing.

The second space of the internal gallery contains *dark string* (2010): an early DV camera and compact digital projector are attached to a light stand, recording and projecting from the same wall on which a purple wampum string of quahog shells

is pinned. In this live-feedback induced *mise-en-abyme*, the light of the image projected onto the wall obstructs the capture of that same image by the camera's sensor with only the wampum to regulate the interference.

5. *dark string*

The wampum so plainly visible in *it dropped down their minds* and *dark string* appears abstracted by the optics and signal processing in *376* and *liminal disturbance*. Though central to all of these works, as a viewer, especially as a viewer not regularly acquainted with wampum, I read them retroactively: the seemingly nonobjective forms in *376* and *liminal disturbance* are paradoxically recoded by the representation of wampum in indexical recordings and as physical artefact. It is this tension between abstraction and realist document—between subjective voice and objective one, between a death cry and a 'Clearminded' condolence—that so eloquently connects subjectivity and technology in Staats' work.

Known for projects that record his ancestral residence on Six Nations in the Grand River Territory through photography and reference to his family archives, Staats continues to perform a complex internalization of the self into documents collected, modulated, and displayed at TSV. It is work that activates subjectivity as an attenuating, vocal presence set against its own abdication in the historical archive. Staats' miscible desire—*something that cannot be found anywhere in the statement, in the spoken speech and its string of signifiers*—is coaxed from his seemingly impassive documents and technology. An apparition, this vaporous, recombinant identity emerges, if only as a glimpse and briefly, to destabilize our "shared zones of experience" and the "monotonous sameness in their temporal patterns and segmentations"—and, furthermore, to complicate the ease at which digital processes "allow the continuous accumulation of information about the user."¹¹ Crary's call for a sustained defense of sleep and its associative states of contemplation are addressed by Staats' use of technology.

The concept of 'errance', or wandering with purpose, is central to Staats' work. Attesting to this, *it dropped down their minds* begins with a POV shot of a walk down a dirt road and, through the winding route of the video's montage, ends with the penultimate shot of a sunset. Some of these recordings were shot on an early form of digital tape as early as 17 years prior to the video's production. The video's process allegorizes the work's peripatetic collage structure.

it dropped down their minds is the linchpin of the exhibition. It is a work of haunting significance that transcribes each of the other works on display, enriching their presence in the galleries at TSV. The short video coordinates our navigation through the physical space. Through its meticulous editing and sound design, through the 'errance' that we participate in through passing time with it, the work suggests a temporal disassociation that revivifies the authorial voice lost to time and technology as fundamental subjective presence.

Staats' interest in recently obsolete technologies—CRT monitors, Standard Definition projectors and tape-based DVC camcorders—is both material and allegoric: these are sculptural objects and metaphoric devices. His decision to work through 'outmoded' electronics frees technology from its need for novelty—what Crary highlights in his discussions of the feverish “planned obsolescence” of digital devices—and situates these products into synergy with corporeal and psychic states of capture and projection and their subjective duration. Confronted with history in the guise of what was once read as the future, these devices are redeemed to once again carry possibility.

Staats' use of obsolete devices is echoed in his studio process. Long interested in processed video practices, he participated in a hands-on 2010 masterclass taught by Peer Bode, the renowned artist and associate of the now defunct Experimental TV Centre in upstate New York. Created partially from recordings made in Bode's seminar, *liminal disturbance 3* is not only an onscreen physical account of the handling of the wampum string by Staats, but is also modulated by simultaneous filtering through video synthesizers and an electronic Bode Vocoder that augments the televisual display through the pitch and frequency of the accompanying Kanien'kehá:ka voice-over. This tweeking of knobs and controls further exercises the work's intuitive 'errance.'

Like the technological devices studied by Crary, the wampum incorporated into Staats' work are activated by touch and speech, but unlike those objects, wampum exceeds superficial phenomenology: these beaded strings are pneumatic sensory objects. The use of wampum is directed by an event—a death, for instance—and the attention of that event through a ceremony with a beginning and end. The endless deferral that endangers subjectivity so correctly identified by Crary in the use of 'smart' technology does not apply to wampum. Though an object for displacement, the use of wampum, especially in the Condolence Ceremony, is an application limited by memory—as something passing through. Wampum signal a future without the fetishization of novelty. These beaded strings correspond to the positivisation of lack—here, death—through its recognition and analysis rather than the unconscious maintenance of lack that is so crucial to technological fetishism.

it dropped down their minds was prompted by Staats watching recordings of his grandfather's house that he made in 1996, and the reflective interval between production and use mediates all that we see onscreen. It is contemporary 'errance': a generative operation that contests “the incompatibility of 24/7 capitalism with any social behaviours that have a rhythmic pattern of action and pause.”¹² Of course, Staats is not privileging antiquation against invention—the sumptuous digitally shot and printed photographs that surround *it dropped down their minds* attest to that. He is, I think, redressing both Stiegler's and Crary's concerns about the “monotonous sameness” in our collective archive of synchronized consciousness—whether 'cinematic' in Stiegler's description of 'temporal objects' or through the gesture-based “repetitive operations” where Crary's sites a numbing responsibility. For Staats, the personal archive remains a

potent source for the manifestation of identity as it is assembled and conserved through the simultaneous gathering of private resources maintained on tapes, drives, CPUs, in file cabinets and storage boxes and through shared digital archives accessed online and stored in public websites, social networks, image streams and the 'clouds' we borrow from service providers. Perhaps the individual archives that we maintain are a form of productive, meditative idleness: that is, it is in keeping a document in mind until it makes sense to explore or until its intrigue is too hard to ignore, that we relinquish the immediate, constrictive grasp of the flattening of digital conversion. Conversion and translation are digestive processes that insert subjectivity into the digitized world.

The artist's role is no different from anyone else that participates in the collection and production of 'temporal objects', that is to say, anyone else: the artist is simply a person who has chosen to make this activity their occupation—the limits of which get broader every day. Perhaps one of the artist's roles is to point to things that require us to interpret the consequences of our collective representations—disconnecting us from others and pointing to our estrangement from the object. Before there is restoration of the subjectivity of artist and viewer there must be a commitment to Staats' invitation (to any person: onkwehonwe) to engage with his work in its duration—to endure his archive. The Condolence Ceremony is model, and like this event, Staats' work offers a reciprocal remapping of roles and responsibilities through the experience of loss. The internal subjectivity of the artwork—the core of desire and trauma accessed through contemplation, time, and its peripatetic conversion—exists outside of "mass synchronization" as something that cannot be narrativized, cannot be fully absorbed, and cannot be transferred by the applications of a docile body. It is what Stiegler has foregrounded as the 'idiosyncratic' potential of some artworks.¹³

While Crary maintains a position that gestural "operations and responses" now exceed Stiegler's content-based 'temporal objects' as the main synchronizing force of geo-social capitalism, it may still be productive to consider this fine point through the interplay of Dolar's thoughts on voice. An important residue of this dialectical pairing accompanies the division of content, Stiegler's 'temporal objects', and form, in Crary's "operations". The idiosyncratic "intersection of presence and absence,"¹⁴ if we recall, Dolar's oppositional structure of voice that outlines an abstract figure which "does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, and does not solidify into an object of fetish reverence". To put it in other words, this remainder is not deconstructed in the allegiance to content nor reified by a fixation on form.

Whether in the dissociative coupling of image and audio in *Fire and it dropped down their minds minds / for at least one day you should continue to think calmly* or in the physical modulation of speech in *liminal disturbance 3*, voice and noise are continually employed as abstractions in Staats' works. Long a portent of redemptive possibility, abstraction could be analogous to Stiegler's 'idiosyncratic'—but here, as a surplus response to abstraction's articulation

through naïve expressionism and structural form. Staats' recitations of Kanien'kehá:ka and its interweaving translation presented on the gallery wall declares the displacement and special relationship of Haudenosaunee people to voice, devastated as theirs has been through translation and the atrocities of the residential school system. Staats' speech is one of acquisition in the recordings: he is learning to speak Kanien'kehá:ka, clarifying the meaning of the words as he repeats them. His own voice returns abstracted or abstracting.

As Dolar suggests, stuck as it is between signification and objecthood, voice is uncanny enough without its forced dislocation. This is why it is defined by content and form. Linked to a signifier—whether in language or as wampum—voice is provided the illusion of a resolvable form. Unlike language and voice however, the relationship between wampum and voice is not inviolable. Wampum as a device, as a beaded string, binds the voice during ceremony, but at its completion—at the resolution of grief—voice is returned to its ineffable state. Wampum is exposed as object. Voice, in the form of a mouthed scream, remains unseen.

The poetic invocation of light in *dark string* is an anterior effect of the wampum's threshold-like intermediation between capture and projection. In the feedback loop created by camera and projector, the beaded string allegorizes the time-based reciprocity of the Condolence Ceremony. Physically hung 'in-between' and regulating our synchronized thought and the "relentless capture and control of time and experience", Staats' extra-sensory wampum is not a device unlike the camera or projector that it meets on the wall. Its differentiation comes from its position or, more precisely, from its optical displacement. The light captured by the projected beam almost eliminates our ability to see the string. There is only a faint, temporary appearance of the object in its fullness. Furthermore, the camera connected to the projector relays the audio from the wall it is pointed through the projector's internal speaker: the viewer's voice and movements and the reproduced sound from the speaker continue an aural *mise-en-abyme*.

dark string may be the site of what philosopher Slavoj Žižek has described metaphorically through a parallax error in optics: the phenomenological gap between a material and its experience that describes subjectivity.¹⁵ *dark string* is this locus of subjectivity. It is a meeting of object and voice.

1 Fenton, William Nelson, "Appendix A: Summary of Elements of the Condolence Council," *The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998. Pp 725.

2 Dolar, Mladen. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006. Pp. 27

3 Ibid. Pp 4

4 Ibid. Pp 4

5 Ibid. Pp 23

6 Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. New York: Verso, 2013. Pp. 128

7 Ibid. Pp 52

⁸ Ibid. Pp 40

⁹ Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics and Time, 3. Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*. Trans.: Stephen Barker. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. As quoted in Patrick Crogan's "Essential Viewing: Bernard Stiegler (2001) *La technique et le temps 3: Le temps du cinéma et la question du mal-être*", *Film Philosophy*, v.10 n.2, September 2006

¹⁰ Crary, Pp 51

¹¹ Ibid. Pp 53

¹² Ibid. Pp 125

¹³ Crogan, Patrick. "Essential Viewing: Bernard Stiegler (2001) *La technique et le temps 3: Le temps du cinéma et la question du mal-être*", *Film Philosophy*, v.10 n.2, September 2006

¹⁴ Dolar, Pp 55

¹⁵ See: Žižek, Slavoj. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.