

SLOW ZOOM LONG PAUSE: Sara Magenheimer

IN CONVERSATION WITH
CORRINE FITZPATRICK

We hear a soft and steady voice speak about her life. Sometimes we see an image: one bird, two birds, fire, someone digging a giant hole, cake, a red anvil with an effervescent essence. Sometimes we are left in the dark with only our imaginations in this sound-driven video. Along the way we consider the nature of human existence, the transfiguring power of sex, and the physicality of words.

Sara Magenheimer For the last four years or more I've been creating these recordings on my phone as I walk around town or ride the subway. They started out as weird dj mix kind of things where I would take whatever audio files were on my phone and collage them together – they often involve songs – but I would aggressively chop things up or repeat them. It was just for my own amusement. That evolved into making theme music, and I have now accumulated an archive of cinematic themes that I've recorded on a phone synthesizer (that's actually really good at emulating what an analogue synth sounds like). I can modify the sounds a lot in the app. So, by going around navigating my way through the day, I'll end up making recordings that seem really evocative to me, like they should be thematic moments – they're often really short, a minute or so – in some kind of video. They all have titles like *Standing in Line at the US Marine Corps Recruitment Center*, or something that alludes to a scene in a movie. For this video I have all of those, my archive of sound clips, sound effects, and field recordings, and I mine all of that.

Corrine Fitzpatrick Had you already laid out all of the visuals and the progression of scenes by the time you introduced the audio? You've got all these elements in play like the script which, correct me if I'm wrong, I assume came first?

(S.M.) There's so much back and forth. This video had the longest gestation period. I made another video, *Seven Signs That Mean Silence*, in 2013 and there's a line that says "What is the rhythm of a plain white t-shirt?". I got stuck on the question and I wanted to make the next video launch from that point. So I started dwelling on that and I had it in the back of my mind when I wrote this script. Basically that seed turned into fraternal twins, one video that ended up being called *The Rhythm of Plain White* and this one, *Slow Zoom Long Pause*. I think they are fraternal twins because they came out of meditating on this weird question, "What is the rhythm of an object?". I was thinking about the frustrating burden of physicality, of an object being embodied and of humans being in bodies and how annoying it is and how much easier it is to just be a concept. The rhythm is maybe that frustration, like a vibration against a physical boundary. That is where this video took off.

(C.F.) That makes me think of a few of the lines I wrote down while watching. "The womb is a fictional place inside the body. We are all born of this fiction. Our birth is the confluence of language and sex. As a result of a human desire to transcribe on ourselves the story of our past and future. The word in language is half someone else's. Like a newborn." And then, shortly after, from the Q and A section, "Q: How old does an object have to be considered 'Timeless?'" "A: It depends on what it looks like. If it's a rock, it's already timeless because you can't tell how old it is by looking at it. If it's a woman, she's in her twenties, but she looks like a 'beautiful woman.'" Also from the Q and A, "Q: How do we know it's real?" "A: It feels real." "Q: What if fake feels real?" "A: Then it's real."



(S.M.) That first quote is something I wrote but then it ends with a sentence that Mikhail Bakhtin wrote, “The word in language is half someone else’s.” I think it’s well-trodden territory, that the way you express an idea – how an idea manifests in a physical form – is never only your own. You’re beholden to your predecessors, historically and linguistically. Even a word is a physical thing.

(C.F.) There are amazingly funny moments throughout, often as a result of you presenting the image of an object a few scenes after it has been referred to in the voice-over. Early on in the video there is a long monologue full of rich language like, “Until our pretend world of coherent images and mainstream narratives dissolves around us and all that is left is the beating pulse of blood in our ears and the throbbing of our measly human genitals.” And, “Sex is the chance to remake yourself on the anvil of nature. To remake yourself in whatever shape pleases you... Every orgasm is a hammer blow, and beneath the sparks you are malleable. The vulnerability of being naked with another person does not come from being close to harm but from being close to freedom.” Then a few minutes later you cut to a shot of a fire-engine red anvil against a white studio backdrop. When you pull the camera back, the contours of the white backdrop are revealed and the frame resembles a body with the anvil as genitals. Or that’s how it read to me.

(S.M.) (laughing) Stop it!

(C.F.) And super androgynous, but I was like, Oh, that’s totally the beating measly human genital right there!

(S.M.) (laughing)

(C.F.) (laughing) It’s the anvil of nature! I couldn’t not read it that way!

(S.M.) (laughing) That’s great!

(C.F.) There’s the whole orgasmic interlude right after that. That’s a brilliant moment too, the actress is voicing an orgasm (against a black screen) and then you cut to the sound and image of a chirping bird. Her voice re-enters saying, “We two do not look alike, but we are classified as the same because of how we sound. The sound of our speech is all that we are.” And then a little later you manipulate her vocal register to make it sound male, or androgynous at least. It’s these puns and rhymes riffing back and forth across the seven sections that really keep it cohesive.

(S.M.) Oh good. That rhyming thing is just how my brain works, it’s fun for me to communicate that way. I was thinking earlier that when I started making videos it was concurrent with my being in bands and I had this really punk stance about anti-auteur and anti-authority and anti-my-own-authority as the dictator of the narrative. I made videos really collaboratively. I was just really into not being the boss.

(C.F.) (laughing) Here we go!

(S.M.) (laughing) Who’s the Boss?! And now, I’ve come to a different place where I feel, as





a woman, we've only been allowed to be the author and to even have a voice for such a short time historically that, like, Fuck Yeah! I'm the author! I'm gonna tell a story exactly how I want to. And I feel like it's my job and I owe it to someone – other women or the world or maybe just myself – to try to communicate in a way that feels really authentic to me. But I also want to leave a lot of room in my work for the viewer. I always want to make work that I would like to see. I don't like to see didactic work. I like work that actually is pretty simple and spare in some ways but really generative, so that you can have this parallel movie in your brain that's actually much more interesting than the video. To be non-hierarchical in that way where I don't want to lean on the primacy of the image, to be image-centric, I'd rather have there be many touchstones for people to have an imaginative experience. I want to access that and give both others and myself a lot of freedom to imagine.

(C.F.) Everything you're saying makes sense to me and I think a lot of that has to do with us being in our thirties at this particular moment in the history of making and talking about art, at a distance from the critical theory we came up through in school. Post-structuralism came so long before us. The Death of the Author is assumed and I think that finally – and this is speaking in such generalizations – here's a moment when we feel allowed to communicate, as you said, an authentic expression or vision or voice. We're not only using found material or referencing things in a post-modern way, we're holding onto what could seemingly be a paradox – assuming authorship while also completely understanding that meaning is made in the interchange between the work and the viewer or the writing and the reader and that it's not a null point to nonetheless try to make something intact and singular and yours or mine.

(S.M.) That's so perfectly said, yeah. Expressing my own subjecthood, specifically through exercising my imagination, is important to me right now. Not because I'm a woman and I feel as though I've been denied that opportunity (though I historically have), but because I think it's a useful way of coping with a world that's full of nonsense. War, terrorism, the way we abuse each other and the environment, all of these things would make you go crazy if you had to think rationally all the time because they just don't make sense.

(C.F.) I've been thinking a lot about how to critically talk about the body, specifically the woman's body, in contemporary art. When the actresses' voice has been lowered and she says, "I ache for your body and over the phone I suggest we have a baby," I thought it was a man asking a woman, which shifts the implications of the narrative. I can't stop thinking of it that way even though I know now that you've manipulated her voice. My misinterpretation seems in dialogue with a passage I brought up already, from earlier in the video: "The womb is a fictional place inside the body. We are all born of this fiction. Our birth is the confluence of language and sex. As a result of a human desire to transcribe on ourselves the story of our past and future." I really think that might be the point in the video where all of the existential, linguistic, and semiotic questions that you're posing come together. Is the desire to transcribe the anvil of human nature? Is procreation a symptom of our desire to write "on ourselves the story of our past and future"? In the very beginning of the piece the voice says, "We're taught to think of sex as an object of desire." That can really be heard two ways. I think you mean that we are taught to objectify sex. Or are you saying that we – meaning women – are raised to think about sex from the point of view of being the object of desire? I like that slippage.

Beinscheibe, 2014, 17 x 15,2 cm, encaustic on linen
photo by Marcus Schneider Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai





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(S.M.) Within the narrative of this video, the narration itself vacillates between forms. It starts out one way with this certain kind of voice and then it becomes pretty clear that her voice is actually an embodied multiplicity of voices. She’s even doing a Q and A with herself, she’s reading a diary entry, she’s giving this rant that’s pretty political. Her voice is a physical embodiment of many different concepts.

(C.F.) Which is what we all are.

(S.M.) Yeah, exactly. So, I think she’s exemplifying one way to transcend our flesh. As the text about sex suggests, she’s absorbing and emitting many different voices and being a permeable vessel for the consciousness of others. I’ve been thinking about material so much. In this video it felt really important to have different linguistic styles or tones; a diaristic tone, an authoritative tone, a Q and A, a neutral kind of quoting, a rant. I was excited about accessing the power of melodrama, like the emotional energy of a teen girl journal entry. They’re all filtered through my voice too. A lot of that text comes from stuff I’ve written. I have a pretty consistent writing practice and have different writing modes. I write a lot on the computer, but I also write in a physical journal and I have since I was really young. Even when I was a kid, my mom would transcribe stories that I would dictate to her and I would illustrate them. I’ve really always been into this process of writing and having images, a back and forth. I feel like the voice is the physical embodiment of all this stuff. Voice is really handled a lot in this video. It’s chopped up a little bit, it’s slowed down, it’s doubled. It’s itself material too, it has a texture.

(C.F.) Why did you choose to hire an actress as opposed to doing the voice-over yourself? You know how to deliver a text, so why go through the trouble of hiring someone else to do it?

(S.M.) I think there’s something magical that happens in that space between giving someone something and getting it back. Even when I take pictures, there’s something magical about the invisible alchemy that happens between snapping a shutter and seeing the picture. So, something about needing that distance. But I did record it myself a lot, just to practice and figure out how to direct her. I don’t always think the sound of my voice is the right voice. I actually auditioned a lot of different actors, from an old Scottish man to a young white girl from America to a British teenage boy. And I ended up choosing Aisha Ricketts, a young woman from Jamaica, because I felt like her voice added something to this character, and I love the musicality of her accent. It’s pretty subtle. The accent is something that calls attention to language not being your own. You’re always speaking in a borrowed tongue. I like accents a lot. And then also, sometimes mispronunciations happen, which is fun.

(C.F.) I like the way she says “fucking.” Focking.

(S.M.) Focking! I know.

(C.F.) “Focking is change.”

* *Slow Zoom Long Pause* is a 13:01 minute-long HD video with sound by Sara Magenheimer. The video is on view through March 15 as part of Magenheimer’s solo exhibition *The Rhythm of Plain White* at Interstate Projects in Brooklyn, NY.