Notes on Feedback

Art like the sun and the sea and the wind, is one and the same all over this earth, in spite of boundaries, nations and wars. ¹

One cold morning while crossing westbound Garfield, I had the most peculiar exchange with a stranger. While rushing across the street, racing to beat the oncoming traffic, she took note of my presence. “You just missed the bus,” she stated in passing, her face warm as a smile emerged from behind layers of clothing. It was the middle of January, and she too was rushing to beat traffic; on her way to catch the very same train that I had just alighted from. I responded with a simple, “Oh,” the tone of my voice thick with the appropriate level of disappointment. Half of a second passed before her comment became apparent, but our conversation was so brief I was not given the proper time to consider the implications. In the moments immediately following I sat quietly at my desk, gazing through the windows overlooking Garfield Boulevard.

The opportunity to respond is one that haunted me. What would I have said? How could I explain what I was doing in this seemingly transitory place? I wanted a chance to tell her that I had arrived at my destination. More importantly, I desired to communicate that this stop – the Green Line Garfield stop – was more than a halfway point on a rush-hour commute. That this was and would be a destination.

As the weeks progressed, the need to continue this dialogue became apparent. Brainstorming sessions on farmer’s markets and urban gardens gave way to ideas about public artwork, exhibitions and events. This open exchange became a recurrent motif, the likes of which influenced Feedback.

Feedback is defined in Webster’s Dictionary as, “the return to the input of a part of the output of a machine, system, or process.”² It can rupture, such as the disruptive sound of auditory feedback. Those moments are generally perceived as noise, and the destabilization of a system. At the corner of 55th and Prairie Avenue, the destabilization occurs with the intent to work with the system to redefine community.

Within the context of the Arts Incubator, it is an exhibition that explores collaboration, dialogue and exchange. Comprised of artwork, various programs and a public dinner, Feedback begins within the confines of the first floor exhibition space, and reverberates into the Washington Park

¹ Cauleen Smith created Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (by Kelly Gabron) under the pseudonym Kelly Gabron, which is a reference to the poet Khalil Gibran. This line is taken from his most famous publication, The Prophet. Gibran, Khalil. The Prophet. (Tel Aviv: Modan Publishing House, 1986).

² Merriam Webster online search
community in the form of public art and performance. This model is one that does not privilege the white cube but works alongside it to consider space through site and time.

The first echo is Cauleen Smith’s *Park Interiors: 17 Possible Directions (PI:17)*, a multi-sited work created through a silkscreening technique the artist learned while taking a course at the Hyde Park Art Center. PI:17 is comprised of over 80 feet of wallpaper with seventeen variant patterns, or wallpaper groups. Historical Southside motifs and contemporary vernacular forms, such as the monk parakeet, are present. African wax print textiles and European innovations in textile design inspire the vibrant color palettes and arrangement of shapes. PI:17 is part of Smith’s larger investigation into the history of Sun Ra, as informed by personal research into the University of Chicago’s Alton Abraham Collection.

The number seventeen plays a crucial role in the project. The mysticism and formal qualities of the number began to unfold through research methodologies Smith honed while studying the legendary experimental musician and philosopher’s time creating here. Taking her cues from this form, Smith anticipates that the presence of the work will inspire Washington Park residents to, “observe, absorb and decipher,” it. Smith has realized a concurrent iteration of this project in the second floor gallery space at the Hyde Park Art Center. With this gesture, Smith links the two locations - creating a dialogue between them.

Multiple dialogues frame an early work created by Cauleen Smith, under her pseudonym Kelly Gabron. *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (by Kelly Gabron)* is a gorgeous and seductive film. It developed out of an assignment Smith was given while at San Francisco State University. Her professor, Lynn Hershman, asked the class to tell their life story twice, using the same material both times. Smith responded with a performance, and the film was created from an accompanying book the artist constructed with Polaroids.

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3 This description was taken from Cauleen Smith’s project statement for the Hyde Park Art Center’s PI 17 (*Park Interiors: 17 Possible Directions*) installation

4 The collection, which is housed in the Special Collections Research Center, is comprised of, “manuscripts, business records, printed ephemera, artifacts, photographs, audio and video recordings, and other documents of his work with Sun Ra. The collection contains textual, graphic, and audio-visual records of the work of Sun Ra and his collaborators, as well as professional and personal papers of Alton Abraham."

5 PI 17 (*Park Interiors: 17 Possible Directions*) Hyde Park Art Center


7 Ibid.

The film begins rather abruptly. Words flash onto the screen, and the countdown commences: 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2...The viewer is confronted with an empty frame, it’s deep blue richness giving way to a thundering sound. A synthesized and authoritative male voice reads the title as it moves swiftly across the bottom of the frame. “Chronicles of a Lying Spirit by Kelly Gabron.” That voice continues, “Detroit, 1972, Cauleen dances for lunch money...” As the voice thunders through the speakers, collaged images cascade into view, at times coupled with text. Less than a minute passes and the voice of Kelly Gabron emerges, combating the authoritative tone of the previous one. The formal qualities of the wallpaper: repetition, layering and collage, appear within the film. For Smith, making Chronicles, “was a learning process, and a process of identity...still [about] processing how she wants to create and for whom.” The presence of this second narrative signifies a metaphorical and structural shift, both in in the work and the meaning of it.

Similarly, Ironing Out the Kinks is a durational endurance performance that complicates the relationship between the Black female figure and the patriarchal gaze. Alexandria Eregbu examines this relationship through the constructed lens of ideal beauty, domesticity, and black hair identity. The title of the performance refers to the performer’s gestures and metaphorically redirects the audience’s attention to an introspective critique of gender, race, and the role of identity within American culture.

Nyeema Morgan is interested in how knowledge has been reduced to general opinion, and that non-qualitative information can be gleaned from multiple media centers. Her disavowal of oversaturated, networked information, coupled with a heightened awareness of media bias and fear mongering forms the basis of her practice.

This refusal of sameness is a reaction to globalization, which inspired the artist to create Forty-Seventy Easy Poundcakes Like grandma Used To Make. In the wake of her grandmother’s passing, Morgan found herself at a Starbucks eating mediocre poundcake. The palpable difference that the artist found between her grandmother’s cake and that which was served at the giant chain restaurant inspired her to reflect on how one’s experience can form their perspective of the world. Had she never tasted her grandmother’s poundcake, would she know the difference between that and the Starbucks brand? From this existential moment the series was born.

Forty-Seventy Easy Poundcakes Like grandma Used To Make are a series of drawings that were created through the conflation and formulaic mapping of her grandmother’s recipe with forty-six different poundcake recipes that she sourced online. The serial repetition of Morgan's process is expressed through the form and installation of the drawings. As an accompaniment to this work,

9 Ibid, 127.
we have selected a variety of poundcake from Abundance Bakery, an independent bakery that is on East 47th and South Michigan Avenue, less than half a mile from the Incubator.

The accumulation of information is a common thread within Feedback. Abbéy Odunlami riffs off this trope with Situations, which are interactive 5-course meals prepared and enjoyed in public spaces in Chicago. With Situation #5, Odunlami will orchestrate a public dinner that will invite both passersby and guests to sit down and engage in a shared experience of eating. On Friday, April 12th he will host a dinner at the Incubator.

Odunlami will situate community members from the Washington Park neighborhood with artists, writers, musicians and members of the University of Chicago community. His gesture engages a largely intentional and at the same time accidental, multi-ethnic and multi-generational audience in dialogues that they otherwise may not have. The guests are invited to stay for one course, after which they leave the table and another participant is invited to join. Odunlami's situations are based on the idea that language and communication can be transfused through our experiences and the remembrance of them. Other situations have been held at the Logan Square Blue Line and the Chicago Loop Alliance Pop-Up Art Loop storefront spaces.

In an attempt to harness the regenerative, transformative, social and transcendent powers of dance, Cecil McDonald, Jr., will stage "Black Bottom Boulevard" a short interval public performance, in the windows of the Arts Incubator. The expectation is that visitors and passersby will be surprised, entertained, and ultimately inspired by the spectacle of moving bodies in the public square.

The visioning of the neighborhood that you will see in the hallway, spearheaded by my colleague Dara Epison and the Office of Civic Engagement, is a consideration of space through site and time. It will also be the primary goal of the Design Apprenticeship Program, which Norman Teague will develop and manage. The Arts Incubator in Washington Park is a tangible and material site as well as an ephemeral, dialogic one. We welcome your feedback, and hope that this moment is the beginning of a symbiotic relationship. Given the freedom to be permeable and transparent only amplifies our ability to receive input. This openness is of the utmost interest; for along with the excitement of a new space comes a keen awareness of the potential for collaboration and exchange.

Allison Glenn  
Program Manager and Exhibitions Curator, Arts Incubator in Washington Park

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