

Testing: One. Two.

Jen Mergel

“Artists, like researchers, build a stage where the manifestation and the effect of their competences become dubious as they frame the story of a new adventure in a new idiom. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It calls for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.” — Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator” (2007)¹

In her two-part exhibition *Amplified Stages*, Allison Kaufman has found her artistic voice. With a new installation and related video, both inspired by chain-store showrooms of guitars, amps, speakers and more, she has expanded her ongoing exploration of how personal performances might inspire a chorus of pathos and self-discovery. Yet, unlike her earlier photographs and videos focused on her private interactions with divorced middle-aged male strangers, Kaufman’s new works probe more public and far-reaching scales of cultural vulnerability. Tuned to a minor key, they expose and embrace a complex alienation inherent in the American dream.

Among the many trademarked logos of big-box superstores that still line the nation’s highways and half-closed shopping centers, Guitar Center proclaims: “All we sell is the greatest feeling on earth.” Since 2009, Kaufman has observed how Guitar Center has remained open throughout the economic downturn, populated by lone shoppers (often men) drawn to the gleaming inventory at discount prices, and the chance to test their sounds on the showroom floor. In each solo instrumental or sound-check before closing time, she recognizes how these “seductive stages in contemporary consumer culture aim to allure and transport us” and “offer us the ability to purchase a promise or fantasy.”² They are a temporary escape, with no money down. Such stages might recall, for Jacques Rancière, “the paradox of the spectator.”³

In her first full-room installation *Empty Party (Intervention Potential I)* (2014), Kaufman creates a metaphoric showroom in both senses: a site for lively showing off and for active sales. But hers is intended as “a sad and humorous stage ... that never fulfills that promise.” In the black-box space, a disco ball spins in silence above a darkened dance floor lined by rows of unplugged sound equipment tagged for sale at markdown, while blinking party lights apathetically call to potential revelers or customers. There are no takers. As the stock collects dust and the lights keep spinning, the prospects for an upswing in mood or markets seem to spiral downward. Kaufman’s gesture is unexpectedly incisive: she gathers found sound material to fill a space with a deflating silence. The refrain that settles upon the room is that it takes people, not products, to keep a party alive. She manifests this emptiness as an object lesson, a “crucial” spectacle through which we might find, in Rancière’s terms “emancipation.”⁴

More animated but no less haunting, Kaufman’s 2012 video *Friday Nights at Guitar Center* glows against this darkness. In a brief four-minute loop, she lines up more found material: in this case, footage of strangers who gave her permission to record them on camera as they tested guitars, keyboards, and microphones with impromptu performances among the

¹ Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” *Artforum* XLV, No. 7 (March 2007): 280, accessed June 12, 2014, <http://members.efn.org/~heroux/The-Emancipated-Spectator-.pdf>. All subsequent quotes by the author re from this source.

² Allison Kaufman, e-mail message to author, May 28, 2014. All subsequent quotes by the artist are from this correspondence.

³ Rancière, 271.

⁴ Rancière, 278.

inventory of Guitar Center and Sam Ash music stores. The result is a quietly powerful American portrait of the creative act in its most raw form, prepackaged and pre-sale.

The music fans that Kaufman records span the full spectrum of age, race, class, gender, talent, and interest in music: from Neil Young to Ella Fitzgerald lyrics, from Heavy Metal to Latin Rock chord shifts, from lilting cabaret to swelling orchestral keyboard solos. The diversity of performances is offset by the consistency of what Kaufman presents. Each player tunes out her camera and the rest of the store to fully give way to the sounds they are finding in the inventory at their fingertips:

A teen tucked close to a wall of amps hides behind his long sandy hair, eyes closed, as he slices through an angry Metal riff. A well-heeled professorial looking man in a jacket sways his head, eyes closed behind his glasses, as he strums while seated on a carpeted stage. Another's silvery crew-cut and white sneakers pick up the bright lights of a mirrored showcase area as he belts the 1970s classic "Heart of Gold," lifting his eyes from his finger work just once, to emphasize a line. A young black man faces into a corner keyboard display, black baseball cap backward, as he strokes a gentle reassuring refrain from the keys, while a framed publicity shot of Elton John pointing to an unseen crowd seems to shout down from the wall above. A very young curly haired prodigy is propped up on a tall stool near a cash register, eyes darting excitedly as he tickles sophisticated Blues out of an electric guitar. A blond woman in sneakers and sweatpants tests a microphone with the sultry lines of Gershwin's "Summertime," strolling among cardboard box debris as a man crouched near the floor accompanies her on guitar. And on and on. Despite their uniqueness, Kaufman focuses on a likeness in their endeavor, echoing an observation by Rancière's of how workers' spent their nights: "There was no gap to bridge between intellectuals and workers, actors and spectators; no gap between two populations, two situations or two ages. On the contrary, there was a likeness that had to be acknowledged and put into play in the very production of knowledge."⁵

Over the course of six months of shooting, often on Friday nights at Guitar Center, Kaufman observed numerous customers scouting and testing to find their sound. As each played, she framed them momentarily oblivious of the consumer context: ignoring the \$218 price tag swaying from a guitar neck, or accepting without question how others ignored them to find and focus on the instrument of their own desires. Kaufman selected and sequenced moments that exposed "how and why people spend/kill significant amounts of time in seductive, yet staged, American chain stores," and specifically "how loneliness is abated and accentuated by spending time in and expressing oneself in this kind of environment." The store she depicts becomes an extension of the great capitalist marketplace, a zone of excess choice and access, a space to lose oneself, to be together alone—productively.

Kaufman's resulting video suggests a paradox: how detachment and remove through art can in fact bring us closer. These private transporting moments of music take the players away from their reality in the store and away from us, but also spark an empathic impulse when viewed through her humble lens. As she notes, "Observing the performers, I saw a vulnerability inherent in their exhibitionism. I think there is beauty and sadness in the revelation of our dreams and alter egos, in our desire to be seen and recognized, and it's something I can relate to." Her relation to this impulse, her respect for it, guided her approach to each individual: "I found that whatever part of the store, instrument, and song they chose to identify with on their own was an expression of how they were feeling, a projection of who they hoped to be or what they may want or have wanted from life."

And the scale of this hope—small, burgeoning, hanging upon a potential purchase—is perfectly suited to the scale of Kaufman's simple production. She records with a single camera, picks up simple unmixed sound, and does it all under the stores' given lighting conditions. It was

⁵ Rancière, 279.

those very track lights or soft fluorescents that beckoned these individuals to come out from the dark and sound a test: “Can I hear myself? Am I here?” Unlike the ubiquitous bedroom confessionals sung for anonymous views on YouTube, the strength of Kaufman’s sequenced clips is that they are performed in public as an honest trial for no one but the potential buyers—for themselves. Is the instrument worth it? Are they worthy of the instruments?

These are eerily transparent acts, at once negating and self-affirming, suggesting the never-ending desire for newer models and more products, but also for more self-testing and more creative sound. Kaufman sought the unexpected, and her video “needed to show different levels of skill and age, and each segment needed to be surprising, strange, beautiful, or humorous.” What she found was a metaphor for a uniquely American mix of consumerism with culture—the showroom. And juxtaposing this video with the installation *Empty Party*, she found an uncanny feedback loop between positive and negative potential, between doing or not. Together, they illustrate Rancière’s key point: “We do need to acknowledge that every spectator is already an actor in his own story and that every actor is in turn the spectator of the same kind of story. This is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between those who look and those who act, between those who are individuals and those who are members of a collective body.”⁶

Kaufman notes that she appreciates her metaphoric stages’ “potential for intervention.” The performance upon them may simultaneously be an unconscious diversion from economic woe, a conscious search for an existential lift, and a highly self-reflexive creation of art, such as her own. Kaufman amplifies these stages so that we can perceive the resonance of such performances with both criticality and empathy. And once registered, perhaps we might not only assess and feel others’ searching, but search ourselves. We might even stand up and test our own voices as emancipated spectators.

Jen Mergel joined the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 2010 as the Beal Senior Curator of Contemporary Art. She opened the Museum’s first contemporary wing and several exhibitions, most recently *Permission To Be Global/Prácticas Globales*. Previously, Mergel was curator of numerous shows at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art, including *Acting Out: Social Experiments in Video*. A native of Boston, she has studied, taught, and curated at Harvard University.

⁶ Rancière, 279.