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*Mendi + Keith Obadike Present Crosstalk*. Bridge Records 9285, 2008.

Mendi and Keith Obadike have compiled a stunning recording containing pieces that have, at one time or another, been referred to as “spoken word,” “text-sound,” “sound poetry,” or simply rap. On *Mendi + Keith Obadike Present Crosstalk*, they explain their preference for the term “crosstalk” as a way of describing the inextricable links connecting speech and music in the thirteen tracks on this recording. Although the term is more commonly “used to describe the bleeding of signals across audio channels,” the Obadikes intend for “crosstalk” to refer to the overlaps between (and artistic experiments dedicated to) music and speech that they understand as having “always come from a variety of communities with different interests and investments in the experiments.” To provide some sort of context for the tracks on *Crosstalk*, they suggest numerous precedents for similar speech-music interactions, including griots, experiments by artists working within certain avant-garde movements (specifically the Dadaists Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters), and the jazz-inflected or -inspired poetry of Langston Hughes. More recently, they cite experiments combining speech and music in the 1960s and 1970s (what they call the “critical decades”), including works by Paul Lansky (who is also represented on this recording), the Last Poets and the Watts Prophets, the early tape pieces of Steve Reich, and various composers-performers affiliated with both the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and the Black Artists’ Group. The seminal recording *10 + 2: 12 American Text-Sound Pieces* (released on Arch Records in 1975 by Charles Amirkhonian and Thomas Buckner) and the rise of rap are also cited as influential precedents for the pieces included on *Crosstalk*.

Although certainly helpful, historical precedents such as these go only so far in corraling the heterogeneous pieces included on *Crosstalk*. The Obadikes also suggest four “common practices” or strategies linking speech and music on *Crosstalk*: the doubling or “mimicry” of the voice by instruments or sounds, a reliance on “repeated or reordered utterances” as part of a (musical or textual) narrative, the use of extended vocal techniques, and the “extrication of the meanings from the sounds of speech.” Whereas some of the tracks fit neatly into one of the practices identified by the Obadikes, most tracks exhibit features from multiple practices in a manner that resembles the type of sonic “bleed-through” originally intended by “crosstalk.”

Certain possibilities associated with speech and sound in dialogue with one another are suggested on the tracks by George Lewis, Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd, and Tracie Morris. In Lewis’s improvisation, “Morning Blues for Yvan,” the dialogue occurs in real time as his trombone reacts and responds to a variety of sounds emerging from his laptop, including snippets of speech, singing and clapping, defamiliarized (yet recognizable) natural sounds, and impossible-to-place samples. In “Redemption Chant 2.0,” the various instrumental tracks composed by Vijay Iyer function both as a musical/sound environment for the recited text (by poet and producer Mike Ladd) and as part of a freely unfolding dialogue as exemplified

by the emergent heterophony between the voice and piano. In her “Africa(n),” poet Tracie Morris uses an opening statement (“It all started when we were brought here as slaves from Africa”) as a point of departure. The sounds that follow (percussion, saxophone, voice, etc.) all respond to this statement and then proceed in their own direction in a sort of free improvisation.

An interrogation of the possibilities and potentialities associated with narrative structures and designs in speech-music is another practice evident on many of the tracks on *Crosstalk*. Furthermore, the ways in which speech and music are (or are not) integrated with one another distinguish some tracks from others. On the two recordings by Mendi and Keith Obadike—“The Pink of Stealth” and “Rodeo Red”—Mendi’s spoken/sung texts proceed in a story-like fashion against Keith’s evolving sonic backdrops. Although the soundscape to DJ Spooky’s “Being Black” seems to follow its own narrative path independent of Ursula Rucker’s spoken text, Shelley Hirsch’s “In the Basement” effectively erases any distinctions between sound and speech. Constructed around a series of autobiographical snapshots concerning an overprotective father and the freedom offered by a basement apartment in Brooklyn, Hirsch effectively employs her stunning vocal dexterity and range. A looped musical fragment (which sounds like it would fit easily in a Screamin’ Jay Hawkins tune but, according to Hirsch, is a snippet from Scott Joplin) and brief interjections by her father add to the track’s darkly humorous tone.

On other tracks, the spectral presence of a narrative functions as an (absent) organizing force. On Paul Lansky’s “Chatter of Pins,” for instance, the spoken delivery of an “old English folksong” participates in the track’s overall rhythmic complexity where the listener may not necessarily follow the meaning of the text but instead—in the words of the composer—its “emphatic rap-like (well, almost) rhythmic structure.” (Composed of swirling sounds all over the stereo field, “Chatter of Pins” is just one example of *Crosstalk*’s high production values.) Although it is never presented in a straightforward fashion, a reading of Shakespeare’s sonnet number 65 serves as the raw material for John Link’s “Life Studies, Movement #1,” yielding a complex rhythmic surface constructed of dislocated aspirates, sibilants, and gutturals. On Guillermo E. Brown’s “Electroprayer 5.0,” one is forced to listen to the voice *as* sound and rhythm as Brown sings in an invented language (a “translation” is included in the liner notes). Daniel Bernard Roumain’s “Blimp/Sky” (an excerpt from a larger composition, *One Loss Plus*) includes vocal fragments spoken by individuals who are responding to the question, “What is gained when something or someone is lost?” against a minimalist musical background for violin and piano. Finally, Pamela Z’s “Declaratives in First Person” is built on fragments derived from the (never fully articulated) sentence “I would like to think that the art itself is enough of a statement.” The statement on which Pamela Z’s work is based suggests a modernist notion of art that privileges an autonomous and self-sufficient conception of the artwork and its meaning(s). At the same time, “Declaratives in First Person” subverts such an aesthetic position by highlighting the role of the listening/perceiving subject in the experience of any work of art. By fragmenting and repeating individual elements of the source statement (specifically the

first-person pronoun “I,” “self” of “itself,” and the phrase “I would like to think . . .”), she dramatically and forcibly deconstructs the meaning of the statement before our very ears.

If Pamela Z’s “Declaratives in First Person” forces us to question how we experience tracks such as those included on *Crosstalk*, “The Society Architect Ponders the Golden Gate Bridge”—a collaboration between the composer Peter Gordon and the conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner—raises issues concerning ontology. This work (is it an unstaged opera? an oratorio?) is based on the court transcript documenting a lawsuit filed by Weiner, who was injured when the car in which he was riding was struck by a drunk driver. What should have been a clear-cut case of awarding damages for pain, injuries, and lost income instead turned into a public scrutiny of Weiner’s life and art. The following excerpt represents the inability (or unwillingness) of the judge to comprehend what type of art Weiner creates and why, therefore, he should be compensated (the lines of the judge are sung/spoken by Joan La Barbara, those of the plaintiff—Weiner—are sung/spoken by Jeffrey Reynolds):

*Judge:* What is this piece you sold, sir? Is it an object or is it words?

*Plaintiff:* I believe it’s an object, sir.

*Judge:* Well, well. The ordinary layperson thinks of an object [as] something tangible [and that] has dimensions to it. Like a baseball. Or a football. Or a torso (if it is a sculpture). What is that you have? Is it anything like that, or is it worth . . .

*Plaintiff:* It’s an object!

*Judge:* Describe it, sir!

*Plaintiff* (singing): Stone upon stone upon fallen stone.

*Judge:* What is that?!

*Plaintiff:* This is a piece of sculpture.

*Judge:* Is it an actual piece of sculpture?

*Plaintiff* (interrupting): It could be. If a person decided to build it.

*Judge:* No. I don’t want to know what it could be. Is it something that is used out of the ground? Out of marble? Or granite? What is it? Can you put it on my desk so I can look at it?

*Plaintiff:* If we write it down.

*Judge:* That’s it! You have to write it down? Is that it?

*Plaintiff:* I don’t understand, sir.

Given the judge’s fixation on tangible objects, he cannot make sense of what type of art Weiner creates. At the same time, Weiner does not even understand the question (talk about “crosstalk”!). Stepping back to consider this collection as a whole in light of this excerpt, it might be possible to situate individual tracks on *Crosstalk* according to something with which we are familiar, such as other pieces or certain historical traditions or artistic movements. Ultimately, however, every track on *Crosstalk* creates something new out of very familiar materials by carving out (or continuing to excavate) a space of artistic possibilities in speech, music, and speech-music.