Drum Listens to Heart @ CCA Wattis

NOVEMBER 26, 2022

by David M. Roth

The human heart, as percussionist Milford Graves observed, operates arrhythmically. It varies from one person to the next, and it produces notes you can name and measure. That being the case, one might reasonably wonder why society doesn’t honor the diversity that resides in all of us, in pectore. One area (and perhaps the sole arena) in which it does is improvised music, a democratic art form that prizes individual expression within agreed-upon bounds. The problem, as CCA Curator Anthony Huberman notes, is that everything else – our economic, religious and political systems — demands that we do the opposite, that we act in unison. That contradiction – between eccentric human rhythm and the metronomic regularity imposed by capitalism (i.e., slavery, the industrial time clock, the post-industrial, corporate-run surveillance state) – is the animating force behind Drum Listens to Heart, the longest, most ambitious show the CCA Wattis Institute for the Arts has ever mounted.
Drumming, as Huberman defines it, is a wide-ranging topic, and for that reason, he divided the exhibition into three parts. The first ended October 15. The second runs through December 17, with a final installment slated to open January 17. So far, it’s consisted mainly of sculptural and video installations interspersed with live performances and a continuous display of percussion-heavy LPs in a back room: catnip for the vinyl-addicted.

While the show’s in-progress status makes critical judgment tricky, its primary strength, based on what has been shown, lies less with the art on view, which is uneven, than with the thinking behind it, gleanable from Huberman’s catalog essay. It’s a brilliant and engaging piece of scholarship that considers percussion in the broadest possible terms — not as mere rhythmic accompaniment, but as a mirror of how society functions (or doesn’t). He traces the drum’s history across time and cultures, noting its religious, ceremonial, artistic, communicative and militaristic uses. From that, he lays out a utopian vision, asserting that if we heeded our internal rhythms and expressed them communally, we’d have a better world, forgetting, perhaps, that we ran a similar experiment (Woodstock Nation) 53 years ago and failed. No matter. The dream persists.

Inspired by Fred Moten’s writing, Huberman spins a compelling riff about drumming, using jazz’s elastic, give-and-take communication as a model for how society might operate. I quote it here in full because it’s the best description of musical dialog I’ve ever read. “Moten,” he writes, “takes the word ensemble and pushes it the way a horn player twists the bend of a note. His ensemble is not a group of people but a condition, a state of generative and collective becoming, of being without a center. His ensemble is not a point of intersection but a force that cuts across and refuses to close. It refers not to a specific situation but to the totality of an ecosystem—to everything that is generated by a situation, every- thing that emerges from it, everything that is entangled within it, even every- thing that works to oppose or contradict it. His ensemble is a political model where diverging perspectives don’t agree, disagree, or even work toward a consensus but where they gather, coexist, contradict, listen to each other, make something with each other, and mutually adapt to a context as it evolves.”
To illustrate those ideas and kick off the exhibition’s first installment, Huberman enlisted the polymath drummer Milford Graves (1941-2021) as a presiding spirit. In addition to dazzling (and sometimes frightening) his most adventurous free-jazz cohorts, Graves also conducted pioneering research into the relationship between the human heartbeat and music. The show, unfortunately, doesn’t present his findings or any of his music, only the artifacts that reflect his conclusions, seen in an installation that consisted of African figurative sculptures and skeletons festooned with wires, fetish objects, drums, electronic gizmos and small computer monitors. All were part of a home laboratory at which the drummer administered EKGs to visitors. The end product was a typological library of cardiac data that fed Graves’ activities on and off the bandstand. The sculptures, which embody the ancient past and a technologically enabled future, rank among the highlights of the exhibition’s first segment.

Just as effective was Marcos Avila Forero’s *Atrato (2014)*, significant for demonstrating the collective spirit Huberman so admires. The video shows a group of Colombians (seven men and one woman) standing waist-deep in a river, pounding the water with their hands to produce what sounds like a first-rate Latin percussion section. With banana-laden canoes gliding past in the background, they encourage each other to build and hold a groove. (“Don’t lose the bass!”) I left thinking I was listening to professionals, only to learn later that they were water drummers-in-training, recruited from a war-torn community by the filmmaker to re-create a lost form of pre-colonial communication.
Theaster Gates, the Chicago-based artist and activist, stars in the exhibition’s second segment. His video, *Gone are the Days of Shelter and Martyr* (2014), describes another kind of rhythm-based community-building effort. Set in a ruined church on Chicago’s South Side, it shows two men, part of Gates’ collaborative retinue, The Black Monks of Mississippi, flipping a heavy door back and forth. Each time it crashes to the floor, it kicks up dust clouds, giving the scene, tinged by a melancholy cello, the character of a laborious religious ritual, made visceral by thunderous reverberations. Lest anyone miss the point, the piece concludes with a sustained shot of *The Last Supper*: a metaphor for the work Gates, an artist-turned-redevelopment wizard, performs by slicing through bureaucratic red tape to give marginalized people hope.

The most politically charged portion of the show’s second installment belongs to gay Black composer Julius Eastman (1940–1990). It features four pianists (4 hands on two pianos) performing three of the artist’s controversially titled post-minimalist compositions: *Crazy Nigger*, *Evil Nigger* and *Gay Guerilla* (all 1979). Built on a series of hypnotic ostinatoes interrupted by melodic interludes, they come prefaced with speeches (voiced by two actors) that the composer delivered before an audience, explaining why he named the works as he did. The performances, filmed by the Otolith Group and collectively titled *The Third Part of the Third Measure* (2017), move between controlled verbal rage and keyboard close-ups that magnify and bring to the fore the piano’s percussive/melodic potential.
Drumming, Huberman points out, isn’t solely about beauty or ecstatic experience or even music. "If rhythm enlists the body," he writes, "it can also dominate and take hold of bodies—literally, as in a trance or a military drill, but also metaphorically, as in an ideology or a belief system that is drummed into you.'

Francis Alÿs’ Guards (2004), a film depicting 64 King's Guard soldiers marching through deserted London streets, probes that phenomenon. With rifles slung across shoulders, arms swinging in unison, and boots echoing off pavement, they induce a mounting sense of dread, presaging a violent conflict that never materializes.

Not everything in Drum Listens to Heart serves the show’s stated theme. Em’kal Eyongakpa’s spooky, catacomb-like sound installation in part one, for example, felt more like a techno-geek's idea of a Halloween event than an exploration of percussion. Davina Semo's collection of playable bronze bells seemed better suited to an Exploratorium show aimed at children. In the second segment, Lucy Raven’s video of percussionists banging on Alexander Calder mobiles comes off as arty and pretentious. Others, like Michael E. Smith’s sculpture of a laser light tracing vertical line on a sweater, seen in part one, are head-scratchers.

Luckily, the works I have discussed more than redeem those I haven’t. They demonstrate what Huberman meant when he wrote: "Drums aren't there to make sense but to break up the senses."

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"Drum Listens to Heart.” Part 2 through December 17, 2022. Part three: January 17 to March 4, 2023 @ CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts. The program also includes live performances, the schedule of which can be viewed on the Institute's website.

About the author: David M. Roth is the editor, publisher and founder of Squarecylinder, where he has published over 400 reviews of Bay Area exhibitions. He was previously a contributor to Artweek and Art Ltd and senior editor for art and culture at the Sacramento News & Review.