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Jennifer Schmidt lecturing at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design in early 2011



Jennifer Schmidt, *Shovel on a Carhood - Concert for Sandhill Cranes, 2010*, installation view at Homestead Artist Residency, Alaska



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Jennifer Schmidt, *Hard times Scrabble Value: A Play in Two Parts (video still), 2010*

Jennifer Schmidt SOUND IN PRINT by Pedro Vélez

Last month, the Brooklyn-based conceptual artist Jennifer Schmidt (b. 1975) came out to the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and lectured for two hours straight. Even if you've been following an artist's work, you don't quite know what she's about until you've heard her talk about what she does for that long of a stretch.

Schmidt is one of those artists who stays on the move, producing much of her art in residencies. She's worked at Homestead in Alaska, Canada's Banff Centre, the Experimental Television Center in New York and the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art.

She makes sound pieces, videos, sculptures and installations of what used to be called supergraphics. Her preoccupations include the relay and transformation of information through history, fables and mainstream media. Her work has been included in exhibitions at Diapason Gallery in Brooklyn, New York's Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, and the International Film Festival Oberhausen in Germany.

After her talk I had a chance to pick her brain.

Pedro Vélez: *Do you have a studio? I ask because most of your work seems to be created in direct relation to the circumstances surrounding the yearly stints you do in artist residencies.*

Jennifer Schmidt: I have a digital studio at home that is my editing booth/thought space of sorts. This is where I do most of my designing, processing, sequencing and archiving. But I don't really feel that I need a studio space for coming up with ideas or making something come into being.

Do you consider yourself a "glocal" artist or a nomad?

I guess a bit of both. I grew up living all over. Moving every three years to places like DC, the Philippines, Italy, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and even more as an adult. So, this kind of movement and lack of overall definition feels right to me.

What's your favorite city?

I'd say I like Chicago for its openness and affordability. There you can be a curator, writer and artist, all at the same time. Boston is another great city to feed your head with so many schools, free talks and events. I like New York, too, for its anonymity, hustle and bustle, and Berlin for its historic grit -- I love the picnic tables on the sidewalks there, and the playgrounds and posters. Also Moscow for its rigidity and love of entertainment.

You commute now between Brooklyn and Boston.

Riding the bus each week to my teaching job at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston gives me a chance to be briefly



Jennifer Schmidt, *Hard times Scrabble Value: A Play in Two Parts* (video still), 2010



Jennifer Schmidt at the Experimental Television Center in Oswego, N.Y.



Jennifer Schmidt, *Readers Digest* (video still), 2007-08



Jennifer Schmidt, *B More Baltimore*, 2003, installation of screenprinted posters in Baltimore, sponsored by the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Art and Culture

dislocated and yet be part of the "everyman zone" that is the highway or a rest stop. The bus is a great place to read, think and just "be" for a few hours. There's a rhythm to it, as well as a false sense of progress that can be encouraging.

During a residency at Homestead in Alaska you amplified the sound of metal barrels and car hoods over a bog. Based on the documentation that I've seen, performing, while isolated in the wilderness can be pretty heavy. Could you describe the feeling?

I think the heaviness for me was about being isolated without a mode of transportation. At Homestead you really need wheels, a machete or a weapon as a means to ride through, hack into and protect yourself from what may lay beyond the mowed grasses. It's an area populated by bears, foxes and moose, so there were clear boundaries to where a person can roam alone.

What exactly is Homestead?

It's a piece of land with a house and a "metal alley" piled with barrels, cars, missile casings, washing machines, bicycles and cabinets -- anything, you name it. And there is a bog with grass, trees and water bordering on a pond.

Tell me more about the work you produced there. In Concert for Sandhill Cranes, you performed for nature and, at the same, for no one in particular. It makes me think of Robert Barry releasing gas into the atmosphere, or the melancholy conceptualism of Bas Jan Ader.

An artist named Garrett Yahn, during his residency at Homestead, built a desk and platform overlooking the bog and called it a "work station." Sitting there each day, I noticed that the sandhill cranes were very aware of my presence. Screeching and moving in forward and backward diagonal patterns, they essentially stormed the workstation.

It was frightening once I realized I was in their territory. I used a shovel to play a car hood and my boots to kick a barrel to produce percussion-like beats. I recorded my performance and amplified it into the bog. To do this, I had to run about 150 feet of extension cord from the house into the woods and out to the site, to plug into my amp. The sound attracted insects and the echoing was a deafening, screeching, violent sound. Then, it was over. I made this the day before I left.

You were one of the last lucky artists to work at the Experimental Television Center in New York, using equipment originally built by legends Nam June Paik, David Jones and Dan Sandin. Is analog technology dead for good?

No, it has just become synthesized. We still refer to it and use it; only it has become a referent and an option, rather than a means.

*Sound has been a constant in your work in recent years, be it by documenting an atmosphere or reciting lines from the book *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens. However, I have never seen you play an instrument or even talk about music. How did this obsession get started?*

My exposure to sound and the nuances of microphones and field recording was via Colin Asquith, a musician living in Boston; we went to the Experimental Television Center together. His role as a musician was huge in the making of the video *Reader's Digest* because at ETC all the equipment was tangible -- involving patch boards, cables and the physical fine-tuning of color, movement, and rhythm. It was a performance in itself to plug in cables and turn knobs, watching, responding and adjusting inputs and outputs in real time while recording hours of footage. Re-playing, re-running the tapes through



Jennifer Schmidt, *B More Baltimore*, 2003



Jennifer Schmidt, *Coupon Dash*, 2006, graphic for Baltimore bus shelter

the machines to the hum of electricity and static feedback.

Didn't you mention in the lecture that the video footage for Reader's Digest is made up of thousands of magazine pages that are digitally animated into a "painterly scape" of flowing content?

Yes. We used sound to modulate the imagery and played around with various instruments to get a "beat" we liked for the video.

You were trained as a printmaker. Working with sound must be a real challenge.

Working with sound is actually really similar to working with print media. As a printmaker, you create templates and matrixes involving your source material: drawings, photographs, collages, texts that you then transfer to another surface. You often choose your desired print process based on esthetic and historical implications -- as well as your technical knowledge and level of craft. For me, working with sound was a byway of making experimental video animations.

Any secrets you'd like to disclose before you get back on a plane?

I just bought a little Fischer Price robot cassette recorder for two bucks at a stoop sale and it amazes me. It automatically makes your voice sound like a robot when you use the mic. And it will record over a source tape at the touch of a button. My two-year-old and I are creating our own pre-recorded radio show using old tapes. It's awesome.

PEDRO VÉLEZ is an artist and critic living in Chicago.