

Robyn Backen

Architecture in Transmission

ANN FINEGAN

A fascination with messaging systems and paradoxical ontologies of sending have long informed Robyn Backen's installation practice. Most often her messages are public/private – obscure, occulted, and intimate – but sent with the public openness of a postcard, and often through the patterning of obsolete Morse code. One has the sense that the medium of transmission itself, the architectures which facilitate sending, take precedence over the message – whether she is coding secret Braille messages on a public handrail (*Blindfold*, 1995, Liverpool Public Library) where few will ever 'translate' and hence receive it, or carving dots and dashes of a text (by Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh) in Morse code into a wooden purdah screen in New Delhi (*Purdah in the Kitchen*, 1999). In Heideggerian terms her secrets are a kind of standing reserve, a private withholding, in the full glare of day.

Weeping Walls (2001) at the international departure lounges of Sydney Airport, was simultaneously a site of transmission and architectural feature: the last wall defining the final zone of contact for the goodbye kiss or hug, but also a tangle of fibre optic cabling pulsing Morse code messages in the medium of light – 'parting is such sweet sorrow' (Shakespeare 1564-1616); 'I have nothing to declare but my genius' (Oscar Wilde 1854-1900); 'famous for fifteen minutes' (Andy Warhol 1927-87); 'better three hours too soon than a minute too late' (Shakespeare 1564-1616) – which few would know to translate let alone recognise as text. Backen's occulted subliminal modes of transmission never signal 'message' directly but tend to masquerade as architectural detail.

This confounding or imbrication of architecture and message was already a feature of Moghul Jantar Mantar observatories (Dehli, Mathura, Varanasi, Ujjain and Jaipur, 1724-1735), which Backen studied intensely in the first of her Indian residencies in 1999. For Backen these structures, built at a scale to dwarf the human body, were a kind of 'whispering architecture' to catch what was falling in giant shadow-lines on the carefully calibrated pages of each massive form. This knowledge, 'all coming from the stars', was there to be caught in the sun's



Delicate Balance, 2009, public art installation/sculpture, Ballast Point, Birchgrove, Sydney, concrete, 240 x 450cm; Collection: Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority; photo: Ian Hobbs
All images this article of work by Robyn Backen; images courtesy the artist

celestial motions via the architectural play of shadow and light. Thought through this point of view, the observatory's architecture was a kind of translating machine, transforming the light into the measurements of a mathematical code, not unlike Backen's earlier fibre optics installations which deployed pulses of light to deliver her Morse code messages.

The bricks. Everywhere in India people in crowds carrying bricks on their heads. Backen began to notice and to make connections. Cheap to make, the clay simply dug out of the earth and given form, bricks were a plentiful and ancient technology. Not just blocks of strong and resistant matter to build with. The architecture of Jantar Mantar had impressed as a refined technology of astronomical reception – and it was just bricks, careful compositions of bricks. Forget, in this context, the complex technology of fibre optics or the archaeology of Morse code, the core exemplar of 19th century Europe and America 'in transmission'. In Jantar Mantar was the ultimate open secret, there for all to see, but requiring a certain knowledge set to unlock its meaning. Like Poe's famous story, *The Purloined Letter*, the secret was out, hidden in full view (on the mantelpiece an envelope addressed in a feminine hand disguised the contents of a compromising note from a man). Jantar Mantar was a revelation of an advanced technology, paradoxically



Purdah in the Kitchen, 1999, Morse code (based on text by Amitav Ghosh) carved on wooden purdah screen; first shown in 4 blind dates at the Kendra, Sanskriti Kendra, New Delhi, 2000



One of the Jantar Mantar observatories constructed by Maharajah Jai Singh II, Jaipur, between 1724-1735; Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

constructed in humble brick. It taught Backen how to read India in a certain way – the simplest materials a machine for abstract thinking – and also how to read more deeply into architecture as a communication-reception medium.

Backen's focus was soon directed to a more literal form of Indian 'whispering architecture', the 16th-century mausoleum of Gol Gumbaz, the second-largest dome in the world and, quoting Backen, 'a magnificent whispering space'. It became the inspiration for one of Backen's most challenging works to date, *Whisper Pitch* (Performance Space, Carriageworks, 2012).

Marcello, can you hear me?

Did you ever feel so close?

Yes.

From a place far far away.

It'd be as if I didn't exist any more if I were not to speak.

(Fellini, *La Dolce Vita*, 1960, voice of Maddalena)

A minimum of communication, a whisper, is enough to confirm this ghost. Projected onto a door at the end of a long corridor in Performance Space, was this snippet from Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. Marcello turns to respond to these soliciting walls. He simply has to hear Maddalena, to bend his ear, inclined towards her, and that will be satisfaction enough.

Deep inside the fabric of Carriageworks' internal architecture, a direct sight line could be drawn from this projection to an architectural intervention Backen had constructed at a scale to seamlessly integrate into Carriageworks' structure. In effect, in solid double brick, Backen had constructed the architectural equivalent of two giant ears, their parabolic curves best shaped to capture, but also throw back, whispered speech. The mouth, which whispers, is effectively also an ear.

Though only temporary, Backen's solid edifices retrofit Carriageworks with Moghul architecture for the sending and receiving of whispers. Viewed from above they almost form a saddle shape, in resonance with Matthew Barney's key architectural motif from the *Cremaster Cycle*. But unlike Barney and Serra (who plays the architect in *Cremaster*), Backen's architectural forms are about more than architecture.

Backen observes of the whispering structures, especially those which she visited in India, that they are noisy spaces, a cacophony of sound. Everybody is whispering loudly, testing the walls, such that no-one can be distinctly heard. Inside her parabolas, multiple registers of tones and languages overlap. Then you hear it. Attuned to a sweet spot in the wall you hear Maddalena, and, instinctively taking the place of Marcello, her *interlocuteur*, you hear her crisis of being, as a disembodied voice; and in that hearing, you effectively confirm her. Ontologically, more is going on in this work than the capture and translation/hearing of whispers. Backen has staged subjectivity across a divide in which a subject is only fully a subject as a being-for-another.

Philosophically, she has quoted the famous Fellini scene, and in restaging it, with us, placing her audience as *interlocuteur*, implicated us in the hearing/confirming roles through which one being exists for another. She has us, paradoxically, confirming ghosts, like Marcello in Fellini's film: I exist if you can hear me. In the history of Western philosophy the speaking being has always conferred presence, the utterance implicated in presencing the self. Even if we can't see her, classical philosophy has prioritised the voice and the speaking-hearing couplet. More so than sight, sound is heard in the interior of the body: hearing oneself think is the ontological core of being in a long line of philosophers from Plato to Husserl.

When I hear you, you're there. This is not the first work of Backen's to investigate ontologies of sending. To borrow a neologism from artist David Haines, we 'exvaporate', we become ghosts; we send out outside of ourselves, when we call ahead. We catch up with ourselves, over there, in the place of our reception. Otherwise we're just calling out, seeking affirmation. Backen, like Fellini, and the more recent philosophers of a subjectivity 'in transmission' like Ronell, favours the affirmation of an other that is not our own selves. Backen amplifies this ontological call.

Gol Gumbaz, 1626-'56, Bijapur, Karnataka, India; the Mausoleum of Muhammad Adil Shah, Sultan of Bijapur; 'Gol Gonbadh' is Persian for 'rose dome' (in reference to the petal-shaped formations at the dome's base); the building's Whispering Gallery is situated around the dome's interior



Inside the parabolas of *Whisper Pitch* Backen has also inverted the priority which is often given to visualisation. Instead, the audience is inside walls which whisper, and which must achieve a certain threshold or pitch in order to be discerned. Again, the whispers return:

Can you hear me?

Did you ever feel so close?

Yes.

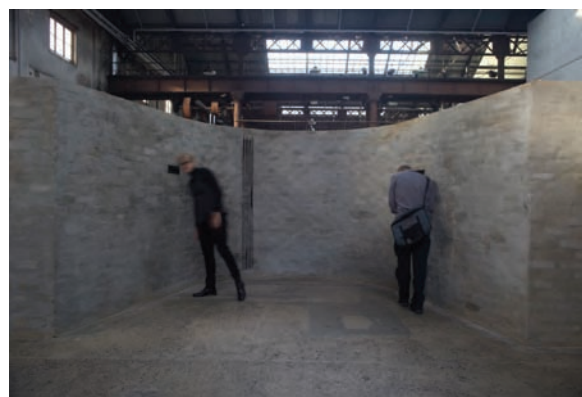
From a place far far away.

It'd be as if I didn't exist any more if I were not to speak.

Your ear close to the wall, you absorb this text and invest this voice with being, in a response which is different to Marcello and the excerpt from the Fellini film. Inside the brick parabolas, listening to the whispering from the walls, your ear up close, you were more proximate, much more intimate than as a spectator to Fellini's film. Watching Marcello's turning to hear, you are distracted by what you see, listening in order to defer to the anticipated visual referent, rather than listening to 'listening as a mode of being'. You are far less involved.

The film's typically hushed setting of the European gallery contrasts with the multi-layered, multi-lingual track inside *Whisper Pitch's* brick parabolas, resonating with Backen's recordings of public temple spaces in India, where she noted the walls were often marked with use, from the rubbing of the many bodies of crowds inside the temple. These marks were a kind of presaging of the temple's many listeners, and she responded with a kind of translation, writing on the walls in charcoal an abstracted translation of Maddalena's words.

Backen chose charcoal because it is one of the earliest mediums of cultural transmission. Charcoal, itself, easily rubbed off, can become as ephemeral as a whisper, and further, the stretched-out code was subjected to an anamorphic perspective that made its discernment near impossible. This concession to the visual was so highly abstracted as to be more akin to a pattern or noise, some curious visualisation of a cacophony of whispers. Another buried or occulted code.



2 +3 + 4/ *Whisper Pitch*, 2012, bricks, charcoal, sound, projection; installation views, Performance Space, Carriageworks, Sydney, 2012; photos: Ian Hobbs



Connecting You, 2010, mirror, bakelite telephones, sound, wood, electronics; installation view, Canberra Contemporary Art Space; photo: Ian Hobbs

Again Backen returns to the paradox of not necessarily always knowing what was in transmission, a constant in her work – whether a circle of telephones symbolising an architecture of connectedness (*Connecting You*, 2010, Backen’s take on the Cold War, with telephonics the weapon of choice; Kennedy on the line to British Prime Minister Macmillan), or the lights pulsing Morse code from her reconstruction of Mrs Biggs Ladies Baths to the naval ships in Woolloomooloo Bay (*Archaeology of Bathing*, 1999); an exchange, perhaps, of lovers.

Delicate Balance, an uber-Modernist concrete tube, perilously tilted off the water’s edge (Ballast Point Park, Sydney, 2009), best translates the Indian experience of an architecture of transmission. Inside the tube, scaled to the accommodation of one or two bodies, leaning out along its slope intimate with the walls, feet on a grid over water, you experience a kind of communication with the environment framed by the various apertures cut into the open tube, most noticeably the sky. As

though you are inside a medium of telecommunication, a micro-particle, in transmission yourself, sending out into the cosmos.

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 This article is an extended version of the catalogue essay for Robyn Backen’s exhibition *Whisper Pitch*, Performance Space, Carriageworks, Sydney, 20 April to 19 May 2012; original text commissioned by Carriageworks, Sydney.

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