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Honors Thesis

HOSTS: RELIC, GESTURE, SITE AND CONNECTION IN AN ART
INSTALLATION

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation
requirements for University Honors

Department of Art
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

HOSTS: RELIC, GESTURE, SITE, AND CONNECTION IN AN ART INSTALLATION

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Bachelor of Fine Art

This project is meant to contextualize the art installation *Hosts* within research regarding ritual, relics, and the concepts of gesture and sites which accumulate in human connection and wonderment. It investigates the historical and philosophical significance of Catholic relics regarding their ability to conjure connection between an audience and their divinity as well as play host to a sense of awe. Additionally, this essay will explore the terms gesture and site as they relate to the ability to create moments of interaction between spans of time, context, and intention. The work will also examine the particular experiences encountered in Rome, Italy at San Clemente, Scala Santa, and Santa Maria Antiqua as they relate to the aforementioned ideas, and those in relationship to the art of sound-based artists like Janet Cardiff and Susan Philipsz. Finally, this essay will address the qualities of *Hosts* as they emanated from these observations and concepts to encapsulate wonder and offer up sites for connection.

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INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND OBSERVATIONS INTO QUESTIONS, A CONTEXT FOR THE ARTWORK

At first, this project was simply a sound. It was a gentle but steady trickle of water under three layers of ancient worship. I found it under my feet during my visit to San Clemente, one of those small pre-modern churches nestled in the fingerprint of Rome. To my ears, the string of water was carrying a tempo and pitch on its back as it cut slowly through the stone. It was like a bit of time physically touching a space and holding remnants that had been built over, buried, and rediscovered. I thought of my own discovery of this underground stream, and how in listening to it I was soaking up time in an ancient space, once occupied by ancient people. I could keenly sense the expanse of years between me and the other people this space had once hosted. In general, the experience prompted a cascade of interest in the eternal city's palimpsest-like spaces, sounds, and objects as well as in the kind of memory and connection that emerges from such sites.

As I more intentionally sought and considered experiences and observations that would eventually culminate in my sound art installation, *Hosts*, ideas regarding relic, ritual, sites, and gesture became central to understanding the context for what I was hoping to explore as an artist. I was interested not necessarily in the dominant visual forms of Catholicism, as much I was in the way they cultivated relationships between physical mediums and metaphysical experiences. Questions that fronted my research and artistic methodologies were centered around how those spaces of connection were crafted historically and experienced, and how I would use my contemporary art practice to

further inquire into the possibilities of connection and wonderment in an artistic space. How do humans use physical means to access and connect with the spiritual or metaphysical, and what potential is there for human connection between vast spans of time within these sites and gestures? How are the connections offered, received, and what hosts them? Though I wasn't interested in illustrating the literal aesthetic practices of Catholicism, Catholic notions of relic and ritual were still worth studying to understand the relationships between gestures, sites, and the humans populating them, as well as artistic mediums such as sound that could facilitate and engage viewers in ways akin to my own experiences within these religion-infused spaces.

While I was living in Rome, I routinely wandered into churches. In nearly every one I found myself squinting, puzzled and curious, at some sort of relic housed in what I perceived as some decadent and obscuring decoration. The smallest fragment of a saint's bone, for example, would be tucked away inside a gem-adorned structure with frames of inscription. Why these frequently minuscule objects were so treasured and spiritual was a mystery to me. Cynthia Hahn, professor of medieval art, has written extensively on questions surrounding relics. She explains that although for unpracticed viewers like me the objects seem shrouded in unrecognizable aesthetic and vague significance, the relationship between the relic object, its divinity, and the viewer was poignant and corporeal for believers in medieval times.¹ The objects themselves were more than just artifacts, as we might be tempted to understand them today. They were intrinsically connected to the person with whom they were associated. The saints were considered to be fully present in even the most fragmented relic while simultaneously being fully

1. Hahn, 285.

present in heaven, leaving the objects with a "marked liveliness."² The relic could be understood as a conduit between its audience and God. It did not only embody but attached the presence of saints to human minds.³ The relic, at once significant because of its original context in time as having been physically associated with deity, was also a means of reaching out beyond the physical association and into the miraculous.

Additionally, relics are capable of acting in a symbolic and mnemonic way. Their bare formal characteristics are often inconsequential. It is not until they are instilled with a memory or reverence that they achieve their presumed abilities and power.⁴ Thus, the trappings encasing the relic, known as reliquaries, are often tasked with this memoria role. They become a mediator between the object and the visitors that confides meaning to the authenticating audience.⁵ It is worthy of note in the context of *Hosts* to consider the dual direction of mnemonic significance that these objects historically achieved. The collective human memory could both bestow upon the relic and be received from interaction with the relic.

From a more secular perspective, what significance does interaction with these so-called sacred objects offer? Art historian and museum director Philippe Cordez observes that even though our modern interaction with these objects is not the same as what was experienced in the original encounters, these objects are still cherished in museums and can "activate memory, arouse wonder, and impart knowledge about nature."⁶ If released from the burden of being sacred in a very specific way, the objects themselves provide a

2. Hahn, 299.

3. Hahn, 300.

4. Hahn, 300.

5. Hahn, 291.

6. Cordez, 213.

notable strangeness in comparison to our modern associations and become not only conduits for deity-related belief, but for a human-world connection that is carried, even treasured, through time. In this sense, it isn't so different from what those earlier worship encounters would have been like, which are described by the medieval religious and devotional practice scholar Beth Williamson, "not in terms of what they could see, but in terms of what their sight might lead them to apprehend."⁷ Relics, their reliquaries, and the resulting interaction with the audience is a type of gesture toward a metaphysical space, be that belief, wonderment, or simple reverence for remnants of human memory.

Although not explicitly a part of the purview of Catholic worship or scholarship, the term "gesture" is nonetheless a critical component for engaging with relic and ritual in these spaces that make up the contextual foundation of *Hosts*. The specific way I employ this term is heavily derived from the writing of Rebecca Schneider, scholar of performance studies at Brown University, in her article "That the Past May Yet Have Another Future: Gesture in the Times of Hands Up." Her own definition is obtained through a performance lens, claiming that gestures "are performances bodying forth the entangled histories and potentialities of relation, even without determined or definitive signification."⁸ While within the context of being a relic, the gesture might have been definitive, Schneider's definition offers a chance for the connection to be independent of any specific belief system. Regardless of the meaning of a gesture, the interval it generates can be crossed. According to her, the gesture can be a body-jumping performance in which history can be carried along and a response can reverberate in

7. Williamson, 35.

8. Schneider, 286.

multiple directions.⁹ Thus, gestures are something that spans spaces and times, as well as belief systems, to open the possibility for connection.

One of the central examples Schneider uses to demonstrate this concretely is with her own experience in a prehistoric cave with the impression of a hand left on the rock. In her account Schneider describes reaching out towards the space where a prehistoric human hand laid on the stone to make the mark, "the hand appeared to me not only as a trace, but also as a call. Hello. Or, if not hello, then stop. Here. Or maybe wait. Wait a moment. Pause."¹⁰ The potential meaning filtered through various possibilities, but the physical mark of the gesture remained there on the rock, ongoing, as she says, as if moving in geologic time.¹¹ This type of interaction is not necessarily concerned with the ability to understand intention and articulate precise communication. Rather, it recognizes that some sort of action was put forward, stretched to call forth, and can have a poignant effect upon those receiving it across vast spans of time and context.

Schneider crucially articulates this action as a form of connection with the ancient painter in the following quotation:

Though the stone, moving in geologic time, has been there all along, she and I are syncopated. When the Paleolithic painter was there, the future person or animal or thing that her hail might meet was absent (not yet there). And when such a future being is there, at least when I was there, the Paleolithic painter is absent (not, yet there). We were both present and both absent at the time of the encounter, even if that time is 30,000 years... Both are thus participants as interinanimate in the ongoingness of cross-temporal events.¹²

9. Schneider, 286.

10. Schneider, 290.

11. Schneider, 291.

12. Schneider, 294.

In its most simple form, offering a gesture creates the chance for someone to gesture back. Schneider eloquently describes the profound effect this can have, particularly when generating a large interval of time, space, or belief. Its efficacy seems to lie in the presumed relationship generated by a call and response. It can link disparate situations because any gesture interacted with is met "where we catch them."¹³ She thus provides a less theologically systemized way of thinking about gestures. Though the intention of the gesture might be lost to time, or at least obscured by mystery, the gesture itself remains and allows for a call and response across disparate times, places, and perhaps the inability to discern any specific messaging. It becomes a site of human connection, rather than of solely human expression and communication. Artistically, I am interested in how to generate spaces conducive to giving and receiving gestures, how those gestures accumulate, and what they carry with them.

In addition to defining the term "gesture" it is also necessary to expound upon the notion of a site. In general, I use "site" to refer to a specific type of space that accumulates, or hosts, these types of gestures. There are different ways of thinking about the characteristics of space. Philosopher Gernot Böhme puts forth the idea of a felt space that is "generated by the tendency of bodily sensation to extend...articulated by bodily feelings stretched out to infinity."¹⁴ I find this notion particularly interesting in conjunction with Schneider's explanation of gesture, the audience and sensory oriented experiences of ritual and relic, and the potential within artistic practice that is concerned with time and sound. It suggests that space is something that can have a relationship with

13. Schneider, 293.

14. Grant et al., 31.

the way we interact through gesture and time. Certain spaces may even collect the gestures and host them for future interaction.

Another aspect of spaces that contributes to my understanding of these types of sites are those intangible characteristics of spaces that employ imagination. Juhani Pallasmaa, architect and scholar, notes a distinction between the way we visually recognize our physical space and the potential ways we can interact with the intangible qualities of spaces. When considered by means beyond optics, space can be embracing, and can make up a lived and shared state of being.¹⁵ This seems markedly like the way gestures can accumulate and generate an atmosphere that transforms a location into a specific type of space. Pallasmaa also denotes a poetic nature to these types of sites, explaining that "lived reality always fuses observation, memory and fantasy, as well as the cerebral and the embodied, into fused existential experiences."¹⁶ The integration of observation, memory and imagination in space is something that is crucial to the way I think about sites and demonstrates their potential for human connection through created gestures.

As an artist, I was not only interested in the way the lenses of gesture, site, ritual, and relic augmented my understanding of my experiences, but how to continue to explore these ideas through my artistic practice. How could a contemporary art context generate similar sites for gesture and connection, both with regard to metaphysical concepts, as well as those that breached into more generic, but tangible, human connection? I started thinking about the installation as a means of engagement with our gestures toward belief,

15. Pallasmaa, 38.

16. Pallasmaa, 39.

but also with and through time, layered histories, as well as individual and collective memory. In many ways, *Hosts* is the manifestation of continuing to explore the questions, observations, and wonderment I gained from specific gestures and sites.

Wonderment, in the way I am defining it, has less to do with a sensation of the sublime, and more to do with the tension, or relationship, between what is tangible and what is immaterial. In a subliminal encounter, people are confronted with grandeur that renders them small. An occurrence of wonderment as I see it would instead engender curiosity within a sense of being lost. In the way I refer to it, wonder occurs when one is having a concrete, physical and sensory experience which is accompanied by a sense that one is also experiencing something intangible, mystical, or metaphysical. Thus, I hope to use the ideas of gesture and site to explore how this phenomenological type of wonderment works, and how it functions as a part of my art installation.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND METHODOLOGY: INTERPRETING SITES AND BRINGING THEM INTO THE ART PRACTICE

As I began to assemble sources and make art embedded in these contexts it was necessary to reexamine some of my prominent experiences in Rome regarding the notions above. Through artistic mediums, how could I consider the sensory component and relationships with objects associated with relic and ritual, and what could potentially offer sites of gestures? Additionally, how would these examples relate to methods involved in my artistic practice? In order to consider these questions through my artistic practice I considered again the three sites I visited in Rome, Italy: San Clemente, Scala Santa, and Santa Maria Antiqua. I wanted to note the gestures that I had encountered and to consider them more thoroughly, not only to use them as a means of approaching my questions, but also to integrate some of their characteristics into my own art installation, which would primarily consist of audio.

The first sound collected for this project, the trickling water, which I previously described, came from San Clemente. Architecturally, this basilica is tied to this idea of history and gestures. I remember being surprised to find that below the structure I was exploring there was even more time folded into the earth. I delicately wandered around the dimly lit lower sites. As I passed a particularly narrow crevice I remember noting and recording that trickle of water. To me it was an apt addition to the palimpsest structure that was becoming a part of the earth as it was simultaneously being rediscovered. There was a music to its running that complimented the way the stone and art were holding time.

The building's history is steeped in memory and gesture. According to the information in *Contribution to a History of the Basilica of Saint Clement in Rome*, the location had been a host for a church since the early centuries of Christianity to keep the memory of the third successor to Saint Peter.¹⁷ The modern audience wasn't aware of its vaster associations until renovations began on the present church. It was only then that they discovered the early Christian basilica, an even earlier first-century building, and a Mithraeum cult area buried underneath San Clemente.¹⁸ This physical state by itself is relevant to how I am thinking about manifestations of time in that it offers a tangible means of sensing intervals of time.

However, further context confides possible gestures from past centuries and the iterations of those gestures. The Mithraeum structure, for example, housed the cult of Mithras and displays evidence of being consumed by fire.¹⁹ In addition to the Mithraic mysteries, its legacy as a Christian church is complexly layered with deliberate gestures towards these Mithraic origins as well as to its own theology. According to history scholar Maria Fabricius Hansen, these early Christians were known for including spolia in their sites of worship.²⁰ Spolia refers to the taking from one structure and adding it to another. Hansen describes the motives for this practice regarding San Clemente as being rooted in their concepts of memory and an understanding of the significance of the space they were repurposing.²¹ Because of the Mithraic rituals conducted on the site, the early Christians would have wished to remove, or more specifically, supplant those gestures of

17. Kane, 117.

18. Kane, 118.

19. Kane, 118.

20. Hansen and Haveland, 9.

21. Hansen, 50.

worship with their own. The type of spolia they were interested in then, was regarding how to reclaim the gesture by blurring and building over the physical manifestations of the collective memory.²² The domineering act of the early Christians to claim a space for their own worship left a metaphorically complex map of gesture that I experienced as I was exploring it. For me, a completely different type of visitor to the space, a non-worshipping foreigner, I observed what was left of their marks centuries into the future, the almost combative layers of contexts distilled into an ambiguous wonder.

I felt a similar awe when I observed the devotion of the people praying on the stairs of Scala Santa. Many of the precious objects of the Catholic tradition I had encountered were devoid of a relationship to their original object-hood, yet the stairs associated with Christ's trial, taken directly from Jerusalem, were still acting as stairs. Another difference was that unlike many relics that engaged with the worshipers in less obvious ways, these holy stairs literally held the weight of the prayers offered over them. Over the centuries visitors have knelt, prayed, and slowly climbed up the steps on their hands and knees, reaching out through this sequence directly to Christ.²³ As they did, they contributed to the depressions in the stone steps, and even upon the wooden casing that was added to preserve the relic. Visitors were not setting out to make marks on the stairs. This notion was distressing enough to warrant the addition of the wooden housing. Yet, the marks on the relic, as well as the reliquary, reflect an interaction that extends outward and leaves remnants of their accumulated gestures of an inward ritual.

22. Hansen, 50.

23. Luciani.

This site in particular seems to welcome physical involvement in receiving and offering a gesture. The involvement of the body is something that the scholars Martin F. Lešák, Sabina Rosenbergová, and Veronika Tvrzníková described as necessary in order to literally and metaphorically understand the past.²⁴ They also noted that as the single or collective groups of bodies begins a dialogue with the space and its objects and images, they awaken the sacred potential of that interaction.²⁵ The way the knees of the pilgrims made direct contact, and deepened the impressions in the steps integrated their immediate, public and physical reality with their metaphysical and personal prayers. The collection of physical gestures in ongoing engagement with a site was a keenly noted detail for me as I thought of how to engage the bodies of visitors in my project, as well as their eyes and ears.

I did not get to see the unfolding gestures from individuals on the palimpsest wall in Santa Maria Antiqua like I did at the Scala Santa. Like the steps however, the effects of time were part of what engendered it with awe and emphasized the hands of those who had contributed to the combination of images. The palimpsest frescos were not originally intended to visually coincide. The curious emergence of Mary, alongside partial compositions of saints and prophets, was an accident attributed to passing time; so too was the fact that, like San Clemente, the wall was reclaimed by various artists through the years. The gestures generated by past artists met me in the twenty-first century as muddled as the original intentions mixed in with other types of wonderment. I was not

24. Lešák, Rosenbergová, and Tvrzníková, 9.

25. Lešák, Rosenbergová, and Tvrzníková, 12.

there to reach towards a specific god, or contemplate my theology, but still, the frescos offered themselves to my gaze and interpretation.

Santa Maria Antiqua is situated between the hills and ruins of the Roman Forum. This location adds significance not only to the site's ancient association with humanity, but to the diversity of gesture and thought. In a space that was occupied since the eighth century, it is unsurprising, and perhaps fortunate, that Santa Maria Antiqua has not been host to only one purpose of theological worship. Scholar Marios Costambeys marvels that it is an ideal site to observe the reuse and spolia of physical structure which manifests, liturgical, cultural, and ideological significance.²⁶ The crumbling, emerging and amalgamated faces of the palimpsest have been present at both private and public worship, surrounded by ancient languages and modern confusion, or presenting indifference to its spiritual connotations.

Particularly because of the church's location in a heavily and indiscriminately studied and visited site, the methods of modern engagement with the palimpsest have been varied and vast. Perhaps some tourists, like me, lingered to watch the curatorial lights which highlight sections of the fresco to explain and date its history. Perhaps others only glanced as they dedicated their time elsewhere in the vast Forum. The diverse levels of engagement, ranging from bored wanderers, generic awe, to the devoted study of professionals, rendered a different type of curiosity for me. The engagement was optional and completely unique to each person. Unlike the similarly iterative gestures in Scala Santa, this collection of interaction was not uniform and left no physical mark on the

26. Rubery, Bordi, and Osborne, 389.

palimpsest, but rather, generated a different type of transient atmosphere orbiting time-affected objects.

Each of these sights hosted my presence and offered up means of connection and reflection from what remained and what had long been surrendered to time. As I considered my own artistic practice and how to integrate my observations, I wanted to do something beyond expressing a general summary of the experiences or a visual depiction of these sites and such gestures. Thus, I became interested in the potential to generate a similar site with my art through the integration of mediums such as sound and viewer participation. Because of this, it was integral to include artists such as Janet Cardiff and Susan Philipsz as points of reflection in order to explore the methods and techniques that help these ideas resonate within the field of contemporary art.

Janet Cardiff is known to work with sound in nuanced ways in her art installations. She uses sound to guide viewers through space or activate their engagement within a space. In my own experience her works have been haunting and beguiling and utilize the properties of sound to successful effect. She describes the decision to work in sound being due in part to its “emotional resonance” and ability to affect the bodies of viewers.²⁷ This sounds remarkably similar to the way that relics and reliquaries were designed to be sensory experiences to help worshipers viscerally engage with their faith. Regarding the specifics of our sense of sound, artist Yolande Harris describes listening as both a modern and an ancient notion, in which our ability to hear is influenced by our own perspectives and has an effect on the physical and perhaps felt space, such as that

27. Cardiff.

explored by Gernot Böhme.²⁸ Spiritual or not, sound is relevant to ancient and modern methods of accessing felt space.

Another artist who frequently works in sound so that she can engage with a collective and personal sense of space is Susan Philipsz. Her work frequently involves a space's history and how to use sound's physicality to trigger memory and simultaneously affect a space.²⁹ Regarding the relationship between sound-art and space, art historian Cardiad Botella, observes that sound exists much like sculpture in our visually perceived space. In addition to this however, she also recognizes sound's bodily connections and ability to affect moods, emotions, and generate a sense of history.³⁰ By carefully selecting sounds that act in unison with spaces and objects, Philipsz draws out memory, both collective and individual, in the way Botella describes. This illustrates the potential that works like those crafted by Philipsz and Cardiff have to render a fluid, destabilizing and even mnemonically immersive space.

That type of space is something I also wish to pursue through my art. For *Hosts* I intended to thread the potential of sound with my observations of those specific sites and gestures of relic and ritual from Rome. By itself, sound has a mysterious quality. Despite being invisible to our eyes, its vibrations are inescapable, and it has the potential to connect viscerally and emotionally with those in proximity.³¹ Jane Grant posits that because of sound's ephemeral and non-visual formal qualities, its means of engaging our senses prompts an integration with imagination and generates other worlds that penetrate

28. Harris, 119.

29. Barnard and Philipsz.

30. Botella.

31. Cardiff.

the subconscious.³² Not only does this connect with the methods of sound art, but it hearkens back to the way that Philippe Cortez and Cynthia Hahn discuss medieval relics as mediums for connection with divinity — or a strange past. The qualities of relics, ritual, as well as sound poignantly invite associations between mind, environments, notions, and personal histories which engender them individually for gesture and site and become the primary conceptual frameworks for building my installation.

32. Grant et al., 35.

THE WORK: RESULTS, DISCOVERIES, AND SYNTHESIS

What I have attempted to do with *Hosts* is contribute to the conversation in which artists such as Janet Cardiff and Susan Philipsz work and to create a space that has a potential for the type of wonder I experienced in Rome. By learning from the successful elements employed by artists such as Cardiff and Philipsz, and by making use of the qualities I observed within relics and rituals, my work is able to explore how gesture and sight can enable an atmosphere of wonder.

As previously discussed, the work of Cardiff and Philipsz make use of sound as a medium to guide viewers through a specific space, whether it be through physical or pneumatic triggers. These artists frequently work to conjure an emotional response in relationship to and from within the space. However, I am more interested in the capability of sound itself that they demonstrated, which is to trigger, conjure, affect, as well as invoke and evoke. *Hosts* does not necessarily address space in the same way. Rather than attempting to use sound and memory to enrich a particular space and address its specificity or history, *Hosts* is more engaged in linking visitors to other spaces and times. Through the use of sounds derived from various contextual circumstances, I am acknowledging the distance that exists within my gestures, such as that between a source and the sound, which might offer visitors a chance to examine their own interaction with those gestures. Additionally, I am concerned with the concept of wonder, and how it can be aroused, deliberately through sensory means, and be a host for connection between visitors, the artwork, and the ideas within the art.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors are met with an old wooden pump organ sitting in the center of the space, surrounded by other sparsely spaced objects as seen in figure 1. Cables emerge from the body of the organ extending up to the ceiling and then cascading around the room to carry the sound to each object. Each object-oriented scene is different. Like reliquaries, they host the speakers, and therefore the physicality of sound in unique



Figure 1. View of organ in *Hosts* installation

ways. Interaction is crucial to the work. The space sits dormant, unless visitors engage physically with the organ keys that generate the sound. By approaching the instrument and pressing the chipped veneers with their hands, visitors are not meant to be met with any organ notes. Instead, they instigate various sounds' movement through the surrounding objects and into space. It is important to note that without viewer

participation, the space would remain silent. It is equally significant that each time someone interacts with the piece, it renders slightly different results. Each key triggers sound, but the sounds selected and the sources they emerge from are randomized. Therefore, the same gesture, even iterated, results in varying sounds emanating from varying objects. This facilitates a need for constant observation as well as a dissonance that might lead to a developing wonderment as visitors continue to interact with the work.

Although the organ is central, the viewers can choose not to play it, and instead wander the space silently. This possibility of silence and non-interaction adds poignancy to the completing gesture of those visitors who do spark sound. The sound's dependency on interaction garners a sense of not only how things reach out to us as viewers, but how we reach back to those things and note the reciprocal interval of possibility.³³ In silence, the space is a gallery. It has various sculptures physically installed about the room. The visual images and allusions might stir up something for viewers, but it is not until the sound emerges from these visual forms that the space becomes a potential for site and gesture. Because the sounds are triggered by a willing finger, and filter through the subsequent wires and visual forms, the work then forges a relationship between the visitor and the space, as well as between the visitor who is stimulating the space with sound and the others within the space.

The work not only hosts interactions such as those between visitors and the physical attributes of audio manifest in the gallery, but also, through the sounds themselves which can gesture towards things outside of the physical space and occupants. The sounds of *Hosts* are intentionally curated. Some of the sounds, like the running water

³³ Grant, 55.

of San Clemente, come from the literal sites that were sources of inspiration. When a visitor uses the organ, recordings of a Gregorian choir performing in a cathedral, walking through a nave, and touching Roman stone might respond to the call of the visitor's fingers. By having recordings that were made in these places play back, a connection is drawn between those places and the gallery. Beyond the site-specific recorded, reverberant echoes of those locations in Rome, the sounds collected are assembled to evoke those types of gesture and connection. Thus, the sound palette could be described as containing sounds that are familiar to humanity. However, they are specific sounds that are heard without a specific narrative. They are ambiguous enough for a listener to find themselves lost, but with curiosity. Additionally, due to the randomization of the type of sound, the potential for sounds to be layered on top of one another, and the fact that they can be housed in any of the various sculptural forms, the sounds become almost like ghosts. They breathe a haunting breath into the space.

It is not just the bodily participation and sonic consequences that are inspired by the sites in Rome, but the sculptural objects also draw from those aesthetics. Fabric draped over mounted wood folds into forms akin to human shrouds or classical painting and sculpture. It exhales the sounds and beckons towards visitors. Melted wax recalls the use of candles; a photograph with clear religious iconography hangs opposite the pump organ which alludes to the sensory trademarks of these locations that so captured my curiosity. Yes, the physical sources housing the speakers are intended, in varying degrees of subtlety, to reference the relics of Catholic traditions.

Though they are meant to allude to specific sites that are potent with metaphysical gestures, these objects are not rendered as exact copies so that they may also remain, like

the collection of sounds, ambiguous to some extent. Therefore, the objects were necessarily crafted with minimal formal qualities. For example, one of these objects includes a tiny brown, bone-like fragment collecting light in the center of a glass bowl full of water. It could be aligned with the reliquaries housing some small fragment of theological magnitude. Like the relic, it is small in scale amid a large and resonant space. But unlike the relic it is bare and unhidden. Though it has a sense of significance, this is not due to its richly adorned preservation or proudly expressed history as legend, rather it is a curiosity because of its sense of importance unattached to any verifiable referent. As art objects, rather than historically illustrative objects, they are capable of an ambiguity in form that is open to multiple interpretations. Even the historical spaces in Rome that struck me were able to do so in part because of the way they were able to allow for the gestures to become open opportunities for connection.

Not only does *Hosts* resist an anti-wonderment dogmatic interpretation by embracing a quality of abstraction, but these objects also become points of convergence. The photograph of the Santa Maria Antiqua Palimpsest for example, is a clear reproduction which has been scanned leaving half-tones visible beneath the semi-transparent film of paper (fig. 2). In this way, it is connected not only to the Roman Forum in terms of content, but also as a photo print, it connects the object to the current time and context. Additionally, the speaker mounted behind can make the skin of the print ripple and shake. Thus, the object engages with physical interactions as well as conceptual ones. Because of these layered interactions and connotations, the objects

enrich the general atmosphere by offering unique points of encounter with the greater whole of the work.



Figure 2. Object containing an image of the Santa Maria Antiqua Palimpsest

To emphasize the monolithic nature of the installation as well as to speak to the integral nature of connections, the speakers and wires are meant to be visible, as nearly every aspect of the speaker system can be seen in the installation (fig. 3). These blunt modes of transference demystify the way that the objects receive their sound. The pathway from the initial gesture of pressing the key to the sound returning to the ears can be visually traced through the cords and sculptural objects. The cord can thus be associated with the way that historical sites can be experienced as objects being carried

through time to offer a gesture. In this case the gesture lives inside a mark that can be iterative and interactive for present visitors even without a specific communication.



Figure 3. View of two objects and their cables in *Hosts*.

The unification and acknowledgement of different types of space as it relates to gesture is something that is consistently explored in *Hosts*. The object closest to the entrance, for example, is a crafted palimpsest made up of transparent tracings of human palms that hold a speaker at their center which has the potential to pulse with sound. For me, it almost literally recalls Rebecca Schneider's essay about reaching towards the ancient cave handprints. Rather than reaching from antiquity, however, the work reaches

out from a closer point in time, while referring to those gestures more broadly, as it is an accumulated gesture of hands being offered for my careful tracing. It then reaches out, both sonically and visually towards viewers. Another object, across from the hands, is a mirror leaning against the wall with a speaker facing it (fig. 4). As sound vibrates through the speaker, it is then reflected back, much like images, to those in the space. Throughout the room sound might bounce off water and glass, shake paper, or flicker fabric veiled



Figure 4. Object where sound is reflected off a mirror

over it. Sound is a medium that exists in regard to time, not only as memoria, but as something that exists in flowing time. These objects then with both physical, visual, and sonic potential, not only live in time, but hold it.³⁴ Much like the way the relics, rituals, sounds, and remnants did in Rome.

34. Smith.

CONCLUSION: IN SEARCH OF WONDERMENT

As I was listening to the chirping of water weaving through ancient stone, peering at painted faces emerging from ruin, and observing the whispered prayers and knees pressing against relic steps, I was being held in swells of time. I do not think it was a recognition of my own theological beliefs that moved me. Rather, those sights granted an awareness of the span of time between me and those who had left these remnants. Through this essay, I have explored the accumulated gestures that make up sites such as Santa Maria Antiqua, Scala Santa, and San Clemente. I have attempted to articulate what it is about them that offers up profound moments of simultaneous reflection and connection and how it is related to my audio installation *Hosts*.

Instead of trying to trace what was being transmitted as a means of theological validation, I was drawn to these sites ultimately for their hosting of accumulated gestures. Or, in other words, I was drawn to the way that time is apparent through the marks left by the past that reached me in the present and would linger into the future. Noting the distance in this way brought on awe. It left me curious about what time carries, and what it lets go. The emphasis then, was not the fact that these sites were important for any historical event, but that they managed to facilitate a place of uncommon connection and engendered an atmosphere of encompassing wonderment.

Hosts, then, is not intended to be a replica of a holy site. Instead, I hope that the art engenders a sense of wonder akin to the way these sites and relics were able to do for me and many others. Wonderment is experienced within these sites as an awareness of our ability to sense things as past and simultaneously as part of the current. It can emerge

from a connection between different spaces as well as times, by the awareness of two different spaces being host to something of the same. It is where the tangible and concrete meet the metaphysical, or the mystical. With wonder, navigating the human experience can include broadened potential for exploration, contemplation, and experiences.³⁵ I hope that the artistic engagement offered by *Hosts* is one in which viewers are not trapped by trying to understand. Instead, I hope that they can embrace the uncertainty and let the various sounds stirred by their hand move through the sculptures and back into their bodies with an unburdened curiosity. I hope the work can become a host for connection, if not through a literal ancient human gesture, then through a wonderment that swells and ripples over time.

³⁵ Sutcliffe and Pilkington, 67.

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