

Gowans, Scott, "Silent Echo Chamber at the Wexner Center", Art Zine, October 15, 2009.



Silent Echo Chamber at the Wexner Center

by Scott Gowans, October 15, 2009

The Silent Echo Chamber is now on exhibit at the Wexner Center for the Arts, and it is deceptively simple.

Here's how the press release reads:

The Silent Echo Chamber (2008) is culled from the "Found Objects" Shearer has collected and aired on his web site (harryshearer.com). These video clips show well-known politicians and media personalities captured in the quiet moments before they "go live" in television appearances. You'll see glassy-eyed stares, fidgety jitters, and other unexpected private expressions, never intended for prime time. The Wexner Center's presentation, in the lower lobby, involves eight video monitors each showing unexpected and revealing clips from the 2008 presidential campaign.

Easy enough, right? Shearer, a comedian whose wit couldn't be drier, is poking fun at the folks who wear too much make-up and have cameras pointed at them. Not so fast. This is not just satellite feeds from cable TV; it's celebrities caught in-between. They will be stars in a moment, when the red light pops on, but for now they are getting into character. Which doesn't mean that it's great art, of course. But the Wexner always seems to be posing that \$64,000 question of what is worth being put on display and what isn't.

As the New York Times asked:

Is that enough to qualify the installation as art, especially with Shearer more established as a comic than an artist?

Shearer shrugged off the question. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "Aren't we 40 years too late for that – didn't Andy Warhol destroy that question? It's art because of the fact that it's happening in an art context."

I spent twenty some years behind the camera as a video guy, grip, videographer, sound recorder, cameraman, etc. I recorded hours of footage such as the stuff that Shearer accumulated, and it never struck me as particularly interesting. But I never looked at it any deeper, either. It was simply the footage that you needed to wade through to find the good takes. Mostly what I was paying attention to during that time was my job:

producers and directors are their talkiest just before you go live, delivering dozens of instructions (occasionally contradictory in nature) per second. What was appearing in my viewfinder (and even less so: what was being said or not said in the studio) was secondary. It takes an uncommon artist who finds poetry in the recorded silences to make me to take another look.

From NPR's site, a transcript of Shearer talking to Neal Conan.

Q: To see their off-camera face. Do you really think that gives you a good view into their personality, or is it more something we all do, and we all have our on-camera face or our off-camera face?

Mr. SHEARER: Yeah, no. I mean, obviously, we're all different in public than we are behind closed doors. That's no revelation. But to see who they are when they don't have the public face on is something revealing about who, you know, about character.

If you see, to take that example I gave earlier, Richard Nixon sitting there waiting to resign the presidency of the United States, it's very revealing what he does. It's very him. It's – nobody else I would bet – I would wager would be doing what he's doing at those – in those crucial 10 minutes. So, it does give you a sense of who he really was.

And it's not about the stuff that, you know, ooh, he picked his nose, or ooh he blinks, and when his eyes are closed, he looks goofy. It's the stuff that's really unique to the individual in the moments before they put a – the public faces, you know, when you're trying – my theory is nobody – none of us work as hard as we do trying to be normal. So, you know, we are all trying to look like – well, I'm normal now, you know, I'm in public. But it's the other thing that's unique and sort of interesting and revealing, I think.