

Legro, Tom, "Shearer's 'Silent Echo Chamber' Embraces TV's Awkward Silences", ART BEAT, April 7, 2010.

Shearer's 'Silent Echo Chamber' Embraces TV's Awkward Silences

BY TOM LEGRO *April 7, 2010*



Squirring in a director's chair on the NBC news set at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Tom Brokaw tries to get comfortable, crossing one leg over another and tugging on his suit jacket. Brian Williams sits next to him, unaware or indifferent to Brokaw's fidgeting — he's too busy on his Blackberry. But it's hard to tell whether Williams is genuinely engaged in the device or whether he's using it as an "out" — a way to avoid what seems to us an awkward silence.

This lasts for what seems like an eternity, painful to watch.

That awkwardness is the essence of "The Silent Echo Chamber," a multi-screen video installation on display at the [New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center](#) and part of an ongoing project called "Nontalking Heads" by [Harry Shearer](#). His work captures popular news anchors, media personalities and politicians in the moments after the "lights," after the "camera," and before the "action."

Shearer, a jack of all artistic trades, is best known for his [time on 'Saturday Night Live,'](#) his role as [Derek Smalls in 'This Is Spinal Tap'](#) and Mark Shubb in ['A Mighty Wind.'](#), as well as the voice(s) of [Mr. Burns, Ned Flanders and others](#) on "The Simpsons."

“The Silent Echo Chamber” is a “return to what television is supposed to be,” says Shearer. He believes television, with its focus too often on sitting and talking, lacks the visual vitality it once had. For him, this project is “an opportunity to get back to the idea of just watching.”



Dan Cameron, the CAC’s Director of Visual Arts, was skeptical about the exhibit’s concept of making art from awkward silence. “Well I guess everybody’s an artist,” he thought when a friend described “The Silent Echo Chamber” to him. (At the time, the installation was showing at the [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#) in Connecticut.)

But Shearer’s creation of a visual environment without any sound began to intrigue him. “As a curator, you see a lot of different variations on things,” Cameron said, “and sometimes somebody can give you something very, very simple...and sometimes those are the best ideas.”

Shearer’s installation uses several DVDs, each with a different set of unedited clips. Cameron made what he describes as a “tour” of rooms where each has a different theme.

In one space, a TV set showing John McCain is adjacent to a set with “Dose Dems” — Barack Obama, Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton. The televised McCain sits still while a clip of Obama skimming the newspaper cuts to Biden snacking ferociously, and then to Clinton smiling as she tries to quell an urge to laugh. In another room, Chris Matthews’ nail-biting habit fills an entire wall, as Anderson Cooper fidgets across the room.

“This idea of who the characters are meant to represent I thought was very compelling,” says Cameron. “A lot of people have been talking recently about how so much of American political life...gets transformed into a kind of duke-‘em-out, sort-of spectator sport. If people come in seeing certain people pitted against each other the way they see them on TV — except that no one’s talking, just waiting — then it would be a very peculiar experience.”



Unlike in Shearer’s comedy work, audiences shouldn’t be waiting for a punch line. “This is really the opposite of what I do in my comedy life,” Shearer says. “In comedy, you have to be really specific and get exactly the point across that you’re trying to get across. And in this, I’m trying to give people as little surrounding content as possible, as little interpretation as possible.”

Shearer’s insistence that “everybody ... make up their own story” about the exhibit applies to curators as well. Cameron says “The Silent Echo Chamber” adds another layer to New Orleans’ complicated relationship with the news media; he is critical of what he says is a cliché of New Orleans — a “wounded,” “dangerous” place.

“After Katrina, a lot of people looked to the media to set the record straight about this very special city,” Cameron says, “and they’re still waiting to hear the country talk about New Orleans in a constructive and positive way.”

“People really have a much more skeptical relationship to the media than they might have had prior to 2005,” says Cameron. “And so in a way I think this

exhibition is...seeing what happens when you start to look at [news] ...as kind of an entertainment. The authority behind these figures kind of dissipates then.”