

What Passes Unspoken: methods to cross linguistic divides

By Kathleen Foran-Spragge

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Abstract

This exhibition thesis explores how artists Evgenia Mikhaylova, Ivetta Sunyoung Kang, and Jasmine Liaw use sound and movement to foster embodied connections across linguistic divides. Working from diasporic positionalities, the artists devise strategies to communicate between languages, using the body to convey feelings and experiences that exceed the spoken and written word. Their artworks are discussed in dialogue with other artists and theorists in order to demonstrate how linguistic restrictions can be probed, challenged, and expanded through creative interventions employing sound and movement. These methods are designed with the intention of deconstructing the social hierarchies defined and enacted through language. Instead, they aim to support more equitable relations which are capable of honouring linguistic differences. Mikaylova, Kang, and Liaw reorganize how information is shared to create more intimate methods of communication. These efforts are carried through the curatorial thesis, which writes alongside the works by highlighting their sensory effects. *What Passes Unspoken* attends to the somatic and sonic aspects of interpersonal encounters.

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Preface

Throughout my first year in OCADu's Criticism and Curatorial Practice program, I was repeatedly reassured that my thesis research topic would change; that I am not beholden to my proposal, and that I should hope to encounter new art and theory which could inspire me to pursue different research than I had initially imagined. I am incredibly grateful to report that this was in fact the case for me. I thank the artists Evgenia Mikhaylova, Ivetta Sunyoung Kang, and Jasmine Liaw for guiding me to engage with new materials and methodologies throughout this project.

I came to OCADu to further explore how art physically affects its audience through its capability to address both the mind and body. I was inspired by the possible integration of these two entities which are often treated as separate. At the time, I felt an acute disconnect between my own mind and body, this condition presented physical symptoms I did not know how to address. I noticed that people around me were experiencing similar struggles, and I was relieved to see these topics addressed through art and arts programming.

In my first semester, I came across the work of Montreal-based artist Erin Gee. Gee's video, *We as Waves* (2020), introduced me to composer and scholar Tara Rodgers' text "Towards a Feminist Epistemology of Sound." I was struck by the way Gee and Rodgers discussed sound and subsequently began to explore the material further. I was particularly intrigued by the cognitive and physical impact of sound: how it can alter one's emotional and somatic state, and how these experiences can be shared with others. The movement of sound

particles puts nearby bodies and objects in contact with one another thereby activating relational networks.¹

It was this interest in sharing sounds with others that led me to Evgenia Mikhaylova's MFA thesis exhibition *Extended Play, Pleasure, and Poetics* (2024) at Galerie Nicolas Robert in Toronto. In speaking with Mikhaylova, I learned she was using sound to connect across language barriers. As an English speaker born and raised in English-speaking countries, my own monolingualism had blinded me to the relationship between sound and language. Mikhaylova brought my attention to this intersection. These revelations influenced my approach to Ivetta Sunyoung Kang's work, *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue* (2024), which I saw presented as part of *Soul Jubilee* (2024), an exhibition curated by Philip Ocampo at Xspace Cultural Centre in Toronto. Speaking with Kang felt like continuing my conversation with Mikhaylova, as both were using sound as means to address struggles with language.

As I spent time with Mikhaylova and Kang's artworks and began reading related theory, I was reminded of a video I had seen screened by Pleasure Dome in 2023. This work was *xīn nī* 心妮 (2023) by Jasmine Liaw, who appeared to be thinking through similar concepts around migration, language, and connection. As my thesis exhibition came together, I regularly reflected on my relationship to this conversation. I do not share experiences like those of Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw. My family are Irish and Scottish settlers who arrived in Canada before the 20th century. I came to this scholarship to trouble the settler-colonial logic I have inherited and to engage in patterns of relation capable of honouring differences. In her introduction to *Unsettling Canadian Art History* (2022), Erin Morton states that "it is the primary responsibility of white

¹ Brandon LaBelle, "Unlikely Publics: On the Edge of Appearance," in *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*, (Goldsmiths Press, 2018), 7.

people to undo the violence of white supremacy, in settler colonial states and beyond them.”² I am inspired by Morton’s statement, which I endeavour to centre in my practice. Regarding this MFA thesis exhibition, I aimed to displace the settler-colonial drive towards monolingualism and bolster methods for addressing linguistic multiplicities. Engaging with *Extended Play, Pleasure, and Poetics, When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue*, and *xīn nī 廖芯妮* has shown me how I can attune my sounds and movements to amplify the sounds and movements of others, together and in tandem.

Introduction

My thesis exhibition, *What Passes Unspoken*, presents works by three diasporic artists who devise strategies to connect across linguistic divides through sound and movement. This phrase, “what passes unspoken,” is an excerpt from researcher and writer Sara Ahmed’s *Stranger Encounters* (2000), which highlights how people exchange more than just words in their meetings with one another.³ Ahmed points out that, in addition to the voice, information is shared and concealed by the noises and gestures of the body, complicating communication by layering the input/output of content.⁴ Ultimately, she emphasizes that communication is not transparent.⁵ For this exhibition, “what passes unspoken” refers to the devices activated by artists Evgenia Mikhaylova, Ivetta Sunyoung Kang, and Jasmine Liaw to engage experiences and feelings which extend beyond language. Their artworks feature audible, visual, and physical

² Erin Morton, “Introduction,” in *Unsettling Canadian Art History*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 30.

³ Sara Ahmed, “Embodying Strangers,” in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 38.

⁴ Sara Ahmed, “Ethical Encounters,” in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 155-156.

⁵ Ibid.

signals to convey ambiguous sensations. *What Passes Unspoken* seeks to highlight how somatic and sonic expressions impact relationships. Visitors to the exhibition are invited to receive and feel these multifaceted signals and explore ways of processing events that defy any adherence to a singular meaning.

Thematic

The artists featured in the exhibition draw upon their own diasporic experiences to design creative interventions that seek to strengthen connections across linguistic divides. Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw use sound and movement as a means to bridge gaps between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ including the fractures that exist within the self, such as the longing for another time, place, or language. Here, motion activates liminal space in order to soften ‘fixed’ categorizations and support more intimate relations.

Both Mikhaylova (b. Russia) and Kang (b. South Korea) are first-generation immigrants to Canada, and describe similar experiences of feeling unable to speak because they could not find the “right” English words; the pressure to be perfect resulting in paralysis. Kang refers to this phenomenon as an “aphasic (or) traumatized tongue,”⁶ while Mikhaylova identifies it as a “broken tongue.”⁷ This difficulty to speak has led them to explore how sound and movement can help them communicate with others. Liaw (b. Canada) embarks on an analogous exploration, using these modes of expression to connect to her paternal lineage. As a second-generation immigrant, Liaw confesses that she feels removed from her Hakka-Chinese heritage and addresses this through retracing her father’s 1970 migration to Vancouver in her video *xīn nī* 心泥

⁶ Ivetta Sunyoung Kang (artist) in discussion with the author, Summer 2024.

⁷ Evgenia Mikhaylova (artist) in discussion with author, Fall 2024.

芯妮 (2023).⁸ For these three artists, sound and movement serve as conduits for connection when language is inaccessible and/or restrictive.

Migration stories are reflected in the dynamic devices employed to create this collection of artworks which form my exhibit. Mikhaylova's multilingual immigration experiences inspired her to explore how communication relies on non-verbal forms of expression. She uses hand gestures, her body, and organic materials to illicit sonic compositions presented as music scores. Whereas Kang converted language into musical notation, transcribing the sound waves of her "imperfect" English in order to celebrate her multilingualism and challenge monolingual perfectionism. Her music boxes require participants to activate the mechanical devices and move alongside them. While Liaw turns to language as an entry point to connect with her paternal heritage, learning more about her Chinese name *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 and its Hakka translation. She processes this knowledge through dance, dialogue, animation, and sound, demonstrating how the threads of her identity cross time and space. These gestures and sounds blend borders and embrace dislocation as a generative site for new possibilities. This approach echoes the work of Vancouver-based artist Jin-me Yoon (b. South Korea) who "uses diaspora and migration as a lens—not as subject matter—to understand who we are in relation to others, in relation to place, and in relation to a planet in crisis."⁹ Thinking through these points of contact from the perspective of migration highlights the interdependencies between subjects that might otherwise have been considered separately. Moving across this network with others writes over an 'us' and 'them' binary to instead practice multiple ways of being together.

⁸ Jasmine Liaw, *xīn nī* 廖芯妮, 2023, digital video.

⁹ Ming Tiampo, "Who Am I here? Activating Diaspora as Method," in *Jin-Me Yoon: About Time*, edited by Diana Freundl and Zoë Chan (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2022), 153.

Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw use movement as an artistic method to attend to social relations, demonstrating how they fluctuate and how they can be altered. Instead of viewing linguistic differences as a barrier, the artists move alongside divergences as a strategy to foster intersubjective connections. Their work responds to the fractures in Canadian culture created by a racialized social hierarchy. In the *House of Difference* (1998), author Eva Mackey identifies that Canada's 'tolerance' for people from 'other' countries does not eradicate inequality but instead continues to "reinforce exclusions and hierarchies of difference."¹⁰ Despite the country's mandate to accommodate multiple cultures, racism persists in official policies and interpersonal relations. Often, these prejudices are obscured by the myth of multiculturalism and inclusion. The concealment of discrimination makes it difficult to address. Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw's movements trace the fine line(s) between inclusion and exclusion with the intention of deconstructing such hierarchies of difference. Their sounds and gestures are choreographed to celebrate diversity with particular attention to how differences shift and transform. Ahmed observes that "'cultural differences' are assumed to be static and fixed," thereby asserting that they are dynamic is to appreciate how they interact.¹¹ The artists activate supposedly 'fixed' conditions through audible and physical signals to extend relations across linguistic divides.

Mikhaylova's approach to this topic also directs particular attention to the ways in which social hierarchies oppress the natural environment by dividing humans from non-humans, resulting in humanity being portrayed as superior. Mikhaylova relates her challenges translating between Russian and English to the linguistic divide between humans and the more-than-human:

¹⁰ Eva Mackay, "Introduction," in *House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 16.

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, "Multiculturalism and the Proximity of Strangers," in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 104.

non-human matter and materials that possess agencies often neglected by Western knowledge systems.¹² In Western philosophy, this language barrier works to silence the more-than-human and justify acts of colonial violence, such as resource extraction, deforestation, and industrialized farming. Colonization silences not only the land but its Indigenous protectors, who are treated as less than human by white supremacists' intent on building a nation with colonial values, religions, and languages.¹³ These imperial undertakings are also fueled by the physical labour of people trafficked through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and migrants.¹⁴ The social hierarchy is structured to oppress Black, Indigenous, racialized immigrants and the natural environment to financially benefit the white dominant class.¹⁵ Mikhaylova amplifies the sounds of the more-than-human to challenge this hierarchy and forge horizontal relationships between humans and non-humans. *EPPP* contests portrayals of the land as uninhabited by attuning to its natural elements. Kang and Liaw also demonstrate sensitivity to the more-than-human in their work: Kang highlights the animacy of the music box and Liaw emphasizes connections between people, places, and memorabilia. In *xīn nī* 廖芯妮, Liaw alters forms of state documentation, animating a map of Vancouver and her passport through video editing in order to centre personal narratives in her relation to nation. Together, all the artworks featured in *What Passes Unspoken* address how language biases marginalize immigrants and isolate the non-human.

In the interest of fostering more equitable relationships, the artists attend to disconnections by reorganizing how information is shared. They examine how the body receives and expresses information, devising strategies to strengthen intersubjective relations. In his book

¹² Jane Bennett, "The Agency of Assemblages," in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

¹³ Erin Morton, "Introduction," in *Unsettling Canadian Art History*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Hungry Listening (2020), xwélmexw artist, writer, and curator Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō/Skwah) describes how people's listening habits filter what they can hear.¹⁶ These tendencies form according to one's subjective position, their experiences, and socialization, all of which teach them what to listen for and what to ignore. Robinson explains that these listening behaviours should be evaluated to identify biases and to learn how to engage with unfamiliar sounds.¹⁷ He emphasizes the importance of performing anti-colonial listening practices to "become better attuned to the particular filters of race, class, gender and ability" in the interaction between sound and listener.¹⁸ I see points of intersection between Robinson's anti-colonial work and the anti-racist efforts enacted by Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw, as all seek to upend settler-colonial domination to prioritize more equitable relations by amending normative listening practices. Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw come to this work as immigrant settlers, they participate in and benefit from the colonial system in Canada; their work is different than Robinson's, who is focused on attending to the frictions between Indigenous and settler-colonial musical, cultural, and political epistemologies.¹⁹ That being said, Robinson's analysis of the exclusions that occur in the guise of Canadian 'multiculturalism' and the restrictions of Western settler-colonial knowledge systems sheds light on a structure that Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw also critique from their respective positionalities. I have brought their voices together in this project with the intention to unpack the violent actions and ideologies implemented by the settler-colonial Canadian state and to bolster strategies that work against oppression. Robinson's text offers insightful context to understand how the artworks in this exhibition encourage new subject

¹⁶ Dylan Robinson, "Introduction," in *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 10-11.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

relations by reimagining how communication methods can account for uneven power imbalances. The artists explore how the entire body can be used to listen and process information, particularly the content and feelings that do not flow easily between beings.

The three works featured in *What Passes Unspoken* alter listening practices to increase the body's reception to the audible and physical signals of others. These strategies of attuning to others are crafted with the aim to go beyond a 'tolerance' of the unknown in order to conceive of ways to honour difference. Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw design tactics to move within linguistic disparities as a means of nurturing horizontal social relations and more adaptive networks.

Literature Review

This MFA thesis exhibition is informed by writing from the intersections of sound studies and intercultural communication. Many of these texts critically examine the effects of settler-colonial domination and propose methods to reorient how knowledge is shared. The featured scholars write from different settings, addressing distinct circumstances, but all participate in a drive to dismantle the operations of oppressive regimes and devise more equitable social structures. They have been instrumental in contextualizing how the artworks in *What Passes Unspoken* use sound and movement to transverse linguistic divides. Placing these artists and scholars in conversation is done with the intention to contend with the restrictive components of language and imagine how they may be altered and expanded.

Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw use movement as a methodology to nurture more intimate social relations and, in turn, displace systems based on subjugation. Contact between people, especially people from different cultures, and between humans and the more-than-human, too often results in hierarchical relations where one party seeks to dominate the other. In such encounters, the absence of a common language can be a site of contention which fuels

misunderstanding and mistreatment. Cultural critic Rey Chow explains how language is employed in colonial projects as a mechanism to exert control whereby the colonizer deals with the linguistic divide by enforcing their language as the only acceptable option.²⁰ As a result, the colonized subject is severed from their mother tongue and forced to learn a new language along with new social codes. Chow underscores how the alienation one experiences when displaced between languages prevents one from identifying completely with either.²¹ The artists in this exhibition employ a migratory lens to attend to this alienation by reclaiming the space between languages as an opportunity to imagine transformative modes of expression. Their sounds and movements exceed linguistic comprehension, instead conveying experiences that are left ‘unhomed’ by language, in the hope that these forms of communication will strengthen connections with others.

When linguistic translation occurs within a system organized hierarchically, it is often employed as a tactic to make the ‘unknown’ knowable—to familiarize the ‘other’—but to do so it has suppressed cultural differences deemed incomprehensible.²² Beliefs and behaviours that exceed the fictitious boundaries marking ‘common grounds’ have been detached from their linguistic signifiers in the interest of uncomplicating intercultural communication. Decolonial theorist Rolando Vasquez names this process ‘translation as erasure’ for it relies on the eradication of undesirable difference in order to make otherness palatable and establish a basis for understanding.²³ Vasquez also identifies an alternative approach that he calls ‘translation as

²⁰ Rey Chow, “Derrida’s Legacy of the Monolingual,” in *Not Like a Native Speaker: on Language as a Postcolonial Experience*, (New York: Columbia Press, 2014), 23.

²¹ Ibid, 39.

²² Sara Ahmed, “Knowing Strangers,” in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 58.

²³ Rolando Vazquez, “Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity’s Epistemic Violence,” *Journal of historical sociology* 24, no. 1 (2011): 27.

plurality,' which seeks to create space for diversity and devise communication methods that can persist without simplifying dissimilarities.²⁴ What might 'translation as plurality' sound and feel like? Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw design distinct strategies to honour differences through movement. Rather than disregarding tensions and inconsistencies, they move with them in physical and sonic capacities in an effort to accentuate their particularities. By doing so, they orchestrate opportunities to learn how to be present with differences: to process them instead of resist them. The artists linger between languages to facilitate inviting, open-ended connections in contrast to limited, hostile exchanges.

An important part of these theoretical and artistic engagements with difference is that they respect dissimilarities without dissecting them. To hold space for multiplicity means appreciating that not all experiences will translate, but they can still be shared in their abstract forms. In the *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Édouard Glissant states that "opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components."²⁵ Rather than analyzing the 'other' and requiring them to be 'knowable' (as an attempt to control them), recognizing their opacity is to meet the 'other' as an equal by affording them the same level of complexity that one attributes to the 'self'. To accept the 'unknowable' aspects of the 'other' is to acknowledge their agency and accommodate their conditions for collaboration. This may require people to learn how to embrace uncertainty if they are accustomed to transparent relations; however, facing opacity does not prevent connection, it only alters its terms. Glissant suggests that his readers approach the opaque by directing their attention to the "texture of the weave."²⁶ Dylan Robinson makes a similar

²⁴ Ibid, 27.

²⁵ Édouard Glissant, "Poetics," in *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

²⁶ Ibid.

statement, encouraging people to consider “the affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound” instead of automatically analyzing its content.²⁷ This method of sensory-based engagement permits people to connect with other beings and materials without requiring their relationship to be transparent. It is for this reason that Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw prioritize embodied forms of communication in their artistic practices, allowing them to process their subject matter as plural without restricting it to a singular interpretation. Through sound and movement, they are able to feel how they relate to others.

The artists use sonic materials and the body to highlight the relational networks stretching between subjects. Their artworks activate dormant connections to strengthen these circuits and extend their reach. Sound theorist Brandon LaBelle observes how sound vibrations pass over and through nearby bodies and materials putting them in contact with one another.²⁸ He proposes that this energetic field can be orchestrated to reach marginalized beings and sonically support their output — sounding out to encourage the sound of another.²⁹ LaBelle's prescription is coupled with attentive listening practices geared towards receiving sounds that may be unfamiliar.³⁰ In *Listening to Noise and Silence* (2010), Salomé Voegelin reframes listening as an exercise based on focusing instead of reducing.³¹ She describes an open-ended approach that encourages listeners to be present with sounds — without impulsively categorizing them through language.³² This method allows communication to occur “not as translation but as a transfer between

²⁷ Dylan Robinson, “Writing Indigenous Space,” in *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.

²⁸ Brandon LaBelle, “Unlikely Publics: On the Edge of Appearance,” in *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*, (Goldsmiths Press, 2018), 7.

²⁹ Ibid, “The Overheard,” 87.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Salomé Voegelin, “Listening,” in *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010), 35.

³² Ibid.

sensibles,” prioritizing the feel of information over its structural ordering.³³ Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw employ variations of this strategy using sound and the body to attune to other beings and encourage their sounds. *Extended Play, Pleasure, and Poetics* engages predominantly with more-than-human beings, while *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue* is concerned foremost with supporting the expressions of non-native speakers, and *xīn nī 廖芯妮* ventures inward to amplify family stories of migration. Each of the artworks demonstrates how relationships between subjects can become more intimate by shifting attention to the way information is shared and altering these arrangements to be considerate of both plurality and opacity.

Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw instigate encounters that are intentionally open-ended, leaving room for the possibilities that arise from embracing uncertainty. Facing this ambiguity can be particularly challenging for those conditioned to value clarity. The texts read alongside these artworks contextualize the necessity of the unknowable and offer strategies for engagement. The authors emphasize how uncertainty can be a useful mechanism to reorient from a hierarchical system and foster more equitable relations. These observations and insights can be read in the artworks included in *What Passes Unspoken*, revealing a similar desire to strengthen connections, extending them to encompass a larger network. Both the texts and artworks mobilized a reorganization of social relations which attend to the spaces between subjects.

Methodology

For this thesis, I used practice-based research to explore artistic methods that traverse linguistic divides. The gallery provided a space for public engagement, allowing visitors to experience the

³³ Ibid, “Noise,” 71.

sensory effects of these methods first-hand. Kang's music boxes require participants to physically activate the artworks, turning the lever to produce the music. When installed in the gallery, the music boxes could be played simultaneously, thus conversing with one another and the other artworks in the space. Mikhaylova's scores emphasize the sonic capacity and animacy of objects, prompting an attuned approach to Kang's music boxes, which sang riddles of "forgettable borders" across the room to Liaw's video *xīn nī* 廖芯妮, as it traced her family's migration from Brunei to Vancouver. I exhibited these artworks together to extend their reach and facilitate communal gatherings where connections could be felt and nurtured. In the gallery, visitors were encouraged to reflect on their communication habits and explore how they would like to interact with others and their surroundings.

The scope of the exhibition emerged through gallery visits with the artworks and studio visits with the artists. After encountering the artworks separately in local exhibitions, individual meetings with the artists revealed commonalities that developed into the exhibition topic. I met with the artists one-on-one throughout the course of the project, and learned how their personal and familial immigration experiences inform their artworks.³⁴ These conversations have been interwoven into the curatorial text and supporting paper, as it is important to me for the artists' voices to be represented in the written components of this project. I noticed through these discussions that each artist was facing feelings of isolation spurred by linguistic divisions, inspiring them to adapt language through their art to better serve their desire for connection.

As a White-Settler born and raised in Canada with English as my mother tongue, I have been thinking about how I can displace my settler logic in the process of conducting this research project. I sought to work alongside Mikhaylova, Kang, Liaw, and the various scholars whose

³⁴ I attempted to arrange an online group meeting, but was inhibited by conflicting schedules.

texts I referenced throughout this paper, to deconstruct hierarchies of difference and support more equitable relations within my own thinking. I drew upon anti-racist theory and praxis to amplify under-represented voices and knowledge systems, and to help build more inclusive communication networks and public spaces. Working in dialogue with the artists was an important part of this process. I consulted with them throughout the project and read a selection of the texts which inform their work. The literature review was built upon conversations with the artists, my OCADu community, and by attending local exhibitions and events. In my writing, I highlighted the correlations between these thinkers and makers, creating a collective through text that will continue to grow.

Dylan Robinson's chapter on "Writing about Musical Intersubjectivity" guided my approach to the written aspects of this project.³⁵ *Hungry Listening* is focused on Indigenous sound studies – by applying Robinson's theories to the work of immigrant settler artists I do not intend to compare their lived experiences and cultural work but rather engage with strategies to listen and sound outside the restrictions of the settler-colonial knowledge system. This pairing of Indigenous sound theory and diasporic artists working with sound and movement has points of cultural and political tension along with points of alignment; I understand tension to be an important part of this discussion on intercultural communication and strive to host varied perspectives. In "Writing about Musical Intersubjectivity," Robinson encourages readers to consider how they can assume an appositional stance in relation to their subject matter.³⁶ In respect to the dynamic devices activated by Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw, I used arts-based research methods to write a curatorial essay alongside them. The curatorial essay typically seeks

³⁶ Dylan Robinson, "Writing About Musical Intersubjectivity," in *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 102.

to introduce and contextualize the artworks from an objective standpoint; to overview the intentions of the exhibition and rationalize the selection of works. I was concerned that my writing habits, formed through institutional conditioning, would “fix” the artworks — making them static and consumable. Instead, I foregrounded a sensory analysis of the art, focusing on how it felt to listen to the sounds, gaze at the visual components, and *move* in response to them. I presented these observations in the curatorial essay by way of a formal analysis of the artworks and complimentary poetic passages written alongside them. For each artwork, I selected an analogous poetic device and wrote my sensory interpretation in this format. There are three poems in the essay, each dedicated to a respective artwork, in addition to a prelude and a conclusion. These sections create a rhythm in the written text, intending to reflect the movement, openness, and sensitivity displayed in the art. Following Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw, I have written my embodied listening into the curatorial text in an attempt to practice more intimate ways of connecting with others.

Exhibition Review

For *What Passes Unspoken*, the gallery transformed into a listening room which offered visitors the opportunity to critically reflect on their listening habits in addition to practicing embodied methods devised to forge relationships across linguistic divides. The gallery provided a crucial service by supplying space for restrictive communication conventions to be reformed in the interest of fostering a more generous perspective on mispronunciations and misunderstandings. The artworks in *What Passes Unspoken* demonstrate multiple ways to connect with others, to inspire more intimate relations.

The first exhibition of sound art in a museum took place at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York in 1979.³⁷ Since that exhibit, *Sound Art*, museums and galleries have offered a space free from the conventions of traditional concert halls, allowing visitors to not only listen to sounds, but also reflect on how they listen. These exhibitions challenged how sounds are classified and engaged with, deviating from various musical standards. This inaugural exhibition at the MoMA has been followed by major sound exhibitions at the museum, including *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* (2013) and *Sound Machines* (2024). While *Sound Art* celebrated the art form's ability to "extend the range of artistic possibilities by moving between different mediums and exploring new modes of presentation," more recent exhibitions have come to focus on the cultural and political implications of sound.³⁸ *What Passes Unspoken* distinguishes itself in the field of sound exhibitions by concentrating on the relationship between sound, movement, and language. Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw share a desire to reform social relations by attuning to the sonic and gestural communication methods that operate alongside verbal language. Here, sound was not merely featured as a device common amongst the artworks, but rather a joint thematic concern informed by the artists' diasporic positionalities.

The political, social, and cultural effects of sound have been addressed in different capacities through contemporary exhibitions including, *Language is Migrant* (2022) at the Colomboscope art festival in Sri Lanka and *Post-Opera* (2019) at the TENT Rotterdam. Colomboscope is an interdisciplinary festival, programming over 50 artists "from across Sri Lanka, South Asia and varied international contexts fostering global dialogue."³⁹ The seventh

³⁷ Martha Joseph, "Resonant Frequencies: Sound at MoMA," *MoMA*, March 30th, 2023, <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/soundart/>.

³⁸ "Museum Exhibition Features Works Incorporating Sound," the Museum of Modern Art: no. 42, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2296>.

³⁹ "Language is Migrant," Colomboscope, accessed December 10th, 2024, <https://www.colomboscope.lk/language-is-migrant>.

edition, *Language is Migrant*, curated by Anushka Rajendran with artistic direction from Natasha Ginwala, explored how language morphs and travels through bodies and their interactions.⁴⁰ In contrast to *Language is Migrant*, which mapped linguistic fluctuations, *What Passes Unspoken* extended beyond language into sound and movement as methods for communication: it directed attention to embodied listening practices. This preoccupation with communication was shared by *Post-Opera*, which examined the performance of communicating through honing in on the relationship between voice and body through the lens of opera. Curators Kris Dittel and Jelena Novak investigated the cultural and social significance of the voice — how this form of expression is linked to identity, citizenship, and anthropocentrism.⁴¹ The exhibition observed the disembodied voice, detached through performance techniques and technological advancements.⁴² Conversely, the artworks in *What Passes Unspoken* centered the body as a tool for communication, but did not deconstruct the body as a performance.⁴³ Instead, movement served as a conduit for connection across linguistic divides to support communication rather than accentuate its ruptures. *What Passes Unspoken* is located at a particular intersection between sound, movement, and language. In the interest of altering communication habits, the exhibition offered people the opportunity to feel how they process and share information.

Installation Design

What Passes Unspoken was spatially configured as a sensory playground, permitting participants to explore their embodied relationship with sound. The artworks were placed with the intention

⁴⁰ Indran Amirthanayagam et al, “Introduction,” in *Colomboscope 2022: Language is Migrant*, edited by Natasha Ginwala and Anushka Rajendran, (Sri Lanka: Fold Media Collective, 2022), 7-9.

⁴¹ “Post-Opera,” TENT, accessed February 18, 2025, <https://www.tentrotterdam.nl/en/tentoonstelling/next-up-post-opera/>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ However, this is explored in other artworks by Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw.

of highlighting specific correlations at particular points in one's anticipated procession through the room.

Upon entering the Graduate Gallery, visitors were first greeted with Mikhaylova's text and image scores hung upon the wall. These pieces offered prompts describing how to engage with sounds, guiding people to notice how sounds feel as they move among sentient beings. Consequently, the scores informed how participants approach Kang's music boxes, which remain dormant until activated by the turn of their levers. *Box #9: "I Neglect My Deficiency"* (2020-2022 & 2024), was positioned beside the scores, with the riddle written phonetically on the wall in graphite along with an empty music notation sheet. The next music box, *Box #8: "I Have Forgettable Borders"* (2020-2022 & 2024) hung on a centerpiece of the anterior wall, dividing the two windows. The box occupied a liminal space between the other two music boxes in the middle of the room's sole windows looking out onto the street. It thus served as an anchor point to connect the music boxes and blend the borders of the left and right walls of the gallery.

Following *Box #8*, visitors encountered a projection of *EPPP: Environmental Scores* (2024), a 6-minute silent video of Evgenia Mikhaylova conducting movement scores in outdoor settings. A number of people commented on how they were able to hear and feel the ghostly sounds of these muted locations after reading Mikhaylova's text scores at the entrance. To the right of *Environmental Scores* was the phonetic text for *Box #8*. Then, *Box #12: "I Objectify Your Tongue"* (2020-2022 & 2024) and its phonetic text. The separation of *Box #8* and its text permitted the boxes to be spread throughout the room, and sought to stagger reading, listening, and viewing engagements to facilitate a varied experience and grant visitors time to process. The layout of these artworks was designed to emphasize the movements required to produce and consume sounds.

Circling back to the entrance door, attendees came across a mounted TV playing *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 (2023) by Liaw for a duration of 7-minutes. The narration Liaw provides in *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 made the video a good candidate to spatially succeed *EPPP* and *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue*, as it contributed context on the thematic concern with language, belonging, and connection. After exploring their own position in the soundscape, visitors were able to witness Liaw navigate her relationships to her past and present through sounds, visuals, and gestures. *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 charted links between sound and identity that more explicitly drew out some of the associations covertly included in the other two works. Placing *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 after *EPPP* and *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue*, was an intentional decision to increasingly reveal more context through the journey of the exhibition.

This layout also sought to balance the visual and auditory components of *What Passes Unspoken*. *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 was the only artwork that emitted audio without intervention; in order to allow visitors to focus on the effects of Mikhaylova and Kang's sound objects, *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 was played through headphones. The headphones were also chosen to correspond with the intimacy of *xīn nī* 廖芯妮, inviting the listener into Liaw's conversation with her dad. With only the artworks in the gallery, the room was relatively quiet, but, once activated, the music boxes could be heard either independently or simultaneously. This setup not only encouraged participants to make sounds and move, but to also interact with one another through musical collaboration. The original exhibition design included a collection of music notes and instruments crafted by Mikhaylova that would have activated her scores and further emphasized the playful qualities of sound production. *What Passes Unspoken* was modified due to health concerns which inhibited the artist from transporting these sound objects to the gallery. While these artworks would have positively contributed to the sensory experience of the exhibition; the

scores, music boxes, and videos were configured to stimulate engaging encounters. The space was arranged with thoughtful attention to the intentions of the exhibition, visitor experience, and the aim of maintaining the deliberate ambiguity of the artworks while still inviting people to feel through their uncertainties.

Conclusion

By facilitating connections through audible and physical signals, *What Passes Unspoken* seeks to reorient communication practices to better address linguistic disparities which restrict communion. The artists featured in this exhibition creatively reimagine communication techniques to focus on the information transmitted by sounds and gestures. As the curator, I aimed to support these artworks by building a theoretical context that highlights the similarities and differences in these three bodies of artwork. I organized this information into a public exhibition and curatorial text which emphasizes how social relations can be strengthened by foregrounding embodied methods for connection that are sensitive to the differences amongst beings. I worked alongside these artworks and theories to prioritize sensory engagement within my curatorial approach. I listened to the artworks. Conveying this experience by writing poetic passages in the curatorial thesis paper, to extend the dynamic devices orchestrated by Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw. The exhibition and supporting documents have been crafted with the intention of bolstering strategies for equitable collaboration which honour linguistic multiplicities.

May the things that pass unspoken between subjects not go unnoticed, because these interactions are ripe with possibilities for social transformation.

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Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation



Figure 1. Exhibition entrance. *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025, Graduate Gallery. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 2. *Extended Play, Pleasure, and Poetics: text and image scores* by Evgenia Mikhaylova. *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 3. When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue: Box #9 "I Neglect My Deficiency" by Ivetta Sunyoung Kang. What Passes Unspoken, 2025, Graduate Gallery. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 4. Installation view of What Passes Unspoken, 2025, Graduate Gallery. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 5. *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue: Box #8 “I Have Forgettable Borders”* by Ivetta Sunyoung Kang. *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025, Graduate Gallery. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 6. Installation view of *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025, Graduate Gallery. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 7. Extended, Play, Pleasure, and Poetics: Environmental Scores by Evgenia Mikhaylova. What Passes Unspoken, 2025, Graduate Gallery. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 8. When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue: Box #12 “I Objectify Your Tongue” by Ivetta Sunyoung Kang. What Passes Unspoken, 2025. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 9. *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue*: Box #12 “I Objectify Your Tongue” by Ivetta Sunyoung Kang. *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025. Photo by Laiken Breau.

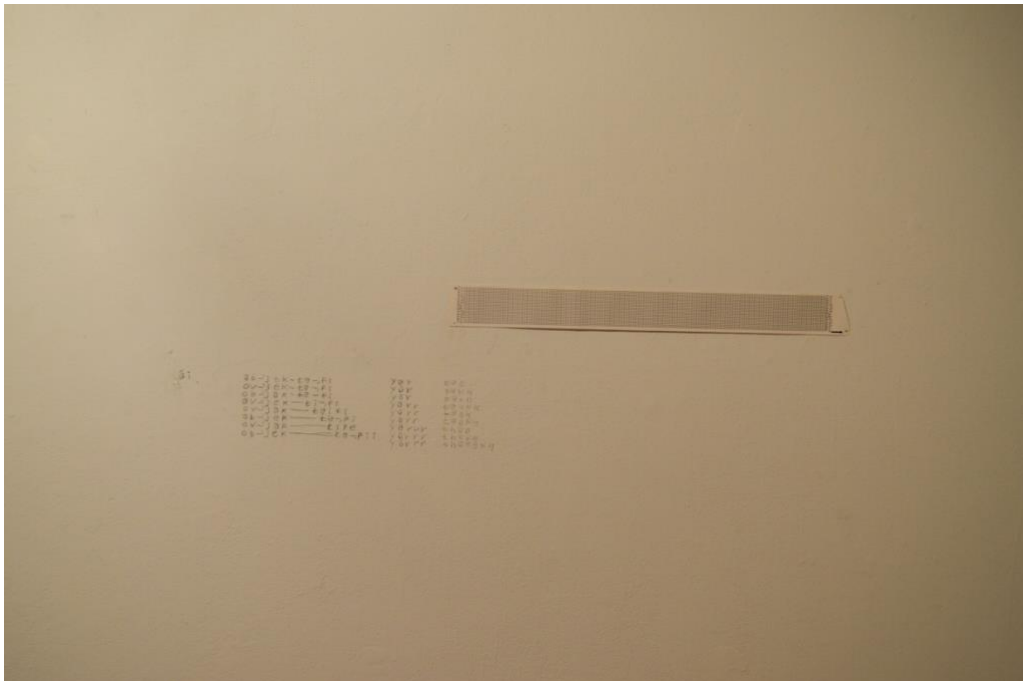


Figure 10. *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue*: Box #12 “I Objectify Your Tongue” by Ivetta Sunyoung Kang. *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 11. Installation view of *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025, Graduate Gallery. Photo by Laiken Breau.



Figure 12. *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 by Jasmine Liaw. *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025, Graduate Gallery. Photo by Laiken Breau.



*Figure 13. Installation view of *Extended, Play, Pleasure and Poetics* by Evgenia Mikhaylova, 2024, Galerie Nicolas Robert. Photo by Kathleen Foran.*

What Passes Unspoken

Graduate Gallery, 205 Richmond St W

Feb. 27 – March 3 | Gallery Hours: 1-5

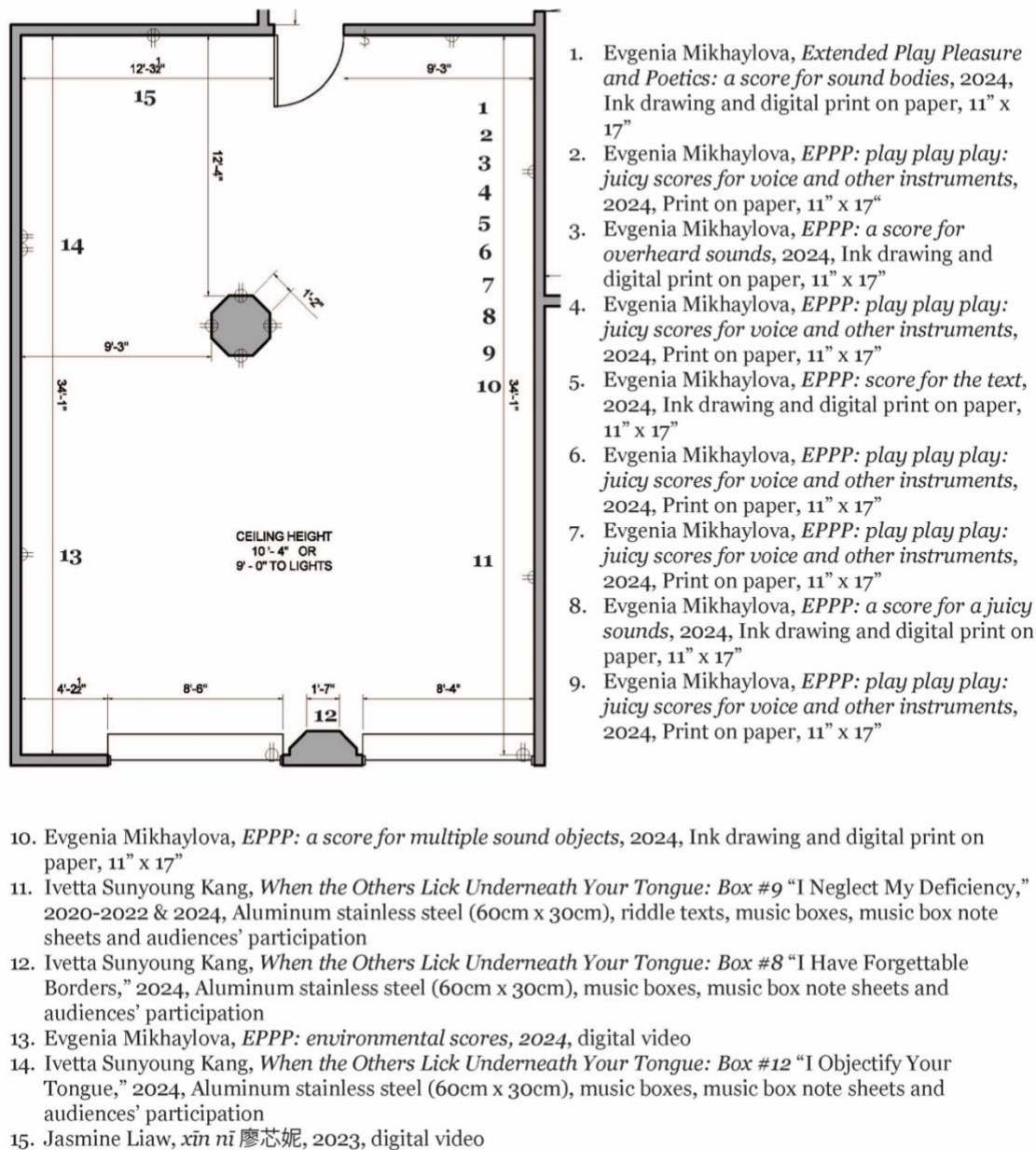


Figure 14. Floor plan and artwork details of *What Passes Unspoken*, 2025, Graduate Gallery.

Appendix B: Artist Biographies

Evgenia Mikhaylova

Evgenia Mikhaylova is a Russian-Chuvashian-Canadian interdisciplinary artist working in installation, video, sound, drawing and performance. Her work examines communication systems, language, and epistemology through interdisciplinary research-based practice that investigates parallels between the ways we experience the world through our senses and the ways we interpret the knowledge we acquire.

Investigating meaning-making through sounds and objects at play, curious about existing knowledge patterns becoming porous, destabilizing hierarchies, and revealing hidden agencies in communication ecosystems, Mikhaylova explores the underbelly of language and the role of reciprocity, play and collaboration in communication through semiotic approach musicality and performance.

Ivetta Sunyoung Kang

Ivetta Sunyoung Kang is a conceptual artist, independent researcher and poet who works across Canada, Germany, and South Korea, currently based in Toronto/Tkaronto. Their practice is concerned with unsettled emotions and sticky desires that lurk in social movements through the lens of political semiotics and transnational psychiatry studies. They work with video installation, geometric text, scriptural sculpture, and site-responsive performance. Kang has presented their work internationally, including at Nuit Blanche Toronto, The Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and Center Clark. They have participated/are participating in AiR at institutions such as the Art Gallery of Ontario, ZK/U, and SeMA Nanji Seoul Museum of Art. Kang published *Tenderhands Volume 1 #1-100* with a South Korea-based press, Leftie Press, in 2024.

Jasmine Liaw

Jasmine Liaw is an emerging interdisciplinary artist in contemporary dance performance, new media art, and experimental film. Bicoastal, she is based in so-called Toronto and Vancouver. Evidenced in collaboration and community, her work leans into transcultural narratives intersecting her Hakka diaspora, and queer theories in temporality and ecology. Liaw holds a certificate diploma with Distinction from the Conteur Academy in Toronto. She's grateful to have presented her work across so-called Canada and internationally. Select presentations include Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, The Asian Arts & Culture Trust with Holt Renfrew, Northwest Film Forum, Gallery 44, Vector Festival, Pleasure Dome, Experimental Series - Salt Lake City, Light Moves Festival Ireland, Festival del cinema di Cefalù, MPCAS/Grunt Gallery, Images Festival and more. With F-O-R-M's (Festival of Recorded Movement) Technology & Interaction Program, she recently completed a two-year research exhibition project as their inaugural artist-in-residence. Liaw is a recipient of the 2023 Emerging Digital Artists Award presented by EQ Bank and Trinity Square Video for her experimental film work, *xīn nī* 廖芯妮.

Curatorial Text

PRELUDE

an unidentifiable sound

met with silence

keeps travelling

eventually colliding with a receptive body or a harmonious note

an encounter with the unfamiliar makes me feel.....

it makes me feel

surrounded by sounds I negotiate which I listen to

but for a moment I attempt to accommodate them all

How To: receive multiple sounds

How To: receive sounds of multiplicity

the artworks gathered here sound outttt in search of connection

move with these sounds ----- offer them support

WHAT PASSES UNSPOKEN

This exhibition features artworks that use sound and movement to cross linguistic divides. Artists Evgenia Mikhaylova, Ivetta Sunyoung Kang, and Jasmine Liaw present methods of communication that go beyond the spoken or written word and centre the body as a conduit for connection. They draw upon their own diasporic experiences to foster more intimate relations attuned to linguistic divergences.

The title of this exhibition, “what passes unspoken,” refers to the feelings and gestures that animate conversations while exceeding verbal language. It is sourced from a passage in feminist scholar and writer Sara Ahmed’s book *Stranger Encounters*, in which she describes how people express themselves through body language and actions. Ahmed emphasizes that communication is not transparent but is instead obscured by emotions and histories that can non-verbally influence how people interact.⁴⁴ The artists in this exhibition focus on unspoken forms of expression to direct attention to the body’s role in forging relationships with places, persons, and objects. Their artworks invite people to feel how sounds and movements are sensed and shared.

Evgenia Mikhaylova is a Russian-Chuvashian-Canadian interdisciplinary artist, playing with communication practices in her collection of text, image, and video scores. These artworks visually depict the movement of sound to accentuate the sensory pathways that connect various beings. Her scores are shown alongside music boxes made by Ivetta Sunyoung Kang, which play songs crafted from the “imperfect” intonations of Kang’s recorded speech. Kang reflects on the process of translation, using her experience shifting between her mother-tongue Korean and English, to transition to communicate via music. The boxes require participants to power the music, creating an embodied relationship through sound and movement. These themes are then explored in a deeply personal capacity by Jasmine Liaw, who conducts interviews with her family to learn more about the Hakka translation of her Chinese name, and her father’s immigration from Brunei to Vancouver in the 1970s. Recordings of these interviews are then interwoven with videos of Liaw dancing, along-side animated figures and family photos, and set against an ambient soundscape. These three bodies of work come together for this exhibition to demonstrate how embodied forms of expression can be employed to nurture relationships across linguistic divides.

Mikhaylova’s scores inspire her audience to attune to the environment and its diverse life forms. She presents and performs sensory exercises that suggest ways of being physically engaged with others. Her scores prompt an attentive approach to Kang’s music boxes, which patiently wait for participants to turn their levers. Once activated these magical music boxes produce nostalgic notes, but rather than a lullaby it is Kang’s own words transcribed into music that play in the gallery. She disorients from language to find freedom for expression in sound,

⁴⁴ Sara Ahmed, “Ethical Encounters,” in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 155.

while Jasmine Liaw returns to language as an entry point to strengthen her intergenerational paternal relationships. She vocally and visually retraces her father's migration, crossing geographical and temporal borders in the course of the video. By moving with her personal history Liaw demonstrates how previous experiences continue to live through the body, the land, and memorabilia.

This strategy to “move with” can be seen in the practices of all three artists, as Mikhaylova moves with her surroundings and Kang invites people to move with the music boxes and her words. In each case, they seek to connect through embodied interactions, during which sensing becomes more important than comprehending. In the book *Hungry Listening*, Dylan Robinson points out that opportunities for connection are reduced by placing too much emphasis on capturing information rather than noticing how it feels to share space and sounds with others.⁴⁵ What might the affect of information reveal? To think about the affects of communication is to think through the sensory networks that place bodies and beings into contact with one another. Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw orchestrate such embodied interactions in order to explore ways of relating that are capable of honoring linguistic differences. They use sound and movement to transfer information in a manner that invites multiple means of engagement and remains open to unanticipated possibilities. In this position of uncertainty, there is an increased awareness to how the sensory receptors are absorbing and processing information. To be disoriented from habitual communication encourages a heightened attention to the mechanisms used to interact with others.

‘BEING WITH DIFFERENCE’

Music scores from **Evgenia Mikhaylova**'s project *EPPP or Extended Play, Pleasure, and Poetics* (2024) are presented as texts, images, and a short video. These materials brim with the capacity to produce sounds, prompting the audience to reflect on their sonic agency. In listening to texts and images, the listener becomes aware of how their body makes sense of information. The text scores conduct this experience with suggestive cues describing methods to engage with sounds, how to: notice, savour, or sing to them. The words “feel,” “listen,” and “with the body” appear in many of these scores. The listening exercises featured in *EPPP* address not only the ear but the entire body to prioritize the sensing of information over its formalized comprehension. Mikhaylova redirects attention from the meaning of sounds to their perception to focus on how information is experienced.

Many communication methods rely upon reciprocal agreements to share, and by foregrounding the feeling of sounds, the artist highlights a shared language through sensing. The scores in the collection encourage attuned attention to more-than-human beings, non-human matter and materials that possess agencies that are often overlooked by a human-centric worldview that values human life at the expense of other life forms. This is a sliding scale that

⁴⁵ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.

tends to prioritize the lives of certain humans over others. Mikhaylova deconstructs this hierarchy to form horizontal relationships amongst humans and non-humans, including rocks, grass, books, and walls. The scores describe ways to relate through sound and its movement, which act as conduits for connection capable of traversing linguistic divides. While *EPPP* concentrates on relationships with more-than-human beings it is also inspired by the artist's multilingual immigrant experiences. Mikhaylova was born in Novocheboksarsk in Chuvashia, Russia and grew up speaking Russian as her mother-tongue, and Chuvash to communicate with her grandparents. She is currently based between Saskatchewan and Ontario, where she continues to explore the intricacies of communication, directing attention to elements that often go unnoticed. By shifting to forms of embodied knowledge sharing, Mikhaylova's work disorients from a linguistic hierarchy which notably neglects contact with more-than-human beings.

The text scores are placed alongside images scores that use organic materials to elicit sensory compositions. For these scores, plants, shells, clay, and bronze pieces are organized into groupings. The spacing, colours, and textures of the objects create patterns based on the midi notation scores. The scores were composed around Milk River in Alberta, where the plants and clay were collected and then returned. Mikhaylova describes how the running water from the river and the hum of insects could be heard while she gathered and composed. She selected the materials based on the sounds they would evoke, and then molded the clay by hand to embody the hand gestures that are reflexively made during conversation. Sonic, visual, and physical signals intersect, and together trace events in the environment and the artist's interactions with its inhabitants.

Sometimes Mikhaylova's hands appear positioned above the objects, frozen in motion. These image scores are stills from a video work included in the collection, titled *EPPP or Extended Play, Pleasure, and Poetics: environmental scores* (2024), in which Mikhaylova's hands move silently over the plants and shells like a conductor guiding an orchestra. These actions accentuate the liveliness of the substances and prompt the viewer to consider how the materials are communicating to them. On the one hand, Mikhaylova moves alongside these sentient beings in order to connect with them and to inspire those viewing *environmental scores* to explore their relationship to their surroundings but on the other, her own gestures betray the hands of the conductor—the human domain over nature.

In *environmental scores*, the text and image scores are shown along with clips of Mikhaylova attuning to her surroundings, touching them, and responding through movement. As she physically responds to the materials, her actions elucidate certain qualities of her surroundings, such as, the stillness of the rock and the force of the SW wind. The film is silent, thereby requiring the viewer to pay close attention to the gestures of the land and those made by Mikhaylova, and to imagine their sensory experiences. How does it feel to be in these settings? While the winds and waves may not be heard aloud in the gallery, their representation recalls their impression. This activation of sensorial memories indicates how interpretation is informed

by past experiences and learned behaviours. *EPPP* spurs people to observe how their body listens, and to imagine ways it could come to listen with thought-provoking cues.

Consider for a moment how it feels to listen to a shell, a silent being that sounds like the ocean; a natural amplifier that allows listeners to hear their setting differently. Now consider the shell itself, its curvy shapes and hidden folds, similar to the human ear. What does the shell hear as I press my ear against it?

These are not traditional listening methods in *EPPP* but rather strategies to practice interacting with sounds and materials with renewed intent. The artworks invite people to witness how their bodies sense, attune, and share knowledge. It is an offer to linger in a space of uncertainty in order to reflect upon one's listening habits and explore other methods that are designed to bridge linguistic divides. This collection of scores focuses predominantly on how listening practices can be reoriented to respect the agency of more-than-human beings with awareness to the subjugation of nature in the hierarchy of languages. Sensing through sound and its movement highlights the relational networks between humans and other beings. These exercises for listening with others explore ways of being with linguistic differences that propose ways to overcome verbal obstacles with embodied forms of communication.

AN ODE TO THE GALLERY

These walls bear the scars of celebration
 Feel the texture of their reconstructed skin
 Listen (to) the miniscule holes that speckle their surface
 Watch them expand and contract

What conversations have they heard (?)

These are generous walls
 Accommodating and amenable
 With a sunny disposition (and) propensity for play

Visitors flock here eager for engagement
 Welcomed with (a) chorus of creaks and crackles
 May its voice reach receptive bodies

‘EMANCIPATING THE TONGUE’

When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue (2020-2022 & 2024) by **Ivetta Sunyoung Kang** is a collection of thirteen music box notations that the artist created by transcribing the soundwaves of her spoken word, three of these notations are present for *What Passes Unspoken*. Kang converts language into music in order to release her speech from the clutch of culturally induced anxiety and to connect to participants inclined to power up the mechanical devices. The three boxes are attached to the wall via aluminum stainless steel sculptures that extend vertically into a waved pattern, accompanied by riddled text written phonetically on the wall beside the sculptures. To activate the music box, participants must move to turn a lever located on the right of the device. This interaction brings people close to the work and allows them to physically customize their experience by controlling the tempo and duration of the music. While it is Kang who has carefully crafted the music boxes, it is visitors to the gallery whose movements produce the sounds.

This is not a passive listening experience, but one that requires participation. It is an opportunity to experience the child-like wonder of playing with sound objects. What do these musical beings have to say? While turning the lever, the exposed music sheets can be seen rotating through the box, thus allowing the audience to see how these sounds are being manually generated. This transparency is then counter-balanced by the riddles featured on the side, which indicate that there is more information than what is found here. The riddle obscures the message, thus positioning the reader outside the channel of communication. *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue* playfully offers access along with limits, in a manner that echoes Ahmed’s observations about the opacities that complicate communication, the excessive conditions that influence each interaction. Kang includes blockades to slow the flow of information and draw people close to the artwork. These mysterious riddles are supplemented by music and movement that enable embodied connections to form without a linguistic common ground.

To create the note sheets for the music boxes Kang consulted the Naver Online Dictionary, a platform dedicated to Korean-English translations, which compared the patterns of her speech to the intonations of a native English speaker. The tool is created with the intention to teach English language learners how to standardize their speech by assessing how accurately the recorded audio aligns with the ones in its database. Similar soundwaves contribute to a perfect score, while inconsistencies lower one’s score. Kang collected the misaligned soundwaves to compose *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue*. Each music box is generated from a different phrase processed through this technique. The thirteen notations are transcribed from riddle sentences responding to the question “who am I?”. The three riddles featured in *What Passes Unspoken* include “I have forgettable borders,” “I neglect my deficiency,” and “I objectify your tongue,” they are also written out phonetically beside the music boxes. Kang takes the sections labeled as ‘imperfect’ and presents them as music. By doing so, she reclaims sounds that have been deemed linguistically undesirable and amplifies them musically.

Kang performs this creative intervention to address the pressures placed on Canadian immigrants to not only learn English but perfect it. Born and raised in South Korea, Kang's migration experience was fraught with anxiety. The fear of mispronunciation constricted her vocal cords, inhibiting her speech for a period of time. The Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said observed that when immigrants are faced with the terrifying experience of building a life in a foreign country, their detachment from language can inspire "elaborate efforts to communicate."⁴⁶ Kang celebrates her 'flawed' speech patterns as a way to confront her worry and alleviate symptoms of stress. She acknowledges that her unease toward vocal expression is a response to the standards defined by the nation-state. Social and professional acceptance is predicated upon assimilation to Canadian cultural practices and values. To be Canadian is to adhere to the rites and rituals of the dominant collective, including speaking unaccented English. Therefore, Kang's attention to her 'incorrect' soundwaves enacts a conscious rejection of systemic racial bias. It is an act that refuses to assume the voice of the nation-state and instead nurtures her individual expression. To free her tongue from the grips of cultural uniformity and return to communication.

The featured riddles "I have forgettable borders," "I neglect my deficiency," and "I objectify your tongue," pronounce Kang's emancipation from state hegemony and her appraisal of her divergences as a diasporic subject. Here, liminality and imperfection are claimed as desirable conditions to imagine polymorphous possibilities. How would it feel to speak without constraints? By converting the three riddles into music, Kang shifts from language and positions all listeners 'outside' the sounds. The words are not recognizable in their new format, making them equally inaccessible to all hearing individuals. Thus, this switch to music attests to an intention to devise a method of communication disoriented from a cultural hierarchy and focused instead on tonality alone. Music is a meeting ground for gallery guests to share a collective experience. That being said, music is by no means a neutral medium. It has its own power dynamics and politics of exclusion;⁴⁷ however, its use in this specific creative project reflects a will to transmit knowledge beyond language. Since the English language emblemizes cultural and social anxiety, its modification demonstrates a desire to dismantle its domination. Music can forge connections across linguistic differences while maintaining the very intonations that make difference observable. The sounds from the three music boxes emanate into the gallery space coming into contact with nearby bodies and establishing a web of relations between them. These sounds do not need to be 'understood' or 'decoded' but felt. *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue* creates a shared experience that prioritizes sensory engagement over comprehension.

The music from the boxes follow an arrhythmic tempo allowing each note to sound out in distinction. Much of the composition occurs at a slow pace thus emphasizing individual notes. Between these punctuations are intervals during which all that can be heard is the sound of the

⁴⁶ Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Granta* 13, September 1st 1984, <https://granta.com/reflections-on-exile/>.

⁴⁷ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 96.

lever being hand-turned. The presence of the lever directs attention to the manual labour required to power these devices; its repetitious sound builds anticipation. Occasionally, these slower sections are balanced by faster sections where the notes seem to tumble out of the box in quick succession, like a swift rainfall of musical sounds, thereby orchestrating excitable bursts. This procession of slow and quick segments brings to mind a conversational rhythm whereby streams of divulgence are accompanied by stages of formation and reflection. A gathering of thoughts along with articulation, absorption, and deliberation. The patterning of pause and eruption communicates a non-linear thought process and mode of exchange. The inconsistency of these arrangements works to displace the listener, who cannot predict the tempo or rhythm and is thus surprised with every note. These incalculable shifts inhibit intellectual rationalization and urge listeners to process how the sounds affect their body. Listening to *When the Others Lick Underneath Your Tongue* offers an opportunity to engage without language.

AN ONOMATOPEIC INTERLUDE

A high note tingles at the top of my head,
while its inverse whirs down a chord in my core.
The lever grinds as it turns and turns and turns,
prompting my stomach to churn, churn, churn.

breathe in and out

Now, a cluster cascades across my skeletal staircase
bouncing off my collarbone and rippling around my spine.
The traces of these movements lingering,
activating,
humming.

a grumble from my stomach

A sharp note pricks me in the forehead.
Its flat counterpart thuds at the base of my throat.

ahem

‘UNDERSTANDING YOU’

In the short video *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 (2022), **Jasmine Liaw** records herself and her family as she learns about her Chinese name *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 and its Hakka translation. Liaw turns to language as a gateway to explore her family history, using dance, dialogue, animation, and sound to dynamically convey the personal stories that converge with these linguistic markers. She mentions that she received her Chinese name, *xīn nī* 廖芯妮, from her auntie Anne Leong at the age of 12, which in Mandarin “symbolizes ‘female love,’ ‘female centre’ but also ‘frail love,’ ‘frail centre.’”⁴⁸ Speaking tenderly to his daughter, Liaw’s father, William Khim Fui Liaw explains that *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 translates to “understanding you” or “trust you” in Hakka. William was raised speaking Hakka, a dialect spoken by the Hakka-Chinese people: an endangered language in need of preservation. The Hakka moved from central to southern China through “a series of migrations” spanning over 2,000 years that subjected them to “various degrees of discrimination and hostility” from the southern communities.⁴⁹ Their language “is one of the seven major dialect groups of Chinese,” but has been increasingly displaced by the “promotion of Mandarin over regional dialects.”⁵⁰ In recent years, there has been a push to preserve the Hakka language in mainland China and amongst diasporic communities.⁵¹ Jasmine speaks to her dad and aunt about their Hakka heritage as a way to bridge intergenerational and cultural divides, and to sustain her family history through the experiences of migration and diasporic survival. In the process she reclaims a sense of connection to the very centre of her being.

In *xīn nī* 廖芯妮, the artist vocally recounts the story of her father’s immigration from Brunei to Vancouver in 1970 at the age of 5, presented along with a contemporary video of her father and aunt writing out their Chinese names.⁵² By doing so, she juxtaposes an act of language preservation with a vivid description of cultural displacement. The combination testifies to the effort undertaken by immigrants to continue cultural practices in a new place with different epistemologies. The visuals and audio also bring the past and present together, overlaying her father’s immigration with a recent family gathering. This parallel of disparate temporalities emphasizes the effect their family history continues to impart on their day-to-day routines. Jasmine traces these atemporal affects in order to contend with the feelings of displacement she experiences in relation to her diasporic positioning. In the video, she confesses that she feels this anxiety in her centre, her centre made frail from disconnection to her family and heritage. As she describes these feelings, she appears on-screen dancing behind a transparent curtain. Her

⁴⁸ Jasmine Liaw uses the term ‘symbolizes’ instead of ‘means’ to indicate the gaps in her knowledge of Mandarin. Through conversations with her mentor Sammy Chien, they choose the term ‘symbolizes’ to account for this uncertainty and create space for continued learning.

⁴⁹ Tiger Huang, “Hakka Revivalism: A Story of Language Conservation in the 21st Century,” *SIR Journal of International Relations*, January 30th, 2018, <https://www.sirjournal.org/op-ed/2018/1/30/hakka-revivalism-a-story-of-language-conservation-in-the-21st-century>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Both Hakka and Mandarin use the standard Chinese characters for writing but differ in their pronunciations.

movements are slow, her legs bent, she proceeds with care as her left arm extends in front of her reaching out momentarily from behind the curtain, to be followed shortly after by her face which remains exposed as the brief segment concludes. Jasmine continues to dance in the next scene, but this time her movements are quicker and the camera hovers close to the centre of her body, cropping her limbs from view and holding her family stories close to her heart. At this point, William assumes the role of narrator and goes on to recount his immigration experience. The conflation of movement and migration highlights how memories are stored by the body. Jasmine harnesses her embodied knowledge to forge connections across time and space.

As William speaks, the screen transitions to a street view of a map of British Columbia. The cursor clicks through the street while an animated figure dances on the road. Jasmine repurposes the map, a typically static medium used to delineate borders and create fixed identifications of place, to instead orchestrate a dynamic engagement. In contrast to a typical birds-eye view that affords a territorial perspective of land, the street view embeds the audience in the landscape. Jasmine Liaw, like Mikhaylova, moves closer to the land in order to create a more intimate relationship to the environment. The movements of the animated figure visually echo William's narration of his flights from Brunei to Vancouver. His descriptions of Vancouver meet both the map and the dancer, prompting the audience to consider what it must have been like walking through Vancouver as a new immigrant in the 1970s, surrounded by the unfamiliar sounds of the English language. William arrived in British Columbia approximately 25 years after the Canadian government lifted the 24-year ban on Chinese immigration. The province, which has been built through exploitative Chinese labour, namely the Canadian Pacific Railway, is ripe with a history of systemic anti-Chinese racism dating back to the 1800s.⁵³ To move through this province is to move amongst these histories. In *xīn nī* 廖芯妮, Jasmine demonstrates how the past continues to impact the present in often unspoken ways, revealing these intersections through a dynamic re-enactment of her father's migration.

Similar animations used to activate the map are also applied to Jasmine's family photos and passport photo. Printed family photos have been scanned and overlaid onto the video of William and Anne writing in Chinese. In the following scene, another animated figure appears, one constructed out of various objects including a framed family photo located at its centre. The figure moves across the screen, showcasing the different objects that comprise its limbs in the process. By animating these relics of the past, Jasmine demonstrates how some personal objects are attributed an exceptional level of agency. Photos of people become an extension of them, and are cared for by loved ones with particular attention. Jasmine engages differently with her own passport photo but performs a similar creative intervention, overlaying a childish iteration with a contemporary version; and then appearing on screen, dancing on top of the collage. However, here her dynamic presence mocks the stilted government identification, emphasizing their formality as her corporeality takes precedence. Her movements exceed fixed representations,

⁵³ Alexander Hackett, "July 1 marks the 100-year anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act," Concordia University, June 19, 2023, <https://www.concordia.ca/cunews/main/stories/2023/06/29/july-1-marks-the-100-year-anniversary-of-the-chinese-exclusion-act.html>

pointing to the actions and experiences occluded by the passport, journeys and relationships absent from state documentation but nonetheless ever-present in the body and its engagements. The data faculty of migration often ignores the humanity of its subjects: reduced to numbers, immigrants appear as a monolithic group divorced from pain, longing, love and worry. Jasmine re-centres embodied knowledges in her autobiography, sharing her narrative through spoken word and dance. Her confessions offer a deeply personal account of how she identifies with her past and makes sense of her present; her movements compliment these descriptions by conveying the experiences that exceed language.

The sounds of *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 consist predominantly of audio recordings of Jasmine and William talking; however, in the background, an ambient sound hums quietly. This sound has an atmospheric quality, adding layers without overpowering the dialogue. Jasmine created the soundscape by using the digital terrain of her passport photo as a model. The ‘fixed’ photo is once again extended, this time by filling its 3-dimensional plane with sound. It rings through *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 coming into contact with the personal anecdotes while remaining in the background. Once again, Jasmine’s narrative takes place against the backdrop of the passport, which like the map is a nationalized, and potentially restrictive form of documentation. She shares this narrative through visuals, sound, and movement to convey the breadth of her experiences. These dynamic mediums allow her to explore how the threads of her identity cross temporal and cultural boundaries. Jasmine Liaw shifts amongst the multiple meanings of *xīn nī* 廖芯妮 to illustrate the heterogenous nature of her lived experience as a diasporic subject entangled in a web of languages. She remains connected to her paternal lineage across linguistic divides through sound and movement.

A PATTERN POEM FOR A PERSONAL PASSPORT

I Keep You Close In Borders Beyond Extend That Roots

the locket I wear around my neck
the wallet I keep in my pocket
your voice immortalized in my phone
your phrases preserved in my speech
my form woven with your fabric
my mannerisms mirroring your rhythm

Reaching Memories Toward Alive In My Body

The Unknown Familiar

DYNAMICALLY DECONSTRUCTING

Mikhaylova, Kang, and Liaw present complex encounters with language that pay particular focus to the feelings and histories that are not easily shared through words. They seek to repair disconnections by orchestrating embodied interactions that demonstrate how sound and movement can bridge linguistic divides. Their efforts coalesce in *What Passes Unspoken*, encouraging connections to emerge amongst subjects thought to be disparate, revealing the ways in which they have always been related. Hierarchical divisions conditioned through language are reorganized through sound and movement to nurture more equitable relations across diverse lifeforms. These dynamic methodologies seek to expand relational networks by attuning to differences rather than conceiving them to be a barrier that should be eradicated. This exhibition aims to hold space for differences to gather and mingle, employing methods for sensory engagement that respect that such interactions are not transparent by prioritizing the feeling of information over its comprehension.

A CACOPHONOUS CONCLUSION

Creating constructive chaos with critical practices
designed to musically muddle and move dominant discourses
that determine social and linguistic hierarchies.

Replacing militant monolingualism with migrant methodologies
that play with polymorphous possibilities to reinforce radical relations.

And deconstruct divisive demarcations to pave pathways for plurality with personal poetics
that stretch, scramble, and stimulate sensory receptors

to seek intimate methods of communication.

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