



Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, *We Are Printers Too*, 2013, HD video, 5.1 audio. Courtesy of the artists and Fehily Contemporary.

FEATURE

David Chesworth and Sonia Leber

by [Dylan Rainforth](#) | Art Guide Australia Issue 85 September 2013

“The sound of language being made” is how David Chesworth and Sonia Leber characterise *We Are Printers Too*, 2013, a single-channel video made for NGV's *Melbourne Now*. The video was shot within the abandoned spaces of The Age newspaper's former headquarters in Melbourne. In it, percussionists wander through ghostly offices and beside the giant printing presses of yesteryear.

It's one of two Chesworth and Leber works that Melbourne audiences have been able to experience over the past few months. Made in 2000 for the Sydney Olympic Park, *5000 Calls* is a multi-channel audio piece that was reconfigured to play within the Torus – a specially constructed spatial structure in the RMIT Gallery as part of *Sound Bites City*.

Since 1996 Chesworth and Leber have collaborated on a wide range of interdisciplinary sound and multimedia installations. As such it's almost uncanny to approach the duo's practice, as I am here, through these almost arbitrarily selected works, *5000 Calls* and *We Are Printers Too*, which were created thirteen years apart. It's uncanny because they reveal a persistent interest in the relationships between sound, communication, language and non-language.

Talking about the decision to focus on percussionists with their intervention with The Age building, the artists – speaking via Skype from Rostov-on-Don in southwest Russia, where they are currently on a residency and preparing work for the Moscow Biennale in September – say it was a way of bringing humans back in to these eerily frozen-in-time

spaces and, in particular, to respond to the printer, “an incredibly noisy machine that people used to talk about; and our piece has a silent building which we’ve populated with the sound of message-making or the sound of language being made, which is what a printer is.”

“The drummer is really one of the earliest forms of printing in a sense; it’s literally an imprint on a skin when you hit something and you’re communicating something beyond your body, a transference of language into another format.” Think “talking drums”, military tattoos or even the tapping out of Morse code (something that appears in the video).



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Comparing the very mechanical means of communication embodied in traditional newspaper production – metal typesetting, sputtering telexes, thundering presses – the artists say they are “very much interested in the sonic by-product of – the chatter of the chatter in a way – the sound that people make when they are attempting to communicate”.

Which was the crux of *5000 Calls* too. Commissioned for the Sydney Olympics, the permanent installation presents, to this day, an ever-changing soundscape of 5000 human vocalisations. “The spark of the idea was there was a crowd within the stadium... but we thought we would like to create a different crowd outside the stadium so this piece is situated on the forecourt over 4.5 hectares.” It was built with around eighty speakers playing an evolving twenty-four channel sonic permutation.

“The idea was to bring together a sonic crowd of people involved in everyday tasks. The opposite of the Olympic ideal of higher, stronger and faster, this was people living their lives, like renovating a kitchen, giving birth, people on the street demonstrating, kids playing in a bath: hundreds and hundreds of sounds.” Chesworth and Leber happily interject with each other and this mini-list is a collective effort.

And here's where it resonates with the "sonic by-product" of *We Are Printers Too*. "We weren't interested in language. We were interested in the sounds people make with their voices prior to language taking hold, so it's the exclamations before you formulate a sentence. So the 'ums' and 'ahs' and groans of the body mentally or physically undergoing duress or straining, or pleasure or pain."

On the edge of meaning, the rest is noise. And this is where Chesworth and Leber seem most at home.

Chesworth and Leber
We are Printers Too

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