

## Wonder in the Wake of Crisis: Elana Mann's *Year of Wonders, redux*

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Upon clicking the link to Elana Mann's exhibition *Year of Wonders, redux*, an aerial gallery view fills the browser. Quickly, the perspective descends into the main viewing area of 18th Street Arts Center where we see *Our work is never done (unfinished business)* (2020–21), a ten-foot-long orange megaphone with six mouthpieces extruding from its sides. Surrounding this centerpiece are Mann's *Unidentified Bright Objects 11-60*, a series of fifty individually crafted rattles spaced at regular intervals across three blue gallery walls. Wooden handles attach to hollow ceramic tops, each roughly resembling a cube, pyramid, tear drop, or eight-sided die. The sides of the rattle tops display hand-painted text fragments that, especially when performed, compose patterns that weave linguistic abstraction through recent activist slogans and chants. Click a small movie icon, and such a performance appears. A figure wearing a cloth covid-19 mask demonstrates playful, poignant, sometimes contradictory pairings. "People Power" rattles against "Maybe." One hand jingles "Equity, Dignity." The other shakes "NOW," which when rotated also reads "OWN."

Zooming out a bit, Mann's exhibition speaks to the at times shaky ground felt beneath socially engaged art during the pandemic. Since covid's start, art practices once defined by social gatherings and collective interaction suddenly found themselves lacking the very sites of presentation that, in many ways, had provided them with an important source of meaning. Prior to the pandemic, Mann used her unique instruments in political demonstrations and community organizing projects in southern California. She has also used these sound making devices in collaboration with musicians, for instance, in the exhibition's videos *untitled* featuring composer Corey Fogel and *Into the Vortex with Kyrie All Alone* with designer Jean-Paul Leonard and musician Emily Aeyer. Through this transdisciplinary body of work, Mann reflects on the desire for communication and community during a time that has unequally suspended many forms of physical togetherness.

To be sure, the online virtual tour wasn't the show's only presentation mode. Like many galleries during this time, 18th Street Arts offered in-person appointments to view the exhibition during preset time slots throughout the day. The maximum number of visitors for each time slot was six. This seems fitting, for one, given the number of mouthpieces available on *Our work is never done*. Mann explains that these openings function as listening ports as well, alluding to this dual use of megaphones that informed Thomas Edison's experiments of the nineteenth century. In the context of the exhibition, one imagines an intricate choreography of utterance and audition shared by an intimate group of visitors. When all six are from the same family or "pod," of course, this is a nonissue. But otherwise, the gallery's standard social distancing protocol would strictly prohibit such an activity. Along these lines, Mann acknowledges how her collaborative instrument—which she initially conceived prior to covid—took on this kind of ethical complication in the context of the pandemic. At the time she worried, jokingly, that she'd inadvertently created a "super-spreader sculpture."

Mann's *Unidentified Bright Objects* share in some of this tension. She started creating these multimedia rattles in 2019 following a residency in which she learned clay casting techniques. Having previously created larger megaphone sculptures (though not all as large as *Our work is never done*), Mann wanted something more portable that she could more easily bring along to protests. There was no shortage of the latter as the residency occurred following the police murder of George Floyd and during the lead-up to the 2020 election. Mann's *Objects* that read "Say his name" and "Say her name" speak to

manifest intersections between police brutality and the pandemic's ongoing intensification of systemic racial and economic inequality. In the gallery, visitors are invited to physically grasp such iconographic words and phrases emblazoned across each of the fifty rattles, all while made aware of the challenge the pandemic poses to the embodied sociality typically associated with such gestures. Zooming out further, *Year of Wonders, redux* understands this dynamic as integral to a year that has transformed life for so many.

Wonder may seem like an odd way to describe 2020. Given the uniqueness many associate with the covid era, it might seem equally strange to suggest that our moment embodies a kind of return or repetition of the past. One meaning of Mann's titular addendum "redux" is the fact that a previous version of the exhibition was installed a few months earlier at Artpace in San Antonio. Yet another connotation refers to Mann's insistence on the *non*-uniqueness of the present. Mann borrows her exhibition title from Australian-American author Geraldine Brooks's 2001 historical fiction novel that tells the story of a housemaid who lives through one of the major recurrences of the bubonic plague in seventeenth-century England. Though separated by centuries, the pandemics are united by crisis and inequality. Domestic servants might be compared to essential workers, the aristocracy with big tech. When the landed gentry worked, it was mostly bureaucratic not unlike some of today's remote workers. And racial oppression was there, too, as the projects of slavery and colonialism had already been well underway. Through this comparison, I don't think Mann is trying to tell us that nothing really changes, but rather suggests that we understand the historical present as belonging to and defined by a longer continuity (if we want a periodizing concept, perhaps Cedric J. Robinson's racial capitalist modernity).

Still, wonder pushes us toward possibility, of imagining alternative ways of being. Wonder stands for the spark of curiosity and unknowing common to art, philosophy, and play. Mann's sono-sculptures compel us to imagine processes of sounding and audition that draw new if only momentary lines of physical and virtual togetherness. At the same time, inequalities—including, as we've seen, the kinds of work available to and/or forced upon certain parts of society—can pervade even the most utopian imaginaries. The title of *Our work is never done* reminds us that in an activist context, work can also refer to the substance upon which a political project acts, as in showing up for the work. Overall, *Year of Wonders, redux* implies that part of that work might be to remain open to the imaginal even in the most trying of times. If we can attune to possibility in such a year of crisis, Mann suggests, we may more readily hear wonder in its wake.