



ABINADI MEZA: FOUND VOICE, SOLO MUSEUM

By Joan Rothfuss

On entering, your eye is drawn to the image projected on one wall. A flashlight beam leads you through a series of rooms that are either unnaturally bright or sunk in shadow. The orb of light scans the spaces like a disembodied eye, and there is a lot to see, even in the murky darkness: looming stone sculptures and articulated doorways, illuminated display cases, softly glowing marble floors. You understand that the video documents someone’s nighttime walk through a museum.

Then you notice the sound, which comes at you from all over the room: voices, footsteps, whispers, the rustle of clothing, laughter.

You may have deduced that the video was shot in this very museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, but you could not possibly know that the sound is also a document of this building. Both record the MIA as experienced by Abinadi Meza, who offers it as an answer to a question: *Who performs a museum?*

Meza thinks of this installation as an exploration of the “performed social entity” that is the museum. He constructed the piece from material gathered during several visits to the MIA over the past months. For the audio element, **Found Voice**, he took his digital recorder and surround-sound microphone into the galleries and workspaces to capture the sounds of visitors and staff alike. Back in his studio he used composing software to digitally layer the recordings in looped, repetitive structures and then sculpt them into sections with varied tonal qualities.

The visual element, **Solo Museum**, was made during a single after-hours visit to the museum, when he wandered through the space with a video camera and a flashlight. Together, the two sections form an impressionistic collage of image and sound that describes a specific place without being connected to a specific moment.

Found Voice, Solo Museum suggests that the museum is a shifting construction of the material and immaterial, in which the sounds, energies, and desires of its visitors collide and ricochet off its architecture and objects. It is also Meza’s critique, or perhaps his corrective, of one way that museums typically function:

The museum preserves objects but erases its visitors.

In that sense, **Found Voice, Solo Museum** is a sonic and visual archive that complements the MIA’s own archive of art objects and artifacts, and it is one of several archive projects by Meza. In 2006, he roamed the streets of Dublin with a video camera and a bat detector, seeking to “record invisibility.” The work he made, **[Silence]**, pairs sounds that are beyond the range of human hearing, like the electronic hum of ATMs and the buzzing of streetlamps, with video images of empty streets. **Majestic, Quiet, and Empty Like a Monster** (2004) is a collage of recorded comments about the University of Minnesota’s Regis Center for Art that Meza installed inside the Regis Center itself, allowing visitors to “walk through a story of the building’s inner life.” These sonic archives are slightly subversive because they work against our understanding of documents as physical evidence: photographs, relics, ruins, written accounts. Meza finds an alternate path, forcing us to imagine (and remember) the presence of people through their sounds: the temporal, intangible vibrations of their absent bodies.

Music = sound + time (+ architecture)

Meza considers himself a sound and installation artist, not a composer. Still, his sonic work is descended from experimental music by composers such as Pierre Schaeffer, John Cage, and Alvin Lucier, all of whom worked with non-musical sounds collected from their environments. **[Silence]** might be understood as Meza’s update of Cage’s famous “silent” composition, **4’33”**, a work for solo piano in which not a single note is sounded and the music consists of any sounds that are audible during the work’s duration. But it is Lucier’s 1970

composition for voice on tape, **I Am Sitting in a Room**, that has had particular importance for Meza’s project. To make the work, Lucier read a short text into a tape recorder, then replayed and rerecorded the sound of his voice thirty-two times. Over the course of the forty-five minute composition, his words are attenuated and blurred until they finally become unintelligible as language. For Lucier, the piece describes “the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech.”¹ John Cage once defined music as sound plus time; Meza, like Lucier, adds a third element to the recipe: architecture.

We perform our presence.

As an undergraduate, Meza studied performance art; one of his early artistic models was Joseph Beuys, a sculptor, performer, and self-styled shaman who believed that creative energy, properly applied, could change the world. Beuys invented the term Social Sculpture to describe a process in which collective human energy is applied to the creation of new social, political, and cultural forms.

There is a humanistic, utopian strain in Meza’s work, too, and he tends to emphasize openness rather than exclusivity. In **The Burning Question** (2004–05) he embraced the concept of “copyleft” (as opposed to copyright), which proposes a new paradigm for understanding the distribution and ownership of ideas and cultural products.² In **Found Voice, Solo Museum** Meza looks at the various hierarchies on which museums are built. He asks us, and himself, “whether a museum is a public space, a private space, or both, and how one’s relationship to a museum is enacted on a daily basis, how it is controlled, how it shifts.”³ He proposes a model that equalizes the roles of artist, museum worker, and visitor. He finds that model through his own performances as both museum visitor and artist.

During the late 1990s Meza spent three years studying Butoh dance, an indefinable form that has been described as a funneling of energy from the environment to the audience through the body of the dancer.⁴ One could think of **Found**



Voice, Solo Museum as a Butoh performance, a kind of feedback loop in which Meza absorbed the psychic and sensory energies inside this building, reduced them to a primal sonic substance, and transmitted them back to us. In that sense, his answer to the question “Who performs the museum?” might be formulated this way:

Everyone who enters this building—every artist, visitor, and staff member—performs the shifting social architecture of the museum, which is in constant motion. I can show you. Please listen.

- ¹ Excerpt from Alvin Lucier, **I Am Sitting In a Room** (1970).
- ² For a description of this work, see <http://abinadimeza.net>.
- ³ Meza in an e-mail to the author, Feb. 15, 2008.
- ⁴ For more information, go to www.butoh.net.

Joan Rothfuss is a writer and art historian who was a curator at the Walker Art Center for more than seventeen years. She has organized exhibitions of work by Jasper Johns, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Conner, Fluxus, Yoko Ono, and many others, and she has written widely on contemporary art. She is currently working on a biography of the avant-garde cellist Charlotte Moorman.

Abinadi Meza is represented by Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis.

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Abinadi Meza: Found Voice, Solo Museum

April 4 to May 25, 2008
Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program Gallery

Opening Reception
Thursday, April 3, at 7 P.M., MAEP Gallery

Gallery Talk
Thursday, April 10, at 7 P.M., MAEP Gallery

Critics' Triologue
Thursday, May 1, at 7 P.M., MAEP Gallery
With critic Kristin Makholm

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

For more information about the artist, this exhibition, and MAEP, visit
abinadimeza.net

MAEP: www2.artsmia.org/wiki

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