

ART

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Georgina Starr
Interviewed by Maria Walsh

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Hearing Voices

Georgina Starr interviewed
by Maria Walsh

The Leeds born, London-based artist discusses hearing voices and other paranormal phenomena, including séances, palm readings and hallucinations, as ways of getting in touch with the mother voice.



Quarantaine, 2020, video

Maria Walsh: I would like to begin with the 2010 work *I am a Record* as it seems to mark a midpoint in your interest in spiritualist and paranormal phenomena between earlier work and more recent pieces, in particular the new film *Quarantaine*, which you produced for this year's Glasgow International. For *I am a Record* you pressed 80 vinyls from your personal archives, beginning with your first tape back in 1992, *Whistle*, up to a 2009 recorded compilation of séances you attended, *I am the Medium*. I believe you became more involved with psychic mediums around 2010 after meeting Ronaldo Wright, is that so?

Georgina Starr: *I am a Record* was almost a portrait of the previous 20 years of work, partly fictional and partly real, which is inherent in all the work I have made. I started to see mediums around that time too. I met Ronaldo, who had been going to see mediums all his life, when I was making the film *THEDA* around 2006. He had drawn movie stars in the 1950s and he did some drawings for me. For *Getting to Know You* in 1995 I went to see people such as palm readers,

graphologists and numerologists, trying to see if I could get to know a stranger by using all of those paranormal phenomena. So, when Ronaldo started telling me about the psychics he had seen, I had this idea to visit a different psychic medium every month for a year to see if it was possible to somehow create a work from that - so that a work almost gets predicted. *I am a Record* was also reflecting back on very early sound works, including one key work, *The Voices* from 1991, which is a recording I made when I was at the Slade School of Art. I had heard this crackling or whispering sound coming from an old radiator and I started recording it over a period of weeks. The sound reminded me of the voices I used to hear in my head when I was a child. Questioning who those voices belonged to - was it an imagined voice, did the voice exist or was it from another place? - is something that has ended up running through nearly all the works I have made, especially the sound works.

The location of voice is certainly a question. It's somehow both inside and outside, yet neither in one place nor the other.

I went to see a doctor when I was young and they said I was experiencing auditory hallucinations. The idea that you could hallucinate and it wouldn't be visual but auditory, that's quite fascinating to me. It only happened a few times over a year when I was a kid and we never really got to the bottom of it, but it was something that stayed with me. When I heard this voice in the radiator, I thought: 'Is that the voice?' I began recording other voices to try to unravel what these voices were saying. I started to record people's conversations in cafes and then use their dialogue to invent scenarios. The 1993 work *Mentioning* used recordings of stranger's voices as subtitles and the voice in *Static Steps* from 1992 is really key to my early use of voice. I wanted this instructive voice, which comes up again in *Quarantaine* and in *Before Le Cerveau Affamé* from 2013. The instructional voice that guides and directs the dance in *Static Steps* is an old-fashioned male 'BBC' announcer voice. The video shows the flimsiest of movements, but the voice lent it authority. This idea of a voice directing from outside the picture is definitely particular to all the work.

In *Before Le Cerveau Affamé* and *Quarantaine* that authoritative voice is a woman's, which gives it a different inflection. There is almost a kind of dominatrix or sadistic aspect to it.

I see it more as a reflection of a maternal voice or an authoritative teacher, the first voice you might hear as a child. My own mother's voice has really become an important part of my work, not so much in recent works, but for *Mum Sings Hello* I recorded her singing the Lionel Richie song *Hello* in 1993 then every year until 2009 I re-recorded it from tape to tape, her voice slowly disintegrating.

The mother's voice, I would say, is both disciplinary and caring. Being haunted by the maternal voice is something that pervades culture - one thinks of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

There is that sinister side, but, for me, it's more about repetition. With *Mum Sings Hello*, the song starts as a sort of love song but as it distorts it turns into a lament and then eventually into something that's actually quite aggressive, terrifying and demanding - I am interested in this aspect of the maternal voice. The idea that you transform into your mother was one I played with when I was making *THEDA*.

I think *THEDA* has a bearing on *Quarantaine*, no?

Absolutely. In *Quarantaine* it's as if I have vocalised *THEDA*. In *THEDA*, it was me playing a series of characters but there was no voice. It was silent. Every time it was screened it was given a new live soundtrack. Over the years, it has had full orchestras, noise bands, a soprano singer and electronic soundtracks, really various sounds played by different people. But the woman on screen is voiceless. I have now given her

a voice in *Quarantaine* through the character Pearl Mama One - the floating disembodied head in the film - played by the soprano Loré Lixenberg. But what is that voice? She is speaking a new language that we have to try to interpret.

It is like she is speaking in tongues, kind of like a hysterical conversion, but I noticed in the credits that some of *Quarantaine*'s music is from Pauline Oliveros and I wondered whether it was that part of the film.

Yes, you've got it there. Oliveros's 'Bye-Bye Butterfly' plays over the scene where the two main characters climb through a large ear - ascending to the next level - and the score becomes a key to what follows. The floating head of Lixenberg as Pearl Mama One, who is wearing a secret earpiece playing Oliveros's music, attempts to vocalise the sound she is listening to - what you have just heard in the previous scene. It is an electronic sound, which some people actually find almost difficult to listen to. It can hurt your ears.

Is there a Pearl Mama Two?

There is, but I haven't introduced her yet.

It's like you have invented your own female cosmogony. *Quarantaine* started to make more sense to me when I went back and looked at footage of the performance in *Before Le Cerveau Affamé*. All the symbols obviously have a meaning for you, and they relate to each other, but if a viewer wants to enter these worlds devoid of men, would they have to do a lot of background tracking?

Definitely not. The best way to enter is by knowing nothing about it and you just come to it like an initiate. That's how I like to approach things. Of course, there are clues and keys to unlock but, actually, there are so many ways to unlock them. I have mentioned the Oliveros scene, but I don't think it matters at all if anyone knows that Lixenberg has the sound in her ear. I'm telling you because we're talking about it but what you got from it by not knowing that was actually far more interesting. For me the sound she is making with her voice is almost transcendent - where is she getting that information from? It relates to the psychic medium as well - what are these sounds she is channeling? I love the belief in a credible other world. I think that's why I went to see all these mediums before. That also goes back to the fact that I was brought up a Catholic. I went to a convent school and my more recent work, especially *Quarantaine*, is very much connected to all that. It's about my first experiences of watching how women talk. I remember one of my favourite teachers when I was about six or seven, the way she moved her mouth. Her lips would press together when she spoke, they would stick for a second before she parted them, because she was wearing lipstick. When I was instructing Loré to do the singing for Pearl Mama One, I was recalling this first teacher.

The idea that you could hallucinate and it wouldn't be visual but auditory, that's quite fascinating to me. It only happened a few times over a year when I was a kid and we never really got to the bottom of it, but it was something that stayed with me.



THEDA, 2007, video

With *Quarantaine* I was also thinking about certain kinds of alternative educational systems, such as the Kodály Method, which is a method of teaching music for children invented by Zoltán Kodály in Hungary in the mid 20th century. I was also looking at Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman's approach to music education and the Barbara Mettler method of teaching dance. They were all working in the early to mid 20th century when people were trying to find new ways of educating people, especially children. These kinds of alternative educational methods definitely informed some of the things that happen in *Quarantaine*, especially the scene when the women move around the solar-lunar lights.

And prior to that scene, the women are in a grey room which is very like a school.

For me, this grey room has the purgatorial feel of waiting. Firstly, are you going to be chosen to get the card reading? Will the right cards appear to allow you to go on to the next level? The scene has something to do with a waiting room in a hospital or in a fertility clinic - behind the card reader hangs a curtain made from 600 blown eggs. I was thinking about where women might wait filled with hope or dread that they are either going to have a child or going to be told they're ill. The cards being dealt are my own predictive card deck - it's called *Le Cerveau Affamé*.

I find it very interesting how the same symbols reappear in completely different iterations in your work. For example, *The Hungry Brain* was part of your 1996 installation *Hypnodreamdruff* and then it reappears as sculptural brains made from chewing gum in *Before Le Cerveau Affamé*.

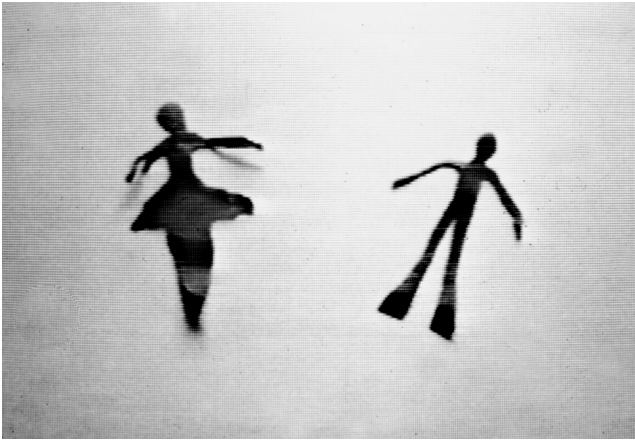
Well, *Le Cerveau Affamé* translates as 'the hungry brain'. In *Hypnodreamdruff*, *The Hungry Brain* was

a nightclub installation, but it was also a dream recounted by a character in one of the videos. The reference came from an earlier work of mine from 1994-95, *Visit to a Small Planet*, which was named after the 1960 Jerry Lewis film in which he goes to a club called 'The Hungry Brain'. I always loved this title and the idea of a brain that things would stick to and be devoured by. The bubblegum brains in *Before Le Cerveau Affamé* came directly from that. They are made from masticated bubblegum chewed by lots of sculpture students at the Cooper Gallery in Dundee where I initially made that piece. The brain also became one of the motifs for the cards *Le Cerveau Affamé*. There were four suits - the cat, the brain, the hand and the bubble - in that pack of cards which I made eight years ago. It was my own tarot. Each card had an illustration and a poem that accompanied it. In the performance of *Before Le Cerveau Affamé*, as the cards got turned, a vinyl record played a female voice reciting poems which directed the actions being performed.

The symbology of the bubblegum bubbles in *Before Le Cerveau Affamé*, what you call a sculptural breath, recurs in *Quarantaine*, again connecting the two works.

When I made the *Before Le Cerveau Affamé* show I had actually been building up to making a film, but I didn't have the funding to do it. You could say that *Quarantaine* has been almost eight years in the making as it really started with the pack of cards I created for *Before Le Cerveau Affamé*.

In both works you use large-scale black-and-white photographic prints of women dancers - kind of 1920s flappers - with bubblegum bubbles issuing from their mouths and vaginas. Where do these images come from?



Static Steps, 1992, video

As I was starting to choreograph some of the movements for the cards in 2013, I was looking at pictures of dance lessons from the 1940s and 1950s and also dance postures in old Chinese scripts of the Dao Yin Tu, and I came across a black-and-white image of three women standing in an interior. The women were pulling their skirts up and looking at each other exposed. I started to find more images that were definitely taken by the same person in similar environments. The women weren't always naked, they might just be standing or sitting around lounging. And then I found the one with the woman falling back with her legs spread open, a dynamic position that for me became about defiance. That's when I became interested in *Anasyrma*, which is an ancient performative action connected to women in mythology, religious rituals and also battle situations. For example, in some instances, if people were under attack, the women would pull up their skirts in defiance to ward off the enemy. *Anasyrma* appears in *Quarantaine* in the street poster at the start of the film and also the repeating visual symbols of the 'V' shapes. I did become quite obsessed with finding where these old photographs came from and in the end discovered that the women were prostitutes photographed in hotels around Paris. What fascinated me about them was that there was no sexual act in any of the photos, it was all about the women showing themselves to one another. I had already started thinking about the bubble as a sculptural motif. I began placing it on the women, sometimes in their mouths, sometimes on their vaginas, not to cover them, but to make a collaboration between this first sculptural breath and the women. It felt like liberating them from the original voyeuristic lens.

The bubbles are transparent and they seem to be ejecting something.

It was really to do with birth and with the idea of the first sculpture - as a child, what was the first sculpture you made? I thought about how I blew this bubble of breath and the breath that was contained in it was my own but it was also an object. This idea of the first sculptural breath ended up being a really important part of *Before Le Cerveau Affamé* and the idea of birth returns in *Quarantaine* because of The Ear. The Ear refers back to the old Marian story about the Virgin Mary. The sacred profundity of the ear - Mary is impregnated via her ear. I love the idea that the seed was planted in the ear because then it becomes about listening, so that hearing something is the birth of



Moment Memory Monument, 2017, video and performance

something. In *Quarantaine*, the two women have gone through the purgatorial level where they get their cards read and then, the next time you see them, they are naked beneath the ear, reborn. That scene is very clearly about going back to nothing - zero. The hand slapping that then ensues is a reference to when they used to slap a baby at birth to encourage the first breath or cry. Hands hold many meanings in my work, some obvious, some more complex, but when the slapping happens in *Quarantaine*, it is this moment when the two women come to life and begin their new journey.

I found it violent. The red-painted handprints on their bodies inevitably suggest blood.

I see them as scars or birthmarks. There are a lot of references to Jacques Rivette's early films in *Quarantaine*. In *Celine and Julie Go Boating* from 1976, a red hand keeps appearing on the girls in the film, but it's never really explained. This idea of being marked but not knowing where it comes from also relates to the stigmata that miraculously appear on people's hands. I can talk forever about hands in film history and mythology, but in *Quarantaine* I call them 'the hands of Ilona Andor', in reference to one of Kodály's main girls' choir conductors. I had the idea that her hands were somehow set free to guide and direct the action in my film.

Most of your video installations include a live performance element, whereas *Quarantaine* is a purely single-screen work. Is this a new development?

Did you see my *Androgynous Egg* performance at Frieze in 2017? *Androgynous Egg* was like a prelude to *Quarantaine*. In the performance, the voice is issued from a disembodied head on a magic table, and in *Quarantaine* this becomes Pearl Mama One. The performance was me experimenting with movement and choreography and even the kind of costumes I wanted to use. Filmmaking becomes a lot easier when you have done something live because the amount of rehearsal you have to do for a live event is that much more intense than in filmmaking. When it's live, you only have one chance to get it right.

***Memory Moment Monument* of 2017, which was also going to be shown at Glasgow International, has a big sculptural brain at the centre of it, yet another iteration. How did that come about?**

I always had an idea of making a really giant version of the brain, so when I was commissioned by the Italian company Alcantara, which makes a special upholstery material which feels like suede but is man-made, I thought I could use this material to make *The Brain*. During my visit to their factory near Rome, I was reminded of Alain Resnais' 1968 film *Je t'aime, Je t'aime*. I've long had an interest in this film, which is about a suicidal man who gets taken by doctors to this strange industrial complex - a kind of underground medical institute - which reminded me of the factory where the material was being made. The idea is that the doctors are going to experiment on him to try to eliminate his depression. They place him inside this oversized brain, a time machine, where he will travel back to one moment in his life when he was happy, then he can be cured. There are two specific parts to *Memory Moment Monument*. There is the enormous brain object called *The Sphere*, then outside of this you have ten performers manning a sort of memory laboratory. During the performances, two female performers - *The Sun* and *The Moon* - choose a member of the gallery audience to enter *The Sphere*. You get to spend six minutes inside. You'll hear a voice. The voice is reciting a text that I wrote, a sort of meditative descriptive journey that takes you back to retrieve a memory. You have one minute of silence to experience the past before being brought back. And people do travel back in time. It's almost impossible not to because you are alone in a very beautiful, comfortable environment and the texture of voice, which is the key, lulls you towards a memory. In France the voice was Hermine Karagheuz's, the French actress from early Rivette films. In Glasgow it is planned to be the actress Gabrielle Drake, sister of Nick and daughter of Molly Drake. I wanted an older female voice to guide you, a kind of maternal otherworldly teacher. Hermine's voice was perfect because she is from another era. I was also thinking about the instructional voice of Radio Rorschach in Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*. As well as working with Rivette, Hermine also had a connection to Cocteau.

Recently you have been writing a novel. How do you see this element of your practice? Is it a prequel to making installation work or does it go hand in hand with it?

I started *The Discreet Dash* around 2015 or so. I was approached by someone who wanted to start publishing artist novels. That project didn't happen but at the time I thought, I'm just going to start writing and see what happens. I spent maybe about a year or so researching and writing and then I got other projects so I stopped, but the writing has definitely fed into the works of the past few years. It fed into *Androgynous Egg*, for sure. For that project I was originally supposed to be doing a reading from my novel, but I didn't think it was an interesting idea for me to sit reading from a book, so I had the idea to do a performance based on the beginning of the novel. The novel begins with a text which is spoken in a voice that you're not sure is human. It could be another type of creature, possibly alien or other. Pearl Mama One is a character mentioned in that first section of the novel so there are things spilling out from the book all the time, although I haven't quite finished it yet.

Who are your literary inspirations?

I'm interested in many of the female surrealist writers and poets, the ones that have often been overlooked, like Lise Deharme, Sonja Sekula, Olga Orozco and Ithell Colquhoun. I also love Anna Kavan. Those writers all informed this work and also Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet*. When I read Colquhoun's *Goose of Hermogenes* around 2010, it was exactly where I was at. It is these female writers who are *The Voices* - it is all of them that became the *Mother voice*. When I am writing my novel, I feel like I am inside one of my installations. It's a really powerful place to be. It's as if I am inside *Quarantaine*. I have gone into the tree, climbed through the ear hole and I am finally inside.

Georgina Starr's *Quarantaine*, commissioned and produced by Film and Video Umbrella, The Hunterian, Leeds Art Gallery, Glasgow International and Art Fund, was to be premiered at Glasgow International this month, but the festival has been postponed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Maria Walsh is a writer and co-editor of the anthology *Twenty Years of MAKE Magazine: Back to the Future of Women's Art*.



Quarantaine, 2020, video