

“I give you my word, as I have nothing else to give you.”  
— Etel Adnan, **Premonition**

### **First Place**

Speaking about the films of Harun Farocki at Artists Space in September 2015, Thomas Elsaesser stated, “Cinema has many histories. Not all of them belong to film.” **Love Sounds** has many histories, not all of which belong to cinema or writing. Using film to write, and film dialogue to think about the voices of love, **Love Sounds** is about what one medium does to, for, with (and without) another. It is one version of history, one version of the essay, one version of a couple. Cinema is made acousmatic in order to consider the loss of a public discourse of love post-cinema. Language is the problem I return to over and over in my work in order to understand a century’s relationship to love and emotion. But also: my own relationship to a new century that no longer loves out loud. The writer and artist Hannah Black recently described a video work of hers as “a technology of relationship.” In the same way that the face was a technology of cinema, the voice, now muted by the internet’s scattered, tone-deaf affects, was once the medium of love. The Latin root of voice is sermon, learned talk, conversation, manner of speaking, discourse, literary style. Love is an affective geography and vocabulary that we inherit and still haven’t invented.

### **Sound System**

I’ve spent my life tracking and mourning language. It’s why I started writing as a child. Not to tell stories, but to produce taxonomies, epistemologies, and inventories of the stories we tell. We make lives out of language and we can never fully succeed at making our lives work because of language. An archive is a form of shelter. **Love Sounds** is a shelter that could only be made into shelter by being made. What I ask the listener to listen to, I’ve already listened to, meaning the listening is doubled. When I was little I played “secretary” for the sole purpose of organizing affects. Adult things were impersonated and made future tense. I pretended to answer the phone and used my voice to resolve the conflicts that came in through the imagined phone line. The fantasy phone calls I received



were long and elaborate and required constant problem solving. I wanted to say things, to test everything out with words. I wanted to answer calls. To take messages. One of the etymologies for archive is public records. But also, literally, “beginning, origins, first place.” The first place of **Love Sounds** were these childhood stagings. **Love Sounds** is also my mother and father. Their love story is my origin story, my first place. One way to look at/listen to love that works is to look at/listen to love that doesn’t. Because my mother and father never broke up, the question of an ordinary split that never structured my life has structured my life. One first place of modernity is cinema, the last place for love. **Love Sounds** is an archive of missteps.

### **Aural History**

Growing up I talked into a tape recorder. I didn’t film things with a Super 8 or a video camera. I watched movies. Actually I listened to them and remembered what people said. I never remember narratives. I don’t really understand plot. What I feel about faces is mostly tonal. Love is about giving your word to someone. I made audio recordings by covering up the holes in music cassettes with masking tape, then I layered my own voice over them. A video store clerk taught me this trick while I was renting a movie once. I didn’t buy blank cassettes. I recorded over the Temptations, Boy George, an early orange-colored Madonna album I bought in Belgrade while traveling from Russia to Italy on a three-day train trip with my parents. I talked into a tape recorder in our New York laundry room/storage closet with the lights off for hours. Also in my bed at night. I performed skits. I performed monologues about the passing of time and the inevitability of death. I talked about what school was like, which I described as a more positive experience than it was. I sang refrains from my favorite pop songs. Like Boy George’s “Do you really want to hurt me? Do you really want to make me cry?” I impersonated people. I imitated their voices. Each cassette was a calendar in the form of audio fragments recorded and amassed over the period of a year or more. Two sides, A and B. Later boyfriends made me mix tapes and recorded audio letters to me. I saved the cassettes from my family’s answering machines. The first boy I ever loved once received a phone call at my house, where a bunch of friends were partying while my parents were upstate for the weekend. When he answered the phone, the machine kept recording. “Brian, I think we’re being *re-re-re*-recorded,” he stuttered nervously. I listened to this telephone scene for years, not having any photographs of him to look at (I was too shy to take any) or refer to for memory. Years before we became a couple, and years after we first met as children, I got to know my first love by listening to him walk around his room in his 5th floor apartment, which was one floor above my friend’s bedroom. I often went to her house just to study his sound. I’d hear him come home, I’d hear him go into his room, I’d hear him practice his drums, I’d hear him fall into bed. The phone calls of friends and ex-boyfriends were also on



those thin black cassette ribbons, now warped. I liked the way you could pull a tape out of its player, find the ribbon stretched out and tangled, and wind it back in with a pencil. One summer I kept an audio diary for a boyfriend while he was in London and I was in New York. I never ended up posting the audio diaries back to England. In them, I can now hear what everyone else heard in my voice then when I would return to New York for short visits: that my New York accent had become Anglicized. As soon as I opened my mouth in NYC, everyone would come back with, “Where are you from?” I’d say, “Here.” Now, years later, everyone tells me I sound like a quintessential New Yorker again. What does that sound like, I ask? I have been recording my sessions with Tarot readers and astrologers since the summer of 2000, building a small archive from the things I want to know about my life but can’t. The first recorded reading was in Prague, the second London. On a few occasions, I cried on tape, in front of the diviners, when they told me I couldn’t have who or what I thought I wanted. Every single reading gave me hope in the form of a voice I could play back and listen to. It was the repetition of listening to cumulative readings on an ongoing question, not the predictions themselves, that gave me insight into the future.

### **Immaterial Trilogy**

**Love Sounds** is the last work in an immaterial trilogy. All three installments interface formally and thematically. Each project establishes a relation to epistemological and phenomenological surfaces — the screen, the face, the voice, the page, gender. Epistemology itself is a surface that I rework and explore. In “Ever Since This World Began,” an audio-visual essay from **Love Dog**, the second installment in the trilogy, I use a singer (Judy Garland) and a song (“The Man That Got Away”) to consider the gendered phenomenology of the female voice by visualizing the aural. In my writing about faces, I look at the tonal affects — the things a face voices and a voice faces — of a face. In **Love Sounds**, I use a visual medium — cinema — to listen to the voice of emotional labor through time. During the silent era of film, the face was treated as a kind of voice. The screen face was seen as audible affective geography. The book is no longer an insular form. Nor is it restricted to the page. Today’s book is a curated space that interacts with and moves through many other spaces and forms. **Love Sounds** is one version of a book.

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Visit [www.thirdrailquarterly.org](http://www.thirdrailquarterly.org) for video from the 4-hr cut of **LOVE**, Part VIII of Love Sounds of **Love Sounds**, a 24-hour audio-essay on love in English-speaking cinema that dematerializes cinema’s visual legacy and reconstitutes it as an all-tonal history of critical listening.

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