

Staff, "Harry Shearer", The Old Gold, January 26, 2009.



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Harry Shearer

After a seemingly endless election period, Harry Shearer's *The Silent Echo Chamber*, now at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, feels like the appropriate palette cleanser. While Shearer is mostly known as the voice of many Simpsons characters and for his various collaborations with Christopher Guest, it is less known that he has been exhibiting these videos of "found" live feeds since 1992. It's surprising how enthralling and fun it is watching television screens of public figures sitting, doing nothing while waiting to go on air.

The Silent Echo Chamber at the Aldrich closes on Feb 8. See my interview with Shearer below:

Jon Lutz: Your various projects really seem to compliment each other and bring something different to the table. The same could be said for *The Silent Echo Chamber*. Can you talk about the impetus to create this work? How long have you been making videos?

Harry Shearer: I had started collecting these images when I realized that we were in the first generation of humans where so much ordinary behavior of so many well-known people was being videographed, and that somebody should be collecting it, after which I nominated myself. So, at some point, it seemed interesting to assembled the images for public view, and the art world seemed the most congenial place to do it. I started with a show called *Telesthesia*, a word I'd like to think I made up, at the Fullerton Museum in Orange

County, CA, in, I think, 1989. Then came Barney's windows in NYC in 1992 for the figures involved in the Democratic Convention in the city, then *The Wall of Silence* at MOCA's Santa Monica storefront, commemorating the OJ trial circus, and then a long pause before the Conner Contemporary Art gallery in D.C. invited me in 2004 to do what became *Face Time*, the immediate predecessor of this show.

JL: Do you see yourself as a “video artist?”

HS: I see myself as a guy who puts these shows together. The term "video artist" is relevant only in the sense that gives people a recognizable category into which to insert this stuff.

JL: Your long running radio show, *Le Show*, features your recap of the lesser-known, but significant news stories of the week. You approach the details of these stories with a dry mix of sarcasm, humor, and critique. With *The Silent Echo Chamber*, it appears that you have taken a more objective or contemplative approach. The biting wit is replaced with a powerful ambiguity that emerges while watching figures like Karl Rove stare blankly, James Carville fidget, or Joe Biden eat a sandwich. Is there any kind of critique here of these individual personalities or is it solely up to the viewer to come to their own conclusion?

HS: That's one reason I enjoy doing this in an art context: much more conducive to ambiguity, multiple meanings, or total lack of meaning, than the comedy/satire world, where you really care whether the audience "gets the point." There's much less critique intended here, although some may occur to some viewers. But I think, in terms of what these shows mean to me, they're much more about the contrast between TV as we know it--basically, to a large extent, radio with pictures--and the possibilities of a truly visual medium.

JL: Most of the figures are politically involved, but then you throw in people like Dr. Phil. Are your choices of subject matter colored by any personal experiences with these people or comments upon the entertainment/news business in general?

HS: Choices constrained by two factors: the ubiquity of these people, and my ability to access images of them.

JL: In one case, Ben Stein and Henry Kissinger are shown, at different times, on the same screen. Given that they bear some resemblance to each other, there is some evidence that you have done some subtle constructing and arranging for humorous effect. Is this deliberate or merely coincidental?

HS: I'm very scrupulous--or obsessive--about not editing or altering the videos. It's too easy, and then it's about me. Kissinger and Stein showed up on the same screen because neither of them is in the immediate current spotlight, a la the other folks, yet they both amuse me. And, of course, that's the Jewish screen.

JL: You have also appeared on cable news shows many times. Is any part of these about your experience of waiting to go on air? Is there an inside joke here or something going on that someone not familiar with television production might not know about these clips?

HS: No, as a matter of fact, there's no joke. Well, if there is a joke, I guess it's that never before in human history has so much valuable time been spent by so many "important" people sitting around doing nothing. That may be a distinctive mark of our era. Or of our (former) prosperity.