

ISSY-LES-MOULINEAUX, FRANCE

## Cécile Babiolo and Laurent Dailleau

### AUDITORIUM D'ISSY-LES-MOULINEAUX

Layering sampled speech and sounds created with an analog synthesizer, Laurent Dailleau's music for the performance *Mexican Standoff*, 2008, fueled a tension that never slackened in its nearly fifty minutes. In response, Cécile Babiolo's live video projection showed details of publicity stills in a series of continuous shots that felt like one long take. Concocting film sequences within individual film stills, the shots glide over each print at close range in short, straight paths, pausing briefly before changing direction. Part of the Cube Festival of digital art that takes place every three years in the Paris suburb of Issy-les-Moulineaux, this performance involved a minimum of bodily presence but also a minimum of visible technology. Watching artist Babiolo and composer Dailleau, equipped with little more than laptops and facing each other from opposite ends of the stage before the huge projection screen, it was impossible to perceive who was doing what. But one thing was certain: The picture and music each held its own and made for a riveting showdown.

Strictly speaking, *Mexican Standoff* has a script and a score, but improvisation is written into both. Dailleau's music, which sets the rhythm for the whole, is a fifteen-part piece with spoken recordings taken from films, television, talks, interviews, readings, language learning tapes, and the street. Dailleau generated all other sounds on a Serge synthesizer, which he describes as having its own specific, almost acoustic sound. Stored on his computer, each sound can be played at will. Nine spoken refrains automatically play every minute, gradually increasing in frequency. From *Mexican Standoff*'s ever-changing strata of sound, women's voices stand out: Deadpan, workaday words like Patti Smith's "Well . . ." or an anonymous "Who are they kidding?" punctuate the performance at opportune moments.

For the visuals, Babiolo made no use of a camera, but rather had devised a way to zoom into and travel over still images stored on her computer and to seamlessly jump from one to another in real time. The stored files are scans of publicity stills from the 1960s through the '80s printed for display in movie theaters. Thus the shots, which stayed up close throughout, reveal not the grain of film emulsion but a halftone screen, evoking Richard Prince's rephotography or Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's static shots of newspapers, magazines, and publicity stills in *Letter to Jane* (1972). However, unlike those precedents, Babiolo's shots are always on the move, more magnified, and above all, they linger no more on faces and objects than on the rest of the picture.

Despite a feeling of familiarity that persists throughout the performance, one probably hadn't seen most of the stills' sources, many of them obscure B movies. Also included are a few scans of magazine covers from the late '40s. Babiolo describes the project as one enormous, muddled picture of personal and collective reminiscence. The layering of analog and digital techniques for production and reproduction is central to the work's meaning, but *Mexican Standoff* is no mere display of technique. The shots Babiolo invents are compelling, not least because they run counter to the publicity stills' intended narrative, but also because they don't subscribe to art-historical and theoretical analyses that break down compositions into trusty diagrams of formal and psychological relationships. Now and then the seemingly continuous take goes to a block of text in the corner of a scan: a pithy quote, but from a different movie than the one depicted. Many of those quotes also appear as sound clips in Dailleau's music, but never at the same time as the text. In *Mexican Standoff*, corresponding elements are always rifted out of sync so as to give us enough room to see or hear something for ourselves, in a different manifestation and frame of reference.



Cécile Babiolo and Laurent Dailleau, *Mexican Standoff*, 2008, still from a live video projection and sound performance, approx. 48 minutes.

—Jian-Xing Too