

**Wendell Bruno**  
**Sounds from the Black**  
by Ebony L. Haynes

v tape

The 2011-12 Vtape Fellowship Essays

3 essays produced in association with the  
Curatorial Incubator v.9:

**GOING SOLO:**

**On the unfamiliar beauty of solitude**

The innovative mentoring project Vtape's Curatorial Incubator continues to generate crucial writing and analysis of contemporary media arts. Julia Paoli - then a recent graduate of the curatorial program at Bard College in New York, now assistant curator at the Power Plant in Toronto - was awarded the Curatorial Incubator residency for 2011-12. Her solo exhibition of Aleesa Cohene included single channel projections as well as site (and scent)-specific installations at Vtape. Paoli's monograph on Cohene's work is being included in an up-coming catalogue on the artist's work published by Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne.

When Paoli was selected, three other emerging curators - Ulysses Castellanos, Alvis Choi, and Ebony Haynes - were awarded Fellowship opportunities which included support for their research and professional editing for their essay on the artist of their choice.

We extend our appreciation to the editors for their work on these texts: artist and writer Luis Jacob worked on Ulysses Castellanos' essay about the early works of Tasman Richardson and Jubal Brown (JAWA Collective); Steve Reinke, artist and academic currently teaching at Northwestern University in Chicago edited Alvis Choi's essay on Rodney Werden; curator and Assistant Professor in the Criticism and Curatorial program at OCAD University Andrea Fatona edited Ebony Haynes' essay on Wendell Bruno.



**Wendell Bruno: Sounds from the Black**

by Ebony L. Haynes

**[throat singing]**

**[metal clanking]**

**[fire crackling]**

-The Landscape Within (1993)

**[strings]**

-Media Black Male (1991)

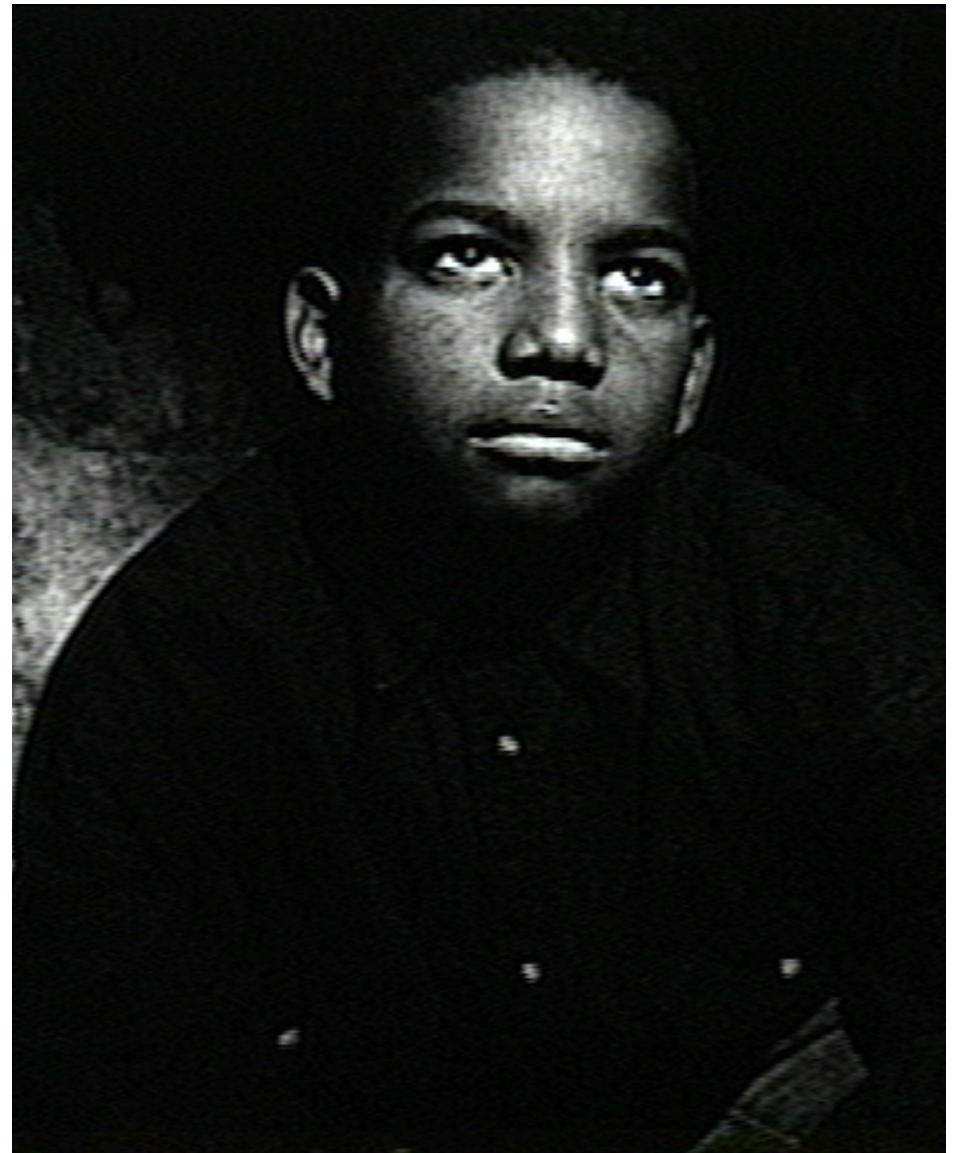
**[water drum]**

**[increasing heartbeat]**

-I and I Outlook (1994)

Images projected through black and white film convey a sense of nostalgia, emotional urgency, or that one needs focus and concentration to uncover something subversive. The grey scale visually intimates something serious and sincere while poetic and beautiful. Wendell Bruno made three films in the nineties, all of which were shot in black and white. Bruno's work moves between autobiography and social commentary. Through a mining of personal history and social experiences, he experimented with filming techniques, narrative, and constantly sought out new ways to create and include sound.

To accompany powerful or emotive images, the relationship between the visual and aural components of film is nothing short of noteworthy.



Wendell Bruno - "I and I Outlook"



Discussions about the formal qualities of a painting or a drawing might point to the artist's use of negative space, highlighting the main object or subject. For film, this delineating approach to breaking down formal qualities, between positive and negative space, can too be applied but more aptly as a relationship between the visual and the aural respectively.

When the aural aesthetic is brought from the surround to the foreground, the soundtrack transcends the visual portrayals of a personal experience into a shared impression. The aural aesthetic of a work can possess similar qualities and attributes when compared to the visual. The aural can be emotive, colorful and even invite a descriptive, formal language of composition. For

Bruno's first three films, *Media Black Male* (1991), *The Landscape Within* (1993), and *I and I Outlook* (1994), this relationship of negative and positive, black and white, or aural and visual space is more than symbiotic. Bruno's process of sound design and editing supports a give and take of both a potentially overshadowing while complementary alliance.<sup>1</sup>

Ways of listening are not unlike the "ways of seeing" put forth by John Berger. Berger hypothesizes on the interrelationship between the world and what we see; where what we see establishes our place in the world through a complex relationship between visuals and ideologies.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, what we listen to is not only influenced by stimulants to our other senses but aural aesthetics influence the viewer's place or familiarity with the visual. Listening to Bruno's work feels

like something in the grand beyond and yet familiar at the same time. In his introduction to *Aural Cultures*, Jim Drobnick expands upon Slavoj Žižek's theory of "looking awry" and transfers its properties onto a form of "listening awry." Žižek proposes looking from an angle in an attempt to separate what appears in the "objective view" from the "substance of enjoyment."<sup>3</sup> This reward, achieved by looking awry, can too be claimed from acts of "listening awry." As Drobnick points out, strategic and angular listening brings the often unnoticed into the forefront - uncovering a new subjective view.<sup>4</sup> For film, listening awry functions as an angle into uncovering the negative or background space.

Bruno created this selection of work at a moment where global socio-cultural concerns in art were raised specifically in the realm of Black identity. Made in the 1990s by then Ottawa-based Bruno, the three films referred to above incorporated a visual exploration of pleasure, identity and sexuality with a seemingly choreographed sound design. In actuality, the aural aesthetic to Bruno's early work went through limited editing filters and were assembled in the editing room alongside the film edits. The sounds of the works possess a Cageian aesthetic in that they are often arbitrary or emotive responses to a moment of creation. These sounds, which emanate from the black space, command an angular approach to listening.

Bruno's first film project entitled *Media Black Male* (1991) coupled the artist's personal experience with racial profiling and trends in the



media that did the same. A blend of strings combined with news sound bites introduces dancer Paul Smith, who appears against an overexposed white backdrop: "How much does the media contribute to this violence? Today there are more African Americans in the criminal justice system than there are in college. Homicide is the leading cause of death among black men, and the life expectancy for Black men in Harlem is shorter for men in Bangladesh." Piano scales accompany Smith's graceful poses while the camera moves up and down his body. A serene moment passes after an intense minute of gyrating, Smith closes his eyes, and the piano stops as his heartbeat takes over. The beat speeds up from a slow drum to a rapid heartbeat and then: "They slapped us in the face again/ They slapped us in the face again." Smith's body then appears with his face and torso painted with white streaks and a drum starts beating. Motioning across the white floor, Smith enlists a large knife to stand for his penis, as he thrusts his pelvis back and forth. Darkness soon envelopes him and we hear Bruno's voice reciting Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*:

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies.  
You may trodden me in the very dirt  
but still, like dust I'll rise.

Just like moons, like sun,  
with the certainty of tides,  
just like hopes spring high,  
still I rise.

*Media Black Male* presents a strong narrative backed by even stronger sounds. The artist's use of his voice to end a story of race and injustice



Wendell Bruno - "I and I Outlook"





suggests a correlation to the film's theme and Bruno himself. Bruno did, in fact, make the last minute decision to narrate the end, realizing that he too was a media Black male: a product of stereotypes, perpetuated by the media, with a repressed sexual and racial identity.

In his second film, Bruno's inclusion of sound became less scripted and more intuitive. *The Landscape Within* (1993) gets its title from Nigerian writer and poet Ben Okri's 1981 novel of the same name. Where Okri's protagonist grappled with his own creative aspirations, Bruno experimented with the possibility of truly subjective interpretation. The nine-minute film is surreal - with Daliesque visuals, distortion and perspective. For Bruno, this project was an investigation in pleasure; the ingredients required to experience pleasure. In the artists attempt to create a silent narrative, abstract cloud formations, dissected algebraic eye charts, and distorted bodies and body parts are included in the group of visuals, lending to the perspective morphing and investigation in, not only pleasure but, sexuality, race, and gender. In *The Landscape Within*, the aural design begins with a dijereedo-sounding sample of Diamonda Galas. While subtle cumulus formations drift on the horizon, Galas' haunting throat singing, reminiscent of a didgeridoo, moves to a rhythm seemingly apart from the rhythm on the screen. As a metal clanking begins to move to an ungrounded beat, it's sharp-sounding, and a low wind blows over. A spotlight moves across a dark room to expose a man's face-though his identity is never revealed. An uneasy close-up of a human eye brings with it the sound of crackling

fire and brief moments of operatic singing. After a pulsing eclipse, two pairs of black and white hands pass a ball back and forth and low humming tones rise as quickly as they descend-ending the film as it fades to black.

While watching the strong and sometimes haunting visuals, the sound that comes from the negative, black space functions as the film's aura. Listening from a new and involved angle or perspective-to hear what is not there-makes *The Landscape Within* exemplary of the dreams, struggles or creative aspirations of all who hear it.

*I and I Outlook* (1994) went even further into Bruno's experimentation with sound design. The film's visual narrative presents a coming-of-age story and the correlation between familial and social influences on identity formation. With stark and floating scenes and imagery, Bruno created strong, emotive scenes with discrete and impulsive instances of sound, though each resonance is off-rhythm with the subject on screen. Leading in with sounds of water and rippling metal sits a young boy followed by a shot of a manhole. A door closes on two Black men arguing in silence as a pulsing beat intensifies. Two men cross in front of a framed picture of a tree and there is the familiar sound of a Polaroid camera. A quick and intense aural attack follows: doors slamming, hissing wind, footsteps. A young boy stares through a doorway during an eerie overture of bowing notes. The camera moves from the basement-like setting into the outdoors and is met with police sirens. The ever-present footsteps quicken while a distant gunshot sounds off. As



both Black bodies, child and man, sit on the ground, the little boy smiles. Water washes over his feet while chimes ring and a memory of the sound of children playing grows dim. While the film's credits roll, the sound of a steak being hammered into the ground rings out for two minutes—long after there is anything left to read or look at.

The offbeat blend of sound with images might suggest that there are two possible narratives at play. Bruno's use of positive and negative space creates a rich conversation between two subjects, which can be uncovered but the subjective listener.

The reactions evoked while looking at Bruno's imagery, which all grapple in some way with the artist's personal struggle with Black identity, range from surreal to literal narrative depictions of generational experiences and divide. And when "listening awry," the sound design can move from the background to the foreground, creating new pleasure and even preface the forms on the screen.

All three films stem from the artist's desire to reflect on a personal and tumultuous relationship with his identity as a Black man. Influenced early on by the photography of Herb Ritts and the style of early-twentieth century filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. Micheaux's films told stories of his experiences being born and living in an era of racial oppression and Jim Crow. Though he would later experiment with "talkies," incorporating dialogue into his films once the technology allowed it, most of his forty-four films were silent. As a young film student, Micheaux became



Wendell Bruno - "I and I Outlook"



for Bruno the example of a young Black man's ability to tell his story visually and, for the most part, without speech.

Bruno hoped that sound in his films would take away the convention of harmony yet remain harmonic. The sense of symmetry between sight and sound, experienced by the viewer, may lend to the fact that Bruno edited the film and sound simultaneously and intuitively. The films' imagery emanates from personal and specific experiences of the artist, and perhaps may be a shared of familiar sight for others in forming objective conclusions and references. But when the affecting sounds of Bruno's films are met with subjective ears, the unfamiliar and often unrecognizable sounds create new sub-narratives where, when removed from the picture, advances from the background to the foreground, from black to white. ■

**Background noise may well be  
the ground of our being.**

- Michel Serres

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Comments made about the artist's process and executions come from a conversation that took place Monday January 9, 2012, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. (London: Penguin Group, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000): 13.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Drobnick, "Listening Awry" in *Aural Cultures*. Ed. Jim Drobnick (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004): 9-15.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Wendell Bruno** was born in Trinidad and Tobago but has lived in Toronto since 1994 where he works in the film industry. He holds a BFA from Concordia University in Montreal where he majored in Film Production and Film Studies. He has made five short films that examine media stereotypes of Black masculinity and, more recently, relations between fathers and sons and mothers and sons.

**Writer: Ebony Haynes** is an emerging curator and writer. She is a 2011 graduate of OCAD University's Master of Fine Arts in Criticism & Curatorial Practice program. In 2012, she was named winner of the juried C New Critics Competition by C Magazine in Toronto. She currently lives in New York City where she the Associate Director of the gallery Foxy Production.

