

## High Strung: Emily HERMANT's *Hesitations*

Tai VAN TOORN

The emotional complexities of spoken language reverberated in *Hesitations*, a sound and textile installation work by Emily Hermant featured at Articule, an artist-run centre in Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood. Hermant, a young Canadian artist based in Montreal and Chicago, created an "immersive, mixed-media environment" occupying the entire gallery.<sup>1</sup> This minimalist yet arrestingly intricate environment appeals simultaneously to vision, touch and hearing. The artist painstakingly made five large, irregular shapes out of dark grey thread wound around innumera-

cally across four walls and are connected by a single continuous thread, darting horizontally across corners. Moreover, these enigmatic arrangements of string are visual and tactile diagrams of sound waves made by voices from an audio recording playing in the gallery. Throughout this digitally manipulated soundtrack, the voices of three women and three men converse in fragments of speech—"umm," "ah," "oh," "so," "well," "uh," "hmm"—that abruptly lapse into silence. The sonic wave formations strung up on the walls comprise what Hermant calls "tactile maps of intimacy and

sculptural and textile works. The thread pieces call to mind some of Yoko Ono's 1960s conceptual artworks in which viewers were invited to hammer nails in the exhibition space. In tandem with the vocal soundtrack, Hermant's loops of cord weave interrelationships between genders through allusions to a variety of human activities and artistic media. Resembling eccentric looms, the arrays of twine reference women's artisan work and handicrafts<sup>2</sup> while the plethora of nails speaks of intensive manual labour, such as construction and renovation, conventionally perceived of as men's occupations. Akin to the strained, halting verbal encounters between female and male voices audible in the gallery, the taught strings and

delaying. These dark patches with amorphous borders against a white background are reminiscent of Rorschach ink blots used to investigate personality and neuroses. Hence, the cord traces the psychological nature of hesitations as awkward moments in conversation during which an individual's tone of voice and speech tics expose (or mask) feelings, doubts, vulnerabilities and apprehensions. To hesitate is to be potentially caught in an impasse, irresolution and even embarrassment. Dense, stylized groupings of grey string inspire other possible free associations and mental imagery: obsessive diagrams, frenetic bar graphs, distorted barcodes, edgily industrial macramé or pencil drawings of unreal cityscapes bursting with skyscrapers.

Results of this experiment in thought and perception change according to the position of the viewer in the exhibition space. When observed from a few feet away, the lines of thread appear hard-edged and almost mechanically produced. However, when beheld obliquely from a greater distance, the work unexpectedly dissolves into atmospheric haziness. String looped across different lengths and layered in varying thicknesses produces a monochromatic watercolour effect. Spiky sound waves blur into rain clouds or shadows composed of graded washes of white, pale grey, medium slate and dark charcoal. These forms appear to float, as the nails are painted white to blend with the walls.

Moreover, the exhibition's integration of the gallery's architecture subtly accentuates key details of the artwork. The monochrome palette and stark linearity of the grey thread patterns contrast with Articule's street-level storefront painted bright chartreuse and the interior of crisp white ceiling and walls, and dark brown wooden floor. Well-organized documentation about the exhibit awaited viewers in an alcove by the door without disrupting the visual pulsation of string waves across the walls. Natural light pouring in through a large window supplemented artificial lighting to illuminate the diverse textures of the

able nails hammered into the gallery walls. These jagged stretches of thread are each of a slightly different dimension and measure up to about five by seven feet. Densely grouped parallel lines stretch verti-

power."<sup>2</sup> such maps give form to the speakers' self-conscious, awkward utterances, exclamations, stammerings, glitches, delays and pauses.

Although the threaded wave forms represent aspects of the audio recording, they are also complex

bristling nails hint at both an intimate merging and a tension between the genders.

Through her distinctive method of lacing and juxtaposing thread and nails, the artist delves into themes of emotion and ambiguity associated with hesitating, pausing and



←→

Emily HERMANT,  
*Hesitations*, 2010. Mixed-media installation: thread, nails, speakers, audio recording. Sound design: Ryan T. Dunn. Voices: Tara Hills, Joseph Kramer, Ben Klaff, Natacha Stolz, Jenny Vallier, Ryan T. Dunn. Photo: Guy L'HEUREUX. Courtesy Articule, Montreal.

materials of manual labor, such as tiny nail heads, grainy thread, matte wall paint and floor varnish. During my visit, restlessly creaking floorboards and thudding footsteps on the staircase outside the building enriched the installation's playfully sputtering sonic environment.

The soundscape of *Hesitations* expands upon the textile work. Emanating from discretely placed speakers, the recording permeates the gallery just as the string winds across most of the walls. This sound-

track emphasizes the ambiguity of hesitation: viewers eavesdrop on snippets of intimate conversations during which self-conscious "hmmms" and "wellls" might either be meaningless chatter or dramatic, pivotal moments. Likewise, recurring intervals of dead air suggest both barren silence and pregnant pauses. Extended listening reveals that the speech patterns are analogous to the path of the thread. The recording plays upon the visitor's expectations by alternating solitary

voices, multiple voices and silence while the wall piece alternates between layered areas of "noise" and a single horizontal thread, connoting a lack of activity, much like a flat line on an electrocardiogram. In addition, the irregular rhythm of the work's soundtrack finds a visual counterpart in the thread patches' evoking of fantastical, asymmetric harps or piano interiors.

Partly a meditation on the lost art of conversation, *Hesitations* is above all a reflection on overlooked, uncertain details of verbal exchanges. The installation focuses on the linguistic concept of the "hesitation-form," defined as "a sound or form used deliberately or accidentally when faltering or stammering in speech."<sup>4</sup> Hermant describes the sounds made by the hesitant speakers as "a kind of substructure that holds spoken language together."<sup>5</sup> Her mixed-media environment sheds light on the potential expressiveness of the idiosyncratic non-words and gaps in

live speech, a "substructure" absent from the abbreviated written language of e-mail, text messaging and online social networking sites. Eloquently simple and aesthetically appealing, this work sets into motion a complex interplay of the visual, tactile, auditory and site-specific.

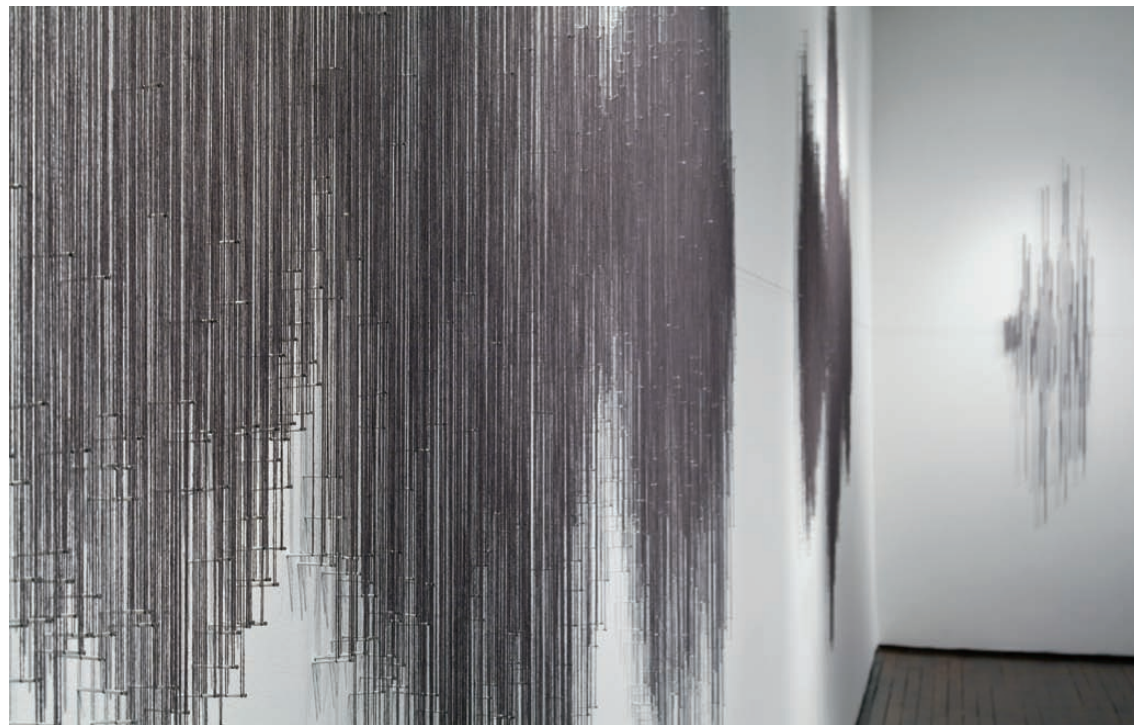
*Hesitations* offers a poignant, occasionally humorous exploration of the nuances of emotion, language, and human relationships. ←

Emily Hermant, *Hesitations*  
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September 17 – October 17, 2010

Tai VAN TOORN is completing a PhD dissertation on Canadian land art in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies of McGill University.

#### NOTES

1. "Emily Hermant (Montreal/Chicago) *Hesitations*," Exhibitions 2010-2011, Article Artist-Run Centre, [http://www.article.org/web/expositions/10-11/Hermant\\_en.html](http://www.article.org/web/expositions/10-11/Hermant_en.html).
2. "Emily Hermant," Exhibitions 2010-2011, Article.
3. Curator and artist Natalie Olanick analyzes Hermant's installation in relation to women's handiwork as well as artworks by Betty Goodwin and Colette Whiten. See Olanick, "Emily Hermant, *Hesitations*," 2010, Press section of the artist's website, [http://www.emilyhermant.com/PFDs/olanick\\_hermant.pdf](http://www.emilyhermant.com/PFDs/olanick_hermant.pdf).
4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989 ed., s.v. "hesitation, n."
5. Hermant, quoted in Robyn Fadden, "Emily Hermant's *Hesitations*: Ums and Ahs," *Hour* (Montreal), September 16, 2010, <http://www.hour.ca/visualarts/visualarts.aspx?ilIDArticle=20435>.



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