Jessica Feldman

Remarks for *Thinking Through Collapse*: roundtable on Art, Politics, and Civic
Engagement

{Show slide with screen grab from protools file}

I'm going to talk about a sound piece that I made in 2008. The image you see here is a
screen grab from the editing file in which the piece was made. I am going to leave that up
there for your contemplation and talk for a bit about the piece, and then at the end I will
play a three-minute excerpt.

So. I want to start by saying that I'm conflicted about this piece. It's not that I think it's
poorly made, but I have questions about its use and function.

The piece is called *Futility*. It is a collage of music that has been used by US forces and
intelligence for "interrogation," torture, and psychological warfare over recent years. It's
designed to be played back in a concert setting or as a looping sound installation. And,
it's horrible to listen to.

I chose this piece because it brings up many of the questions addressed by this conference
and particularly by this panel: What is the role of art in addressing or creating collapse?
What is the artist's relationship and responsibility to her subject, and to her audience?
Can art injure? Conversely, can art heal? Essentially, where do we draw the line between
"art" and "the real," and how can that line function strategically? Or does it need to be
obliterated?

I made the piece somewhat hastily in response to a request for a piece of electronic music
for a show a friend of mine was putting together. At that moment – and still now – I was
very interested in the ways in which sound affects the body and the psyche, and the
slippage between those two sites of intervention. In some ways, the piece began as an
investigation of these questions.

In other ways, the piece was a response to – and an attempt to understand – the acts of
terror and torture being perpetuated by the US government. In particular, the use of non-
lethal warfare and 'interrogation techniques' had and has become more mainstream and
widely discussed, thereby normalizing it. One of these techniques involves the use of
sound and music.

Government documents describe the use of this music as a technique named "futility". A
2005 declassified army report on investigations into allegations of detainee abuse at
Guantanamo Bay describes the technique:

"Technique: Authorized: FM 34-52 technique – Futility – Act used to highlight futility of
the detainee's situation. ... On numerous occasions between July 2002 and October 2004,
detainees were yelled at or subjected to loud music during interrogation. "

Often, this music is repeated for hours or days on end. It seems to me that the loudness and particularly the repetition is what is responsible for the "highlighting of futility."

I'm not fully sure why I decided to make this piece in the way that I did – which was to try to imagine and simulate the experience of being subjected to this technique, by creating an incessantly looping, noisy, trebly, mashup of the sounds that have been used.

At some level, this was an attempt to understand and sympathize with the subject of the technique. I have no idea if that is actually possible, but I had a need to try. I think I also had a ~~feeling~~/dream that this effort served some sort of political and humanitarian function when made public. The strange thing, however, is that these intentions resulted in my [quote] 'torturing' my audience and myself in the process. So now I have a lot of questions about how, why, and if that can be a reparative – or even useful -- action. Certainly, after making this piece, my work started to take a turn towards more sensuous or communicative forms.

In terms of how it is actually constructed: I ripped a number of files from the internet and itunes so that I could cut them up in audio editing software. I chose pieces that have been used for sonic warfare in the past. These were: Metallica, *Enter Sandman*; Barney the Purple Dinosaur, *I Love You*; Eminem, *White America* and *The Real Slim Shady*; Meatloaf, *Paradise by the Dashboard Light*; Bruce Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A.*; and Guns n Roses, *Welcome to the Jungle*.

Structurally, the piece works primarily with rhythm and recognition to attempt to create some experience of being unable to control one's environment and of having lost track of oneself in linear time. Very small, barely recognizable, particularly annoying or troubling chunks of the sound are looped, layered, and repeated. Rhythms/beats, and with them, expectations, are set up and then stymied. The intent is to create an experience in which the listener feels unable to anticipate what the sound will do to him next, but cannot help having an idea of what should come next. In working through this, the questions of time, mortality, and subjectivity presented themselves on marco and micro scales – by how many milliseconds shall I shift this little chunk of digital memory in order to best destroy narrative, and thereby create a feeling of being lost/abandoned by history?

Of course, the piece's title has a double (at least double) meaning for me – in making it, I constantly was confronted with the possibility of my own futility – as an artist, as one person, as a civilian, etc. – in the face of the issues the work is addressing and the violence the work wishes it could eradicate.

Notes added for talk at Doctoral Research Colloquium, Department of Media, Culture, and Communication, NYU (April, 2012)

The reality is that the audience can leave at their own volition, and at the end of the piece, can go back to their lives. This makes me question the validity of the proposal that art can ever really create sympathy, or that such sympathy (or even empathy) can help anything.

This piece confronts me with my fear about the futility and limits of art; and my hope for art to make meaningful interventions. When dealing with suffering and violence, the dichotomy – sometimes called false – between representation and the "real," feels very pronounced. *Yet*, something is coming full circle in this case: the means of one of the most extreme cases of "real" violence – psychological warfare and torture – is music, an art form.

The violence is in the subjection of the subject to a representation that he does not choose to experience and that he can not escape. The question of locating reality changes from "representation vs. real" to one of agency. Is it as simple as this: We are experiencing art if we choose to hear it, torture if it is inflicted upon us by another. ?

If what I made is art, how can I hope that this, a metaphorical, symbolic, fictitious gesture can ever do anything real? At the same time, why make art if not to influence the real? Can art affect change? Finally, can art make new, different worlds beyond **reacting against** the current crisis?

{play excerpt}