

Dayna McLeod

**INTIMATE KARAOKE
LIVE AT UTERINE CONCERT HALL**

From Specular to Speculative: Intimate Encounters @ Uterine Concert Hall

Essay by Alanna Thain

INTIMATE KARAOKE
LIVE AT UTERINE CONCERT HALL
Conceived and performed by Dayna McLeod



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One of the things that became apparent in those two previous iterations is that I thought it was enough for the audience for me to be literally splayed out for them to listen to. And it wasn't. The piece for me really started out as the expectations of a body marked female. — Dayna McLeod

A long, bizarre history of medicine has seen the womb as an organ prone to wandering. From Hippocrates onwards, a uterus on the move was blamed for all kinds of female troubles, and hysteria, from the Greek word for uterus, named the condition of women prone to outbursts of excessive emotion, taking up too much space. Today, the uterus is newly mobilized. From the “Fuck You” GIF where fallopian tubes give the finger to reproductive surveillance and control, to the neo-liberal imperative to make the uterus ever more useful in crafting tomorrow’s workers by providing expectant mothers with Baby Pods, pink speakers inserted in the vagina to sonically curate the “fetal experience” and cultivate baby geniuses, the uterus is taking up new space in the public imagination. Dayna McLeod’s *Uterine Concert Hall* (2016-) is a wholly novel take on these phenomena, crisscrossing social, personal and media ecologies to explore the public, speculative intimacies of this contested organ. At the heart of this work is the attempt to think and feel the physical space of the uterus as “a viable space for creative production and not reproduction.” (McLeod) In other words, what else can a uterus do?

McLeod launched *Uterine Concert Hall* in 2016 as a website, offering for rent an “intimate concert venue,” closed a few days each month for “renovations,” bookable online but not available for “frat parties, corporate events, or weddings.” This became a public performance where DJs (artists Nik Forrest and Jackie Gallant) played music for McLeod’s uterus, filtered through the internal speaker of a Baby Pod nestled in McLeod’s vaginal canal and audible

to the audience only through intimate listening via a stethoscope. In its current iteration, *Intimate Karaoke, Live at Uterine Concert Hall*, audience members take the DJs’ place; invited to perform karaoke for McLeod’s uterus, belting it out before a crowd that can’t hear the music, channelled through the Baby Pod into one-at-a-time listening sessions between McLeod and individual participants in another room. While McLeod’s work builds on the feminist legacy of performances like Annie Sprinkle’s sexy conflation of pedagogical and gynaecological fun with *Public Cervix Announcement* (1990), which invited people one at a time to examine her cervix through a speculum, McLeod’s work foregrounds and complicates questions of access and autonomy well beyond invitation, display and the visual. Her work demands better forms of sociability, where individual autonomy is inseparable from touch, contact, consent and creation.

From Autopsy to Auditioning

In the mainstream we are absolutely desensitized to what could be classified as extravagant displays of the body through advertising, entertainment, and art . . . the female body, the male body, the trans body have each been examined publicly very thoroughly. An audience often wants more and comes with a lot of expectations. — Dayna McLeod

It seems impossible to think the uterus outside of debates around abortion rights, and unethical to think it outside the violent histories of medical gynecology. For every object of individual consumer choice like the Baby Pod, there are forced transvaginal ultrasounds or other invasive forms of surveillance of uterus-bearing bodies. McLeod’s work suggestively restages a gynecological setting in ways

that speak to the attempt to pacify women's bodies. If gynecology relies on bodies that are stilled so that they can be better seen (and thus known) by doctors and other figures of authority, *Intimate Karaoke, Live at Uterine Concert Hall* shifts the terms of encounter to an audition—both an intensive attention to listening, and a try-out to become part of the show, a collaborative making.

The history of the pelvic exam in particular is one of profound violence, often enacted through the bodies of women who were rendered silent. Anesthetized patients were turned over to students, without consent or knowledge, as passive objects of investigation, and the roots of gynecology in the bodies of enslaved women, whose “social death” rendered their pain inaudible, is only now coming to light. One of the first interventions by feminists into gynecological health was through the role of gynecological teaching assistants, who—awake and aware—speak back to medical students during exams, both to improve their technique and to serve as a reminder that the uterus remains attached to a person.

In *Uterine Concert Hall*, “the performance starts with me presenting myself as something to be examined by the audience in the position of the doctor.” (McLeod) Participants “play doctor” by donning a stethoscope to listen to music through McLeod's body; McLeod, however, is in on the fun, using a double-headed stethoscope to both guide the experience, and to collaboratively listen along. Photo after photo of the event shows McLeod and participants sharing conspiratorial looks of delight, as the performance shifts from the womb's wandering to collective forms of wonder. Despite the work's construction of a shared space, some participants nonetheless feel frustration when the quality of experience is not up to their expectations. McLeod reports “aggressive demands” from people who at times have even questioned if she is misleading them when they can't tune into what is happening, as if her performing

body is “in the way” of the experience. “The demands of my body are translated into the demands on the art project and these expectations . . . I always joke, I'm not a boom box.”

One of the first people to speculate that a fetus could hear its mother's voice in the womb via bone conduction was Dr. A.A. Tomatis, who developed a practice called Audio-Psycho-Phonology. Theorizing that multiple conditions were in fact, listening problems, from weakened vocal range in opera singers to autism to difficulties in learning foreign languages, his work sought to develop devices and techniques for listening that would allow people to better function. Headphones that vibrated allowed sound to be heard via both air and bone conduction. He also developed techniques that refiltered a mother's voice to replicate sound of “the uterine night” for children to reconnect to that stage of development through a familiarity lost in the noisiness of the post-uterine world. Forrest, one of *Uterine Concert Hall*'s DJs, points out that sound is multiform, such that it is really hard to say exactly what's happening and where hearing occurs. *Uterine Concert Hall* reroutes Tomatis' key insight around the critical importance of listening, to reanimate the familiarity of pop songs via the body's creative strangeness. The non-exclusive intimacies of McLeod's work suspend what we already think we know and can perceive, doing the work of listening in the here and now.

Walking out our front door, we would never blithely put on a blindfold and head into the streets, but we think nothing of the way that noise-cancelling headphones cut us off from listening to the world around us. The currencies of the aural and the visual are not simply exchangeable. In its restaging of gynecological spaces such as the doctor's office, inverting the medicalized exposure into scenes of care, *Uterine Concert Hall* likewise reanimates autopsies into auditions. In *Intimate Karaoke, Live at Uterine Concert Hall*, McLeod reports that there is a palpable difference between those who come to listen

after already having performed a song (a task which lets them “jump the line” to listen through the stethoscope) and those that listen only. Vulnerability opens one’s body and one’s ears. You listen in a different way. “I could always tell someone who sang, because they were physically just so open . . . they had just gone through this whole vulnerability thing, and they listened and they listened more carefully than someone who didn’t sing.” (McLeod)

This is the generosity of McLeod’s piece, to share the responsibility to be vulnerable in such a way that keeps folding risk back into relation. As a speculative and durational form, the work has evolved to bring out the needs of the performer in relation to questions of care. Initially performed in lively, social spaces (a cabaret, in a public street) the newest version reworks access into different zones of encounter. McLeod is situated apart from where the audience gathers, in a space that borrows the quiet and isolation of the doctor’s office, allowing the focus of the one-on-one encounter between McLeod and visitors to the “concert hall” to be on the ability to listen and to register the presence of McLeod’s body not just as a conductor, but as the enabling conditions of experience. In the other room, individual singers are asked to be game and become a spectacle themselves. Solo singers step up to the mic to perform the karaoke soundtrack of a song they feel is right for the occasion. In their headphones they hear themselves, filtered by reverb (making everyone sound pretty good), and their audience hears only their solo voice, while McLeod and the visitors to the “concert hall” hear the mixed performance via Baby Pod and stethoscope. Performance is cut up and redistributed across an uneven playing field of response and engagement.

For McLeod, intimate karaoke allows the audience to asymmetrically access the vulnerability she lives throughout the work. It’s not equal. McLeod has yet to find a doctor willing to sign onto the project to assess and help manage the potential risks of amplifying

the vaginal canal. Her physical vulnerability is unmatched by anyone else in the work. But her ask is that others take a risk of failure and openness to meet her within the project itself. “What are you offering as an exchange rather than me being a static object which you are poking and prodding and listening to, because I thought that’s what I was critiquing.” (McLeod)

Remix and Redistribution

The uterus is a contested territory of ownership and belonging. Paparazzi photos and strangers’ hands alike think nothing of reaching towards a “baby bump” with no invitation. *Uterine Concert Hall* takes up such issues through longstanding concerns in McLeod’s work: the body made vulnerable through collaborative performance and the invitation to look, touch and engage, and our rights to the pop culture that saturates our social environment with its claims on our attention, perception, memory and feeling.

Like most technologies, the stethoscope was not invented but re-invented multiple times and in multiple places. The version we use today is a variation on a design by George Cammann, notable not just for its efficacy, but its ethics. Cammann refused to patent the design, to keep it widely accessible and freely available. An icon of medical professionalism, this tradition is still evident in something like Tarek Loubani’s recent development of a 3-D printable, open source stethoscope that, for around 3\$, can be accessed and used in under-resourced areas such as war zones and impoverished hospitals. Across her career, McLeod’s works of reperformance and remixing have long engaged questions of the commons, copyright and what we might call affective ownership. She asks: what are our rights to the pop culture that makes up the atmosphere we live and



Uterine Concert Hall. Dayna McLeod. Monument-National, Montréal, Canada.
Photo: Nikol Mikus

A SELECTION OF UTERINE CONCERT SONG REQUESTS TO DATE



Echo Beach, Martha and the Muffins
Don't Cry Out Loud, Melissa Manchester
God Save The Queen, Sex Pistols
Is that all there is?, Peggy Lee
Take on Me, A-Ha
Valley Of The Dolls, Dionne Warwick
The Body Says No, The New Pornographers
Comfortably Numb, Pink Floyd
In Heaven Everything is Fine from *Eraserhead*
Forever Young, Bob Dylan
Love is a Battlefield, Pat Benatar
Tiptoe Through the Tulips, Tiny Tim
I Think We're Alone Now, Tiffany
Welcome to the Jungle, Guns and Roses
Greased Lightening from the *Grease* soundtrack
Xanadu, Olivia Newton-John
Breathe Me, Sia
Space is the Place, Sun Ra
Hey Ya, Outkast
Don't Cry for Me Argentina
Tell it to my Heart, Taylor Dayne
Snowbird, Anne Murray
Je t'aime... moi non plus, Serge Gainsbourg & Jane Birkin
Space Oddity, David Bowie
Respect, Aretha Franklin
My Way, Elvis Presley
Get Lucky, Daft Punk
U Can't Touch This, MC Hammer
Paradise Place, Siouxsie and the Banshees
Tunnel of Love, Bruce Springsteen
You Don't Own Me, Lesley Gore
It's Oh So Quiet, Bjork
Slip It In, Black Flag
Juicy Fruit, Mtume

breathe, occupying our emotions and memories but still subject to claims of possession and ownership through copyright and control?

The stethoscope, the Baby Pod, and a third, soft technology of consumption and control, Facebook, were the starting points for this project. If the stethoscope's history reflects a commons of care, the Baby Pod signals the curiously private forms of individual ownership best signaled by pop music. McLeod first encountered the Baby Pod in a Facebook ad. If you don't already hate Christmas, but wish you did, take a look at the promotional video for the Baby Pod in which Spanish singer Soraya performs a concert of carols to a stage of "amplified" expectant mothers, awkwardly swaying as strange spectacles on stage as they "listen for two." Interpellated as a presumed mother by Facebook's crappy algorithmic mirror/personal shopping assistant, McLeod redirects expectation and surveillance into a more creative social form. Against a dynamics of reproduction of the same, McLeod has worked towards a performance in which familiarity is just the starting point for novel configurations of encounter.

Uterine Concert Hall generates unequal zones of performance, access and intimacy. At its first performance at Montréal's Darling Foundry in July 2016, McLeod's staging in the outdoor space of Darling's summer performance patio drew in and on the sheer pleasure of summer sociability. McLeod reclined on a table, propped up on a flowery lawn chair-like support, in the middle of a blocked-off street. The DJs worked at a table a short distance away, while a long line up snaked away from the table into other parts of the street. Access to the "show" of listening to the music in the "concert hall" drifted across gossip clusters of people waiting in line, the spectacles of the radically different performance styles of the DJs, reading the music off their bodies moving in the heat and fading light, and at the heart of the scene the cozy clusters of people listening one at a time

to and with McLeod. Her fabulous boots and glamorous hair shifted the passive recline of the patient into a colourful star turn; McLeod's performance did little to solemnize the seriously durational and vulnerable labour she was performing. Engaging, charismatic and chatty throughout, seemingly relaxed and comfortable, one had to look—and listen—again and again to see what McLeod was doing as work. Performed again for a cabaret night at the National Women's Studies Association, the durational quality of McLeod's performance could easily disappear behind audience's expectations, who may come to feel that they are working hard in waiting for their turn, and earning the right to a spectacular performance that may not live up to sonic expectations. In foregrounding intimacy and sociability in her work, McLeod fails to accrue the spectacularized gravitas of the "durational" as endurance art, opting instead for more humble rhythms of confabulation. The chat you have with the person behind you in the line can be as much a part of the performance event as the time of listening in. What are you thinking about? In this way, she converts the passivity of the gynaecological subject into a labouring body, outside of the normative reproduction of a human being. *Uterine Concert Hall* generates uncommon grounds of encounter through an opportunistic bait and switch that mobilizes, rather than simply swaps, vulnerability. In its politics, the performance replaces the presumed accessibility of the participatory with the earned pleasures of confabulation, insisting that we work to be in this together.

Techniques of Togetherness

Those in possession of a uterus frequently experience their own somatic knowledge dismissed as mysterious, unreliable, even witchy.

A look at the dismal rates of treatment for reports of complaints related to uterus-specific conditions alone show vast gaps—years even—between onset of symptoms and effective care; many people even take a long time to recognize their experiences as symptoms rather than what they must simply endure. McLeod’s work makes those silencings and dismissals evident, but beyond critique, proposes techniques of togetherness that rely on unequal access, impenetrability and animate not-knowing as a conditions of care. I call this the work’s confabulations: fabulating together, conspiratorially.

Forrest pointed out that the work’s focus on sound, with its assumed immateriality, often seemed to make the body disappear for participants. At the same time, that disappearance can serve a re-emergence of a speculative perception, in a visualization process that echoes the work of listening beyond the already known. Whatever we know of the inside of our bodies, it is not a primarily visual mode of knowledge. Just try asking an ultrasound technician to let you look at the screen next time you are getting scanned! McLeod points out that though we might have the “handlebar” image of the uterus in mind, this is an autopsied vision, stilled and sampled from the inaccessibility of a living body. Forrest suggests that as a speculative space, the *Uterine Concert Hall* created delicate co-imaginings between McLeod and her participants, as the shared sonic experience invites them both to imagine the uterine realm from which the sound emerges. This is not an equal perception, as McLeod’s experience is doubled sonically by her body’s bone conduction and other somatic effects. But neither of them see the source, and so something remains inaccessible, and floats in the imagination of the encounter.

Queering the Uterus

A gold-fish pond occupied the site of the womb and this required no commentary. — Niki de Saint Phalle

McLeod reports that after a performance of *Uterine Concert Hall*, she has unusually deep and restful sleep, which she attributes to the effect of the long internal massage of the Baby Pod’s vibration. In her playful deviance of the labour of social reproduction, rest and pleasure are positive side effects! One of the final images in Marshall McLuhan’s book *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) is of a gigantic installation sculpture of a reclining woman, Niki de Saint Phalle’s *Hon-en-katedral/She: A Cathedral* (1966). Spectators could enter the body through the vaginal canal and wander around corporeal spaces repurposed into various sites of encounter and display. Destroyed at the end of the exhibition, the work presented the body as a wildly ludic space of potential, one capable of unleashing strong affects. Saint Phalle asked in a video documentation of the work, “Was it the pleasure people got from She that led to more babies being born in Stockholm a year later?”, falling back into a heteronormative logic of reproduction that what goes in through the pussy comes out as a baby. For McLeod’s project of queering the uterus, which insistently shifts from reproduction to creative production, we might ask instead, what are the other pleasures of this work?

Uterine Concert Hall’s queer impulses mobilize a productive tension. On the one hand, a feminist discourse of autonomy, as we see in slogans such as “No uterus, no opinion” or “My body, my choice.” On the other hand, the power and productiveness of a vulnerability that needs exposure, others and community, one that is rooted in the knowledge that no one has a full knowledge of themselves. Part of the delicate gamble of *Uterine Concert Hall* is

that it relies on certain forms of obscurity, of an unequal and incomplete distribution of the experience that keeps close certain moments, that undoes absolute authority for the risk of relation.

Intimate Karaoke, Live at Uterine Concert Hall relies on the queer timings of the uterus to take the closed capsule of the pop song, made to be repeatedly consumed, and turn it into living performance. No organ in the body is so queerly polytemporal as a uterus. The heart's consistent metric ebbs and flows with emotion and excitement, the skin stretches and sags as a surface reading of aging, but the uterus is polyrhythmic. *Uterine Concert Hall* emerged out of the "use it or lose it" pressure that women face heading into middle age. Occupied, a uterus suspends one bodily rhythm for the space of a pregnancy. Cyclical, with a disregard for clock time, convenience or our own schedule, the uterus renews and refreshes. Post menopause, it lingers in a state of suspended animation. A pop song seems so consumable and disposable, but the karaoke performance gives it a renewed urgency and quality that refreshes its cyclical nature. At the same time, the repetition is a quality of familiarity that for McLeod is key to what she calls "the queer aspect" of her work, stretching the idea of the public domain to account for our affective encounters beyond forms of stable and static ownership. In the space of a song, *Intimate Karaoke, Live at Uterine Concert Hall* displaces the public domain into new intimacies that take the familiar as a necessary, but not sufficient, starting point for taking back affects and experiences that are already in common.

So, what you do you want to sing?

Alanna Thain

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DAYNA MCLEOD is a practicing performance and video artist working in Montréal, Canada. Within her practice, Dayna has staged over three dozen independent performance art productions and cabaret works, have twenty-five single channel videos in distribution, have designed video sets for theatre companies and dance productions, collaborated with choreographers, and consulted on artist projects. Dayna is PhD candidate at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture at Concordia University pursuing an interdisciplinary degree in Humanities that combines studies in performance art, feminism, queer theory, age, and research-creation practices.



ALANNA THAIN is a professor of Cultural Studies and World Cinemas at McGill University, where she directs the Moving Image Research Laboratory and the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies. She is the author of *Bodies in Suspense: Time and Affect in Cinema* (U. of Minnesota Press, 2017).



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