Jace Clayton
That Singing Crowd

On Saturday, November 7, 2020, at approximately 11:30 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, a communal yell broke out across the Unites States of America. The pandemic kept me grounded at home in Manhattan for most of this year, and that is where I heard it. Within seconds a few scattered voices gathered to a roar. I went to my open window and howled. It felt humanizing to join the outburst. We didn't need to check the news; for all its noisiness, the meaning of the holler was clear. Major news networks had finally announced that the incumbent president had lost his bid for re-election.

During his time in office, the loser had lethally ignored a global public health emergency, appointed more than five hundred right-wing federal judges to lifelong positions, openly courted violent white supremacists, denied climate change, sacked the heads of multiple government institutions to replace them with loyalist puppets, unlawfully and systematically separated parents from their children, gotten impeached twice, trashed nearly one hundred environmental protection laws, and lied to the public no fewer than twenty-five thousand times. This is a partial list. The damages he unleashed were expansive, deep-seated, and will not soon be undone. Our common scream was heartfelt.

Partly we were screaming in grief – so many awful things had happened. But mostly this was a happy cry. It expressed relief that four increasingly horrific years of American government-led terror were finally drawing to a close. The weary hope crescendoed into spontaneous street parties, where Bob Marley's "Everything's Gonna Be Alright" proved to be a reliably centrist crowd-pleaser. My personal favorite was Snap!'s anthem "I've Got the Power" emerging from a corner boombox that usually blasts Nuyorican salsa.

At its best, music in public crystallizes mood. What defined Saturday's feeling was the chaotic and joyful sound of a yelling crowd. That social noise brought to mind another national scream, one that had begun nearly four years prior, after the previous election. Those yells appeared in a short video that US-based Moroccan artist Meriem Bennani posted to her Instagram feed on January 17, 2017. The piece is only sixteen seconds long, but the Facebook-owned media platform loops – and mutes – video content by default. "Turn on Sound," Bennani wrote, "that singing crowd."
    The same day I saw Bennani's video, the forty-fifth president of the United States of America had been sworn into office at the West Front of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.

Still of a video that artist Meriem Bennani posted to her Instagram feed on January 17, 2017.

His opponent had gained 2,868,519 more votes than him. Widespread protests blossomed stateside and abroad. Entertainment was hard to find.

Elton John, Celine Dion, Garth Brooks, Kiss, and Andrea Bocelli numbered among the musicians who had refused invitations to perform at the inauspicious gathering. The only strategic move for any popular entertainer was to stay away.

When the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, official musical ambassadors of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, announced they were going to sing at the inauguration, the backlash was immediate. In an open letter announcing her resignation, chorister Jan Chamberlin wrote: "I know the goodness of your hearts, and your desire to go out there and show that we are politically neutral and share good will ... I also know, looking from the outside in, it will appear that the Choir is endorsing tyranny and fascism by singing for this man."

Dressed in off-white coats with matching turtlenecks and red plaid scarves, 215 members of the choir grunt, yell, holler, and scream. Or at least that's what they do in Bennani's video. Moments after its live broadcast, she spliced together footage of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's performance. Instead of soaring Steadicam footage, we get quick and queasy jump cuts stitching together counterintuitive camera movements. Deftly edited shrieks replace the original audio. It is very funny.

One doesn't need context to realize that this massive, nearly all-white choir arranged so neatly in front of an even more massive neoclassical building should not be howling. The initial gag is something a toddler could enjoy. Yet behind the slapstick incongruity lies a pitch-perfect evocation of American political discourse in this era of filter bubbles and muddied disinfo whose resonance has only grown in light of the insurrectionist storming of the Capitol nearly four years later.

Screaming means emotional overload. It's the sound of language failing you. But when a crowd screams? That results from collectivized overwhelmedness. It's the sound of language failing *us*. The choir on this particular national stage stands in for Americans talking to each other across divides everywhere: those people who disagree with you – they might look sanctimonious but whatever they are saying *makes no sense at all*. This is a performance of discourse drained of the possibility of communication.

Who didn't want to scream for much of 2020? Ask any noise musician: screams can offer sublime tantrum time-outs, cathartic moments of intermission from the existing social-sonic order. Just not here. For all the chaos the white mob members apparently embody, we cannot lose sight of the fact that they are being conducted. Visually, the choir's staging projects extreme conformity. Their mouths move in unison. However, we hear a disjointed series of mostly individual yelps.

Bennani replaced the singing with canned screams and nothing else. There's no faint rustle of the crowd, as in the original footage, for example. Nor has she applied any reverb, which would create the effect of the vocalists inhabiting the same acoustic space. All the members of this choir howl in isolation – from the world (there's no diegetic sound) and from each other (there's no reverb). A crowd vocalizing with none of the subtle audio cues that let us know we are in a crowd: Bennani's audio treatments mirror the eerie social alienation that is only possible in digital domains.

Much of Bennani's work rejoices in shaping this staccato digitized reality. Her 2017 solo exhibition, "Siham and Hafida," was ostensibly a video installation, but the viewing experience felt like being in a whimsical and immersive funhouse. The show combined sculpture, customized seating, distorting mirrors, and a thirty-minute, multi-channel video featuring original footage and animation that was projection-mapped across various surfaces. The razor-sharp editing sensibility and inclusive sense of humor in Bennani's Instagram post are very much present in her gallery works such as these, where the constructedness of the physical world is inextricable from the constructedness of her videos and animations.

An unusual glitch animates the thematic and structural center of Bennani's choir clip. About six seconds in, Bennani zooms in on a particular screaming woman. This chorister's red lipstick perfectly matches the plaid scarves of the figures awkwardly cropped around her. As her eyes close in effort or concentration, the webstream glitches out. For a split second the image freezes and the familiar pulsing page-loading graphic appears in the center. The still is striking: the screamer's open mouth, her closed eyes, the page-loading icon, and the wide-open single eye of the chorister above her form a strong diagonal. This diagonal focuses attention on themes of intake, outtake, and disruption.

"Stutters" was Vilém Flusser's term for the

quantitative discontinuities that characterize our digitized reality, and this is what one looks like. "Machines are stutterers even if they appear to slide," wrote Flusser. "This becomes clear when cars and film projectors start to go wrong."[1]

As the video feed halts, a sliver of the scream repeats over and over, transforming into a microloop that cycles so fast it forms its own distinct texture and pitch. No audio processing effects or additional noises have been used to create this startling metamorphosis; this new sound is the sound of a scream with narrative removed from it. Even the briefest acoustic event has a start, middle, and end. Human hearing is attuned to extract an extraordinary amount of information from the first few milliseconds of rapidly changing sounds such as sudden noises or the shifting intricacies of speech; without the beginning, we have trouble deciphering the rest. Here the compact narrative of a sound gets interrupted and loops back into itself. What was an elemental, fundamentally human sound spins out of recognizability to turn machinelike, alien, synthetic. The "story" starts to "sttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt."

When I first experienced this page-loading hiccup, I assumed that my internet connection was to blame. Indeed, the digital is nothing but an interruption in flows, marked as an on/off division. As the video looped and the glitch-moment repeated, I realized that the joke was on me. A fake glitch! Perhaps I had been scrolling IG in a state of distraction. But I like to think that the way Bennani's edit duped my ordinarily skeptical media-consumer eyes speaks to the increasingly subtle derangements of information and interpretation in a social-media ecosystem.

Twenty-four-hour news feeds and ubiquitous social media are a climate we cannot help but inhabit. The weather trends more severe and less predictable each year. Glitches (fake or real) in this system can't offer liberation or enlightenment. They arise from entanglement. (Instagram videos stutter along at a rate of thirty frames per second. Benanni's scream-loop is also one-thirtieth of a second long, equal to the length of a single video frame; Instagram's technical formatting of video content shaped how the screaming voice audio would transform.) However, the sounds created in that strange intermission cannot be determined in advance, and they sidestep the singing/signal – screaming/noise dichotomy.

You can't unplug, but you can resynthesize. In Bennani's scream-loop the human voice operates, briefly, as a synthesizer. This technique

was pioneered in 1979, when German engineer Wolfgang Palm published a paper outlining how one could create previously unimagined sounds by looping very short soundwaves. The method, called wavetable synthesis, powers most of the hi-fi growling and alien shapeshifting timbres in contemporary electronic music. Wavetable synthesis is radically unpredictable: you take a known fragment of the world, loop it, and cannot guess what the results will be. Yet once they are there, you can play them as melody.

So Bennani's page-loading moment gives us the scream as a pitched, playable thing. The frozen-yet-tuneable scream is neither human nor machine, neither transcendent music nor worldly noise, neither of the algorithm-governed, ad-saturated timeline nor apart from it. It suggests a new way of navigating – when our subjective voices become indistinguishable from their technical edits we cannot speak freely if at all, and loops, not progress, may be the only available direction.

Watch Meriem Benanni's video here: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/115/373650/that-singing-crowd/ https://www.e-flux.com/journal/115/373650/that-singing-crowd/

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Jace Clayton is an artist and writer based in Manhattan, also known for his work as DJ /rupture. Clayton uses an interdisciplinary approach to focus on how sound, memory, and public space interact, with an emphasis on low-income communities and non-Western geographies. His book *Uproot: Travels in 21st Century Music and Digital Culture* was published in 2016 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. He serves on the Music faculty of Bard College's Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts and in 2019 taught a seminar on "Interdisciplinary Temporalities in Performance" at Harvard University.

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Vilém Flusser, "Why Do Typewriters Go 'Click'?" *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* (Reaktion Books, 1999), 62.