



Madeleine Foote

The Evolution of Karaoke: From Tasteless Imitation to Brilliant Art

Upon entering, the Empty Orchestra exhibit at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in Hart House instantly provokes those forcibly repressed memories of drunken karaoke nights everyone seems to have. However, this is not your typical drunken karaoke. This exhibit of five installations, almost every one endowed with a disco ball, makes you realize how taking something considered so mundane, even tasteless, out of its typical context can become so meaningful, so poignant, and embody so much about what pop culture has become. Amidst the obvious Canadian/American Idol comparisons there seems to be something more profound here. Something artistic.

Ichiro Tanaka's piece *Classical Music Karaoke* depicts great classical works by Tchaikovsky, Strauss and Rossini on a typical karaoke screen. The lyrics that appear, seemingly intended to be sung, are actually gibberish lyrics in Japanese "katakana" symbols. Tanaka's piece is evidently commenting on the liberties taken with respect to the original art piece when turned into karaoke. In the fact that none of these classical pieces had lyrics not to mention the completely nonsensical words given to participators, it's clear that while this installation is labeled "interactive", it is no mistake that it is impossible to interact with. In some sense making Tanaka's piece acts as the antithesis to karaoke—it is music, untouchable.



Karen Tam's installation *Tchang Tchou Karaoke Lounge* features an interactive menu of classic Americana songs from which you can choose. Each song—such as Hank Williams' Jambalaya—appears sung in Chinese as opposed to the American originals with a complete, seeming ignorance of the English original. In addition, the lyrics on screen appear in Cajun French, not the original English version. The video that appears is of young girls dancing and appearing in a parade. It's no accident that the combination of effects here is about as far from the original Williams tune as you can get. This is clearly a comment on the Chinese ability to turn another culture into their own, specifically through karaoke. Karaoke here is not only uttering lyrics to pop hits, but in fact changing the lyrics to their own language to create a new piece of art that is wholly representative of Chinese culture. This karaoke isn't presented so much as an imitation of art but as art in and of itself.

Other pieces in Empty Orchestra include Christian Jankowski's installation *The Day We Met* in which a video of a "typical Korean drama" and love story is set to a flexible soundtrack, which you can personally sing. As well as Wang Gongxin's *Kara Oke*, a looped video piece which depicts karaoke singers of all ages on the teeth in a grin of the giant mouth of a male. Singers all sing a single note, which blends into an electronic tweeter.

The standout however was Candice Breitz's installation *Karaoke*. It consists of a dark room with ten TV's in a circle, facing each other. Upon entrance you hear a cacophony of sounds and see the familiar blue light emulated from television screens. Once inside the circle however, this piece, though not

CANDICE BREITZ
Karaoke, 2002

DVD Installation: 10 Looping DVDs
Installation View: New York Center for Media Arts, New York
Photograph: Jason Mandella

as obviously interactive, is certainly the most provocative of the exhibit. Each screen shows a karaoke singer of different cultural background singing the same song—"Killing Me Softly"—in what at times seems to be rounds, and at other times simply chaos. The longer you stand in the centre of the piece, the less possible it becomes to leave. You begin to hear chords, forget where you are, sort of like a dream. You begin to experiment with your stance, realizing that facing in different directions allows you to hear different individuals singing. The whole thing begs the comparison to American and Canadian Idol phenomena—each singer is even depicted against a blue background—but in some way by emphasizing the "ugliness" of karaoke (that is the horrible warbling off-tone singing that scares most of us out of even considering it), it all at once becomes beautifully artistic. Breit's piece in particular makes one realize this whole exhibit is really about turning the imitation of art into art itself. Overall, curators Maiko Tanaka and Heather Keung have done a fantastic job of seeing karaoke in a different light, one in which karaoke is not the cheapening of original art but rather the evolution of old into new. ●



WANG GONGXIN, *Kara Oke*, 2000, video still, courtesy of the artist

