

# T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

## Scenes From a Punk Rock and Storytelling Show, for Deaf People

By NATHAN REESE APRIL 29, 2016

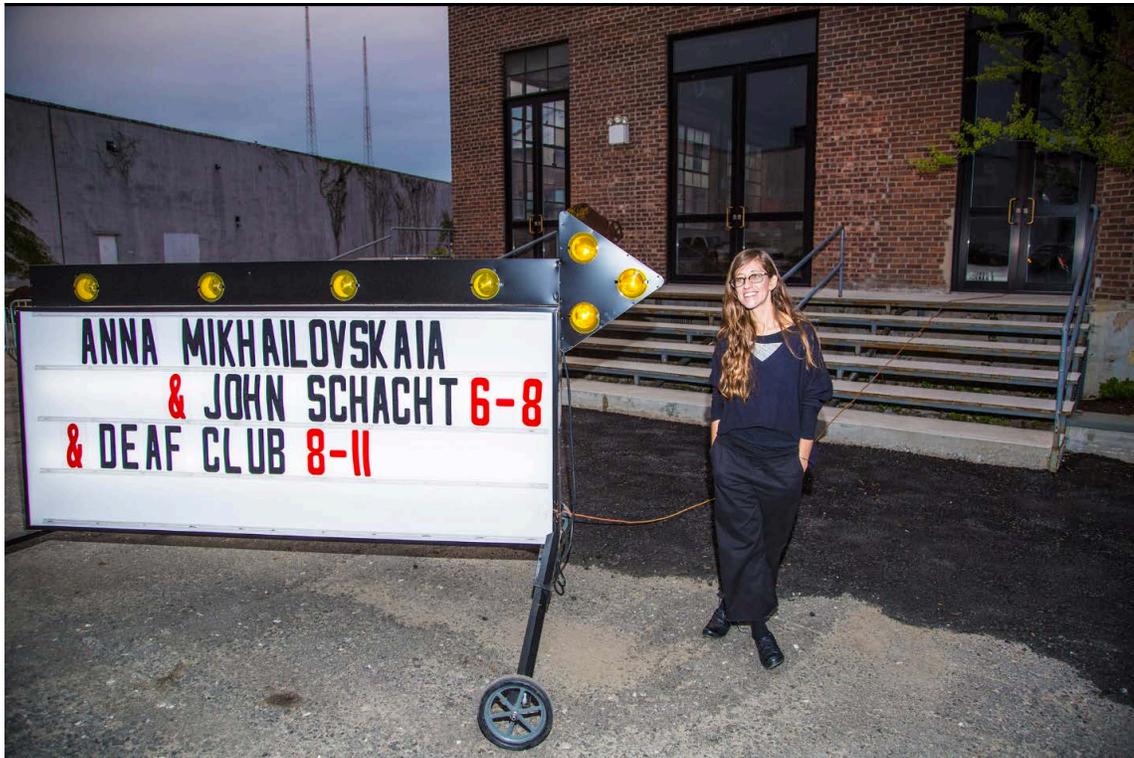


At its best, punk rock relies on an admixture of velocity, attitude and volume —which is exactly what made last night’s Deaf Club event a smash success. The show, held at the Knockdown Center in Maspeth, Queens, a former door factory turned interdisciplinary arts space, was curated by the Los Angeles-based artist Alison O’Daniel who, herself, is hard of hearing. The event was a live extension of O’Daniel’s “The Tuba Thieves” (currently a part of her “Room Tone” exhibition) — a film that explores the events surrounding an unlikely series of tuba thefts in Los Angeles schools.

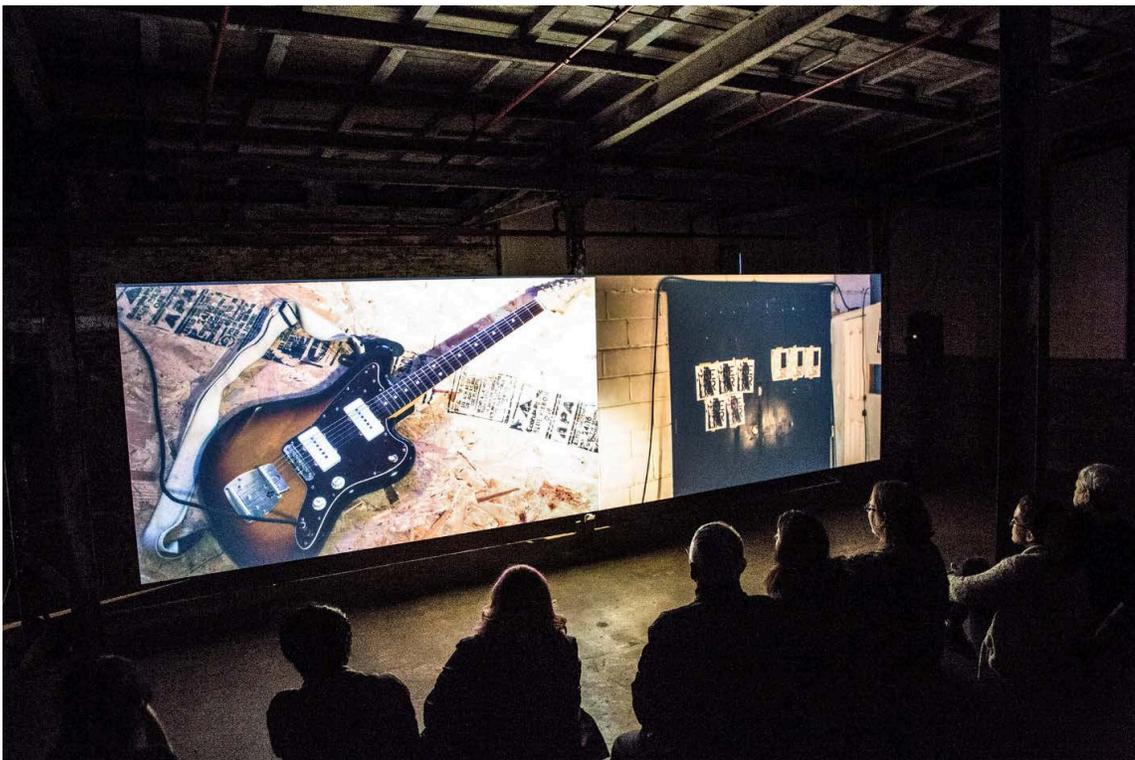
One portion, however, also recreates a performance in the Deaf Club, a now-defunct social club for San Francisco's deaf community that hosted punk shows in 1979. As the story goes, Robert Hanrahan, the manager for the punk band the Offs, was walking by it, saw a sign reading "The Deaf Club" and thought it was a cool, unexpected name for a concert venue. After realizing his mistake, he asked if his band could play — a message he originally wrote on a napkin. "I'm not a punk historian," said O'Daniel. "My interest comes more from the deaf community. It's the meeting of two totally disenfranchised communities — it's really beautiful." Eventually, bands including Dead Kennedys and Pink Section would record albums at the venue, forever sanctifying it in punk lore. (A core irony of the story, and also fittingly punk, was that the shows eventually came to a halt because of noise complaints.)

But the goal of last night's event wasn't an attempt to dispel hearing people's outmoded assumption that the deaf world doesn't (or can't) appreciate music — though that notion seemed ready to explode along with the tower of amps — but rather, to create an environment where people of all ages and backgrounds could revel in the power of punk and performance art. Among the performers, many of whom helped with the making of O'Daniel's film, were three bands and four American Sign Language storytellers, each of whom approached the night with their own interpretation of the Deaf Club theme. Wall, a Brooklyn four-piece, brought No Wave clamor and cutting politics to the stage, while Future Punx arrived with fog machines and New Wave synths in tow. Also appearing was a band with a name unpublishable in this publication — which only serves to solidify its street cred. (The frontman, Paddy Mulloy, played an M.C. in O'Daniel's film.)

Between the sets, performers told stories of identity — comedic anecdotes, personal hardships and the deaf world's relationship with music. Maleni Chaitoo drew a through line between the alienation of punk in the '70s and the underserved Deaf community, while Opal Gordon, who closed out the show, traced black history through the lens of music, using a combination of A.S.L. and interpretive dance to spin a tale that moved from the slave trade, to the her own story of embracing pop music as a deaf, African-American woman. "It's not true that deaf people can't enjoy music," said Gordon. "Music is strong, they can feel the vibrations. Punk is perfect because it's loud, it's heavy, it's in-your-face."



Alison O'Daniel stood in front of the Knockdown Center about an hour before the show. "As someone who is hard of hearing, and has grown up in the hearing world, my relationship to it is several steps removed," says O'Daniel. "Every person I've worked with has a unique relationship with listening and sound. I've just become really interested in the way to honor that. How do I build a project and honor everyone's really specific relationship to sound?"



The Deaf Club portion of the film "The Tuba Thieves" was projected as part of O'Daniel's "Room Tone," exhibition, along with many other sections of the film, including a tuba heist scene, a reenactment of the composer John Cage's "4'33" and a scene in which the main character, a deaf drummer named Nyke Prince, watches live music in Los Angeles.



The A.S.L. interpreter Vern Leon stood front and center, signing from lyrics sheets provided by the bands. “He’s the singer tonight,” said the tattooed punk rocker Paddy Mulloy.



The storyteller Jubil Khan’s performance focused on her journey toward accepting herself for who she is. “I’m a black, deaf woman,” she signed from the stage. “Do you know who you are?”



The show opened with Jeremy Lee Sanchez, who told a comedic story about a situation involving a subway ride after having (much) too much to drink. “I wanted it to be a little bit more graphic and visual,” said Sanchez of the night’s performance. He hoped “people can see A.S.L. as a fully visual language that’s possible to be merged with music,” he said.



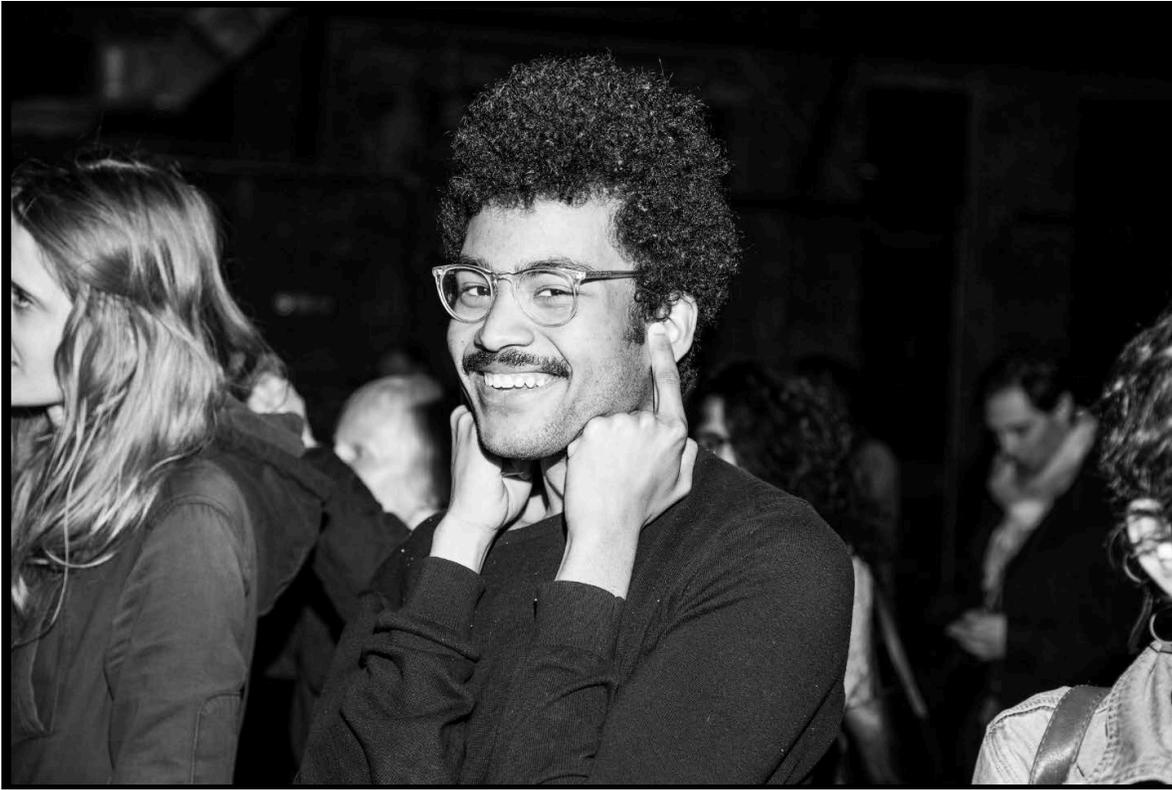
Now based in Brooklyn, Wall members Sam York and Elizabeth Skadden (who produced two scenes in “The Tuba Thieves,” including the Deaf Club portion) were roommates with O’Daniel in Austin a decade ago. “A door is just a wall that moves,” joked Skadden from the stage, calling out the Knockdown Center’s industrial history as a door factory.



Future Punx appeared in the Deaf Club portion of “Tuba Thieves,” playing as the legendary New Wave band the Units. “We were trying to recreate a moment from 1979, but we ended up making our own beautiful moment,” said singer Chris Pickering. “The Units were a huge inspiration for us,” said drummer Jason Kelly. “We got to pretend to be a band that we love, we got to immerse ourselves in a community we wouldn’t normally be exposed to. Everything about it was awesome.”



A.S.L. storyteller Opal Gordon danced and signed rhythmically, owning the stage as she told a story that traversed musical and racial history. She learned to love music from her mother, who was a musician and a dancer. “Hearing people need to open up their mind a little bit more,” she said. “Deaf people can’t hear, per se, but everything else related to music is totally accessible.”



The crowd was full of people of all ages, as well as both hearing and deaf music fans.



Paddy Mulloy bellowed at the top of his lungs as Vern Leon signed lyrics. “Even though it’s punk, even though it’s high energy, I want to get to the message of the text,” said Leon. “I’ve got copies of all the band’s lyrics and listened to the music to really see if I understood what the songs are about. But I guess I’ll try to punk rock it out, too.”



Deaf music fans talked about feeling rhythm and vibration, which was inescapable in the cavernous space at the Knockdown Center.



Audience members rocked out late into the evening.