

# AESTHETICS OF VOICE

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This paper introduces key themes in relation to vocal aesthetics: voice as intersubjective, paradoxical, uncanny, intimate. It asks how voice is determined by and determining of spatial relationships and the way this affects memory and place. The paper explores specific examples from media arts to explore the performativity of voice and an 'authenticity effect' of media voices.

A number of key themes reverberate through the aesthetics of voice: paradox, uncanniness, intimacy, intersubjectivity, performativity, and memory and place. I'll begin with a brief introduction to these themes, turn next to modalities and techniques of voice in media art, and finally end with a discussion of voice's 'authenticity effect.'

## Theoretical Introduction

Media artists have long been exploring the potentials and complexities of electronically mediated voice. From Yoko Ono screaming and coughing; to Alvin Lucier sitting and stuttering in his room; to Janet Cardiff leaving the room and the building to take us on sound walks; to Susan Philipsz with her locational singing – to name but a very few. Despite the richness of media art and the resounding way that sound studies burst into prominence in the 90s, vocal aesthetics has remained rather sub voce. And, although it has been several decades since Roland Barthes first invited attention with his concept of "grain of the voice," strangely, little general theoretical work on voice followed.

There was of course Derrida's significant work in the seventies, when he deconstructed the "self-presence, immediacy, identity, interiority" of vocal speech. [1] While this moved past invocations of voice as true, unmediated and authentic, the attention to vocal speech in relation to writing may well have played into a sort of binary, which inadvertently diverted theoretical attention. In recent years, however, critical writing has sidestepped such a binary, attending instead to an ambiguity of voice, a supplementarity, which resonate with Derridean concepts and draw out potentials of voice on which Derrida himself did not focus.

Key figures in this critical revival are Adriana Cavarero, Mladen Dolar, and Steven Connor, who share a sense of the complexity, the uncanniness, the difference and the paradox of voice. They recognise the in-between quality of voice – hinging between the physical (sonorous) and non-physical (signifying). [2] [3] As Steven Shaviro explains, in relation to Dolar's work: [4]

"Dolar... argues and demonstrates that the phenomenon of Voice is in fact far more uncanny and slippery, and already inclusive of difference, than Derrida gives it credit for. The voice always stands in between: in between body and language, in between biology and culture, in between inside and outside, in between subject and Other.... the voice is both what links these opposed categories together, what is common to both of them, without belonging to either." [5]

In its uncanniness – in Freud’s sense of *unheimlich* or unhomely – voice carries a trace of its ‘home,’ the body of the speaker, but leaves that home to perform speaking. Steven Connor is particularly intrigued by the uncanny voice of the double; he works with the *doppelgänger* figure of the ventriloquist’s speech because for him it evokes “the imaginary production of a secondary body, a body double: a ‘voice-body.’” [6] [7]

The doubling of voice undoes a ‘unitary’ subject – not just in relation to an individual subject, but it also disturbs a separation of two ‘unitary’ subjects. Here the work of Adriana Cavarero is particularly relevant, emphasizing the relationality of voice, in order, as she says, to prise apart any ‘unitary’ quality in Derrida’s figure of Speech. Cavarero engages with the alterity, relationality, and intersubjectivity of voice in order to get past the presence, which rightly, in her view, worried Derrida. [8] Relationality also resonates with the spatial relationship that voice creates, a shared space, a relational space, a doubled space – to which I’ll turn next.

### Spatiality: Voice, Memory, and Place

While it’s a basic understanding within sound studies that sound operates not only through time but also in space – performatively in/forming the space it traverses – once again too little attention has been paid to how this plays out with voice in particular. Just as voice can be thought as a hinge between the sonorous and signifying, it also hinges between bodies and the spaces they inhabit: “...bend[ing] and connect[ing] rather than dividing.... facilitat[ing] openings and intertwinings (of doors, concepts, subjects, experiences, materials) rather than discriminating one side or one thing from another.” [9] And so voice hinges bodies and spaces, mediated and personal memory, memory and place; it connects speaking and listening bodies physically and affectively with each other as well as/through the spaces they share.

To explore this, I’ll discuss two works at Cockatoo Island, Sydney – a location resonant with its history as a prison and an industrial site and now an art and event site, tourist destination and camping ground. The first work is Susan Philipsz’ “The Internationale,” originally sited in an underpass in Ljubljana, during the 1999 European Biennial, Manifesta 3. The work was restaged in Cockatoo Island for the 2008 Biennale of Sydney (‘Revolutions - Forms that Turn’) in Turbine Hall – a large, abandoned post-industrial space. This is one of those works that takes you by surprise: What is the work? What is it doing here? Almost instantly, however, it seems completely sensible and at home. Yet, uncannily, of course, not at home, and thus disturbing our own location in the space. Philipsz’ singing of the classic workers’ anthem taps into the Hall’s physical memory, echoing through the space and through us. We feel ourselves differently in that space, sensing, somehow remembering its industrial history, as her frail, obviously recorded voice re-inhabits the space as if with workers’ memories – as if those memories haunt her voice, as if those memories haunt those enormous spaces, as if we overhear it in that space – a private, intimate voice wafting on that memory.

As always, Philipsz sings in a lone (lonely?), unaccompanied, palpably untrained voice – thin but reverberant. Here, it is an electronic voice emerging from one lone old speaker, calling you into the space as you approach. The effect of Philipsz’ recorded voice, evidently with little or no ‘art’ or ‘professional’ postproduction and no deployment of sophisticated speakers, is almost like an old radio abandoned somewhere in the Hall.

"When I make the recordings, it is important to keep the breaths and pauses in between, so that the song sounds natural and intimate. The idea is that when you hear a voice taken out of context in this way, your own sense of self becomes heightened while at the same time, you begin to experience your surroundings in a new way." [10]

For Philipsz this sort of production gives listeners the possibility to imagine it as their own voice. [11] For some it is a melancholy lament for revolutionary workers' hopes, for some it is exposed, fragile and brave, for still others, stirring and sad... Like any "cover" version, Philipsz is inhabited by and inhabits this song, bringing her own emotional response to it, but leaving us room to have our own.

Another, very different work – though like Philipsz', complex and ambiguous thanks to the voicing as well as being strangely in and out of place – is Richard Grayson's work, *Messiah*, in the 2010 Sydney Biennale. *Messiah* is located in one of Cockatoo Island's long tunnels – a transitional, hinging space, moving from the expansive and bright outside into a dark, intense, echoic domain. Off that tunnel, in a small low ceilinged dark room, plays Grayson's sound/video work.

Richard Grayson, who is interested in belief systems and the way that he sees Theology taking over from enlightenment rationalism, had emailed The Midnight Amblers, a group of musicians from Erskville, Sydney, to rewrite and perform Handel's *Messiah* as country music – revoicing and rescoring it so that we could hear the words anew. He asked the band to perform the work in a back yard, recording it with various DIY video cameras. When Grayson edited in Berlin, the sync turned out to be a bit off. He embraced this 'failure,' which served well to "foreground the artifice," He wanted to "bring back the weirdness and the spookiness... of something we take in a way as granted." [12] In its room strewn bizarrely with classic country and western hay bales, the out-of-sync mode – where sound does not seamlessly sub-serve the visual – add to the disturbance and heightened sense of awareness of the materiality of each sense. Itself dislocated from concert hall to suburban back yard to funky Berlin and now to this 'art' space, Grayson's *Messiah* is dislocating – mediating and enhancing our sense of the layered memory of the work and of this place.

## Performativity

In both of these works the voice is not just performing, it is performative – performatively bringing forth memory of the place in which we find ourselves. The concept of performativity helps to take us beyond voice as straightforward performance or as the emission from some fixed unitary subject. Performativity is suggestive of the way voices DO and create, the way they change something rather than present or represent. Recalling Cavarero's attention to the relationality of voice, I would suggest that voice performatively evokes this relationality, bringing it into being rather than expressing it. What I'd like to emphasize here is the complicated and intimate intersubjective relations, which are staged as performative electronic voices lure the other, across space, even across the familiar space of the Internet.

The example I'll present is the networked performance of visual artist Barbara Campbell. The title of her durational project, *1001 nights cast*, [13] played with the *Tales from 1001 Nights* (The Arabian Nights) and with the fact that the net cast of this performance involved a webcast and a cast of over two hundred writers, who submitted their stories online for Barbara to perform each night. When you logged on to her evening performance, you saw only her mouth, giving prominence to the voicing, which storytelling involves. Framed by a story of a bereft bride wandering the world and greeted by strangers who give her stories "to heal her heart," the webcast opened with a view of Barbara's tongue, pierced and

wounded—like the heart of the bride— with a numbered tongue stud that signaled the number of the day/performance. I was fascinated by that mouth and tongue— a bit like a Chinese acupuncturist, searching it for deeper meanings, to see what it told about her, as it told her/other's stories. I asked Campbell about the choice to frame her mouth and foreground her tongue, in a conversation we had for Maria Miranda's forthcoming book, *Unsitely Aesthetics*. We discussed the mouth as visceral evidence of the physicality of the storytelling, and the importance of voice.

"Barbara Campbell: Of course the other thing about my tongue was that it had the tongue stud in it which had the number of that night ... I previously didn't have any kind of piercing.... that was another kind of reminder to me that I was carrying the project around or that it was inhabiting me or I was inhabiting it because to have a piercing in your tongue is very much like carrying an open wound because the tongue with all those enzymes from the saliva is always trying to heal itself..." [14]

This pierced and wounded tongue not only performed the stories but also performatively brought forth an intimate and wounded affective space that inhabited us and that we inhabited together during the ephemeral nine minutes performance.

### Modalities and Techniques of Voice

Technique is somewhat like performativity—it shapes the object and technologies to which it ostensibly responds. Elsewhere I have discussed a number of bodily techniques or habits that shape voices as well as various modes of voice that throw the normal voice into relief—from the broken and stuttering voice to the scream.\* Here I'll focus on the 'ground zero' of voice, breath.

Breathing is both a technique that enables and shapes voice as well as a mode in the whispered or breathy voice. As an example, I'll reference my own collaborative artwork. For a number of years Maria Miranda, and I have been working on a project called *Talking about the Weather*. In this work, we've been collecting breath, beginning with performative encounters with strangers on the streets. The project was animated by a desire to get the world's biggest collection of breath and use it to blow back global warming.

As Tim Flannery said in a few poetic lines, which were the inspiration—literally and metaphorically—for this project, the intimacy of breath is not just between people but also between people and the planet:

"The air you just exhaled has already spread far and wide. The CO<sub>2</sub> from a breath last week may now be feeding a plant on a distant continent, or plankton in a frozen sea. In a matter of months all of the CO<sub>2</sub> you just exhaled will have dispersed around the planet." [15]

Breath is a particularly intimate and alluring mode of voice. Like full-throated voice, of which it is an essential condition and part, breath is compelling and intriguing in that it is both bodily and not—it starts in one body and then connects to and communicates with another. I should emphasize that I am not talking here about the commodified intimacy of TV ads that have become all too familiar. Rather the performative intimacy and breath that I am interested in and that I hear in a range of artists works, is more strange and in-between. It is a way of speaking about a shared affective, inter-corporeal space that is beyond that of two separate unitary subjectivities. Following Alfred North Whitehead's idea that "the body is only a peculiarly intimate bit of the world," cultural geographer Sarah Whatmore understands the way in which "the corporeality of the body and of the world fold through each other." [16]

Breath, in its affective movement, performatively calls forth the space around us – it is “the very engagement between body and world from which these feelings arise.” [17]

Returning to the streets where we collected breath... With the weather feeling so frightening when we started this work in 2006, we needed to talk about it – obsessively, incessantly – to connect with people through this talk. We were asking people to contribute the breath they would use to talk about the weather to our project. The project felt to us like a very intimate communication in that we were asking people to contribute something personal and vital. We asked first for a minute of their time and then for their breath. We were calling upon and calling forth their generosity – and doing it in the middle of their everyday life, going somewhere on the street or in the park – we were inviting strangers to enter an imaginative, performative zone with us.

As you can imagine, gathering the world’s largest collection of breath is a big task and we realized we needed to extend our search as widely as possible, so in 2008 we took it into Second Life. Not having played in such worlds as a gamer, my experience there was unexpected. While at first appearance, and certainly if you haven’t been “in world,” Second Life may look like a familiar cartoon world, but this fails to account for the strangely magical, compelling and intense feeling of being there, including an intimacy with avatars, one’s own, and others’. While preparing for the breath collection events, I wandered around Second Life and noticed its voice activation mode. However after one attempt, I quickly realised that I did not want to use it, because it actually broke the intimacy of the connections between me and my avatar and others’ avatars. That is, voice activation, my own voice and others’, took me out of the world. In a sense, this is obvious – the avatar has its own specific materiality and therefore needs its own voice. The implication of this is that in order not to break the intimacy of the Second Life experience, what is needed is either a silent voice, full of potential, but not actualised, or a particular voice for your avatar, that you choose or make, like all its other body parts and clothing. That voice would speak from the avatar’s ‘embodiment,’ not ‘yours’, and thus maintain the intimacy. Thus, in our own work in Second Life, which we experienced as a public place in which to collect breath, we chose to work with the specificity of avatars’ connections and still have the affect of voice by using only breath rather than spoken word.

## Authenticity Effect

To end, I’ll briefly discuss what I call an ‘authenticity effect’ of voice. Although in the heyday of postmodernism and in the early days of the Internet, artists and everyday users seemed to revel in the disruption of identity and authenticity, now with social media and YouTube, there has been a prevalence of direct address and ‘at home’ videos that many read as a desire for and return to authenticity. What I sense in this, however, is a performative voice, and, as Cavarero would remind us, when voice works performatively, it is not necessarily a call to (or from) essentialism or authenticity. What we have here instead, I suggest, is voice performatively evoking authenticity – an authenticity effect.

Contemporary artist TV Moore provides my final example here. Timothy Vernon Moore delightfully invokes the network between subject and machine as he goes by his very own, proper name’s initials, TV – ‘no pun intended’, as he says. In his work, we can find stunning examples of what Nicolas Bourriaud insightfully understood as ‘postproduction’ (Postproduction, 2002) or what Mark Amerika inspiringly explores as remix culture (REMIXTHEBOOK 2011). After months of playing around in the Australian Broadcasting Corporations archives, TV Moore found a documentary about marginal people, earlier recog-

nised as 'vagrants' or hobos. In the 60s, they were a different sort of nonconformist or outsider or prototypical artist-- alienated youth outside 'normal' structures of work, family, home. What TV Moore did for the work "The Forgotten Man" (2006) was perform the script of all the people in the documentary, from the snooty bureaucrats to the youth themselves to the ABC narrator. He re-performed their words, lip-syncing with amazing closeness. And so you watch this video in wonder and wonderment... whose voice are you listening to, why do they all have the 'same' voice? Is it the same? The lip sync is so neat, so 'authentic' yet...

And then you wonder, what has become of these characters, now ventriloquized, haunted, inhabited by TV Moore – or is it he that is inhabited by them? 'Inhabiting' is one of the key ways that Bourriaud understands the working of Postproduction artists.

"Artists actively inhabit cultural and social forms.... By refilming a movie shot by shot, we represent something other than what was dealt with in the original work. We show the time that has passed, but above all we manifest a capacity to evolve among signs, to inhabit them." [18]

TV Moore voices an inhabiting of the forgotten man and all who discoursed around him, to mediate them and our memory of them, but also to displace them and himself. In this way, TV Moore's work not only provokes wonder – about the forgotten man, about history, about documentary and about authenticity – but also provides a stunning final example of the intimate, uncanny and paradoxical aesthetic potentials of voice.

## Acknowledgments

I discuss a number of these ideas at length in "Introduction: The Paradox of Voice" and "Doing Things with Voices: Performativity and Voice" in *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, eds. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leeuwen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

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