

# THE MAGNETIC FIELD OF AUDIOVISUAL ART PRACTICES

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The paper proposes the term *magnetic* - which I have coined - as an implement that invites us to re-think the artwork beyond its material presence and actual signification in digital culture. The discussion in the paper will be centred on the idea that audiovisual artwork can behave like a magnet by either pulling things and people towards itself as well as to each other or pushing them apart.

The digitally mediated world is a gigantic magnet that either pulls things and people towards each other or pushes them apart as an organising force within its magnetic field. In his book *Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, William J. Mitchell points out that in the networked culture of the global world, neither our environments nor our bodies consist of single or contiguous enclosures. Rather they have become increasingly fragmented and dispersed. [1] If the world operates as a magnet for centralization, regulation and control, then the task for critics is to map or, even better, in a sense, to electrify other forces operating within dominant forces that generate social pressures. From this perspective, the paper proposes the term 'magnetic' –which I have coined– that is an implement inviting us to re-think audiovisual artwork as alternative electric currents and thus attract alternative forms of flows through mobility and/or social connectedness. Dealing with the element of voice and sound in installation works, I will argue that audiovisual artwork can behave like a magnet involving the mapping of the invisible, the temporal, the detachable, the connectible, the reversible, and the modifiable. By giving examples from certain pieces by visual and audio artists, I will focus on the magnetized and the magnetizable voice that awaits a place to attach to while acting and producing events by itself.

### The Magnetic Voice

In the age of digital culture, artists develop a digital aesthetics that a certain shift happens from the eyes to the ears through the use of sound and voice opening up a new channel of sensation. Jacques Rancière puts sensation at the centre of artistic field. Rancière argues that what the artist does is to weave together a new sensory fabric by wresting percepts and affects from the perceptions and affections that make up the fabric of ordinary experience. This task is political. He speaks of the community of sensation which equating the 'individual' production of art with the sensory fabric of collective life. Sense here refers to both five senses and the sensual. Rancière defines this community an 'aesthetic community', a 'community of sense' that contains a certain combination of sense data: forms, words, spaces, rhythms and so on. [2] In relation to the use of voice in installations, I call this certain combination 'the magnetic.'

In our times, art is mostly produced and distributed digitally, and magnetism is inherent in digital culture. The artists do not only use digital technologies as a tool for the creation of traditional art objects, such as photograph, print, music, film and so on, but they employ these technologies as its very own medium, being produced, stored, and presented exclusively in the digital format and making use of its interactive features. As being the force of attraction or repulsion that acts at a distance, magnetism is due to a magnetic field which is caused by moving electrically charged particles such as a magnet. Inspired by this operational mode of digital technologies, I aim to interrogate audiovisual art practices that exhibits strong magnetic field. Through the act of listening as well as looking, an audio-visual artwork

can take shape or function as being inclined toward affect and not just towards perceived meaning, content, logos or truth. It can offer an aesthetic experience that facilitates a form of consciousness, an intensity of feeling, an energy for action. The digital voice can produce an aesthetic effect which stands apart from the referential or informational function of language. Voice is there for expression, as Mladen Dolar, a voice theorist points out:

expression versus meaning, expression beyond meaning, expression which is more than meaning, yet expression which functions only in tension with meaning, for it needs the signifier as the limit to transcend and to reveal its beyond. [3]

Hearing a voice and listening to it marks the moment of which it starts to operate as magnet therefore facilitating events and situations, introducing dis/connections, mobilizing bodies, and appealing to senses.

Speaking in visual terms, the recognition of forms is precise. However, sound and voice complicates the vision. Not being subordinated itself to the vision, voice becomes another object in the installation or another element in the video. Dolar points out a major difference between the visible and the audible:

The visible world presents relative stability, permanence, distinctiveness, and a location at a distance; the audible presents fluidity, passing, a certain inchoate, amorphous character, and a lack of distance. Voice is elusive, always changing, becoming, elapsing, with unclear contours, as opposed to the permanence, solidity, durability of the seen. [4]

Voice is on the site of event, not of fixity of things or the visibility of beings. It is magnetic. By its nature, voice knows neither interior nor exterior. It is a heavy task to keep the voice at distant. One is constantly exposed, no distance can be maintained to it.

In his book *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Michel Chion uses the term ‘magnetization’ in order to discuss the ways in which the filmic image ‘magnetizes’ sound in the space. By ‘magnetization’, Chion means mental spatialization, that is the psychological process (in monaural film viewing) of locating a sound’s source in the space of the image, no matter what the real point of origin of the sound in the viewing space is. [5] He explains his point by giving some examples:

... if under particular screening conditions the loudspeaker is not located behind the screen, but placed somewhere else in the auditorium or in an outdoor setting (e.g., at the drive-in), or if the soundtrack resonates in our head by means of earphones (watching a movie on an airplane), these sounds will be perceived no less as coming from the screen, in spite of the evidence our own senses. [6]

Chion further argues that sound coming from another point than the screen is ‘magnetizable’ only if the sound itself maintains a basic spatial stability. If it constantly moves back and forth among loudspeakers, the image will have a harder time absorbing it, and the sound takes on a centrifugal force of its own that resists visual ‘attraction.’ [7]

A sound-installation can produce spatial magnetization on its own, free from the image or vision as formulated by Chion. The magnetic field is also a topography that is invisible, but responsible for the most notable property of a magnet. Ayse Erkmen’s nine-channel sound installation *Ghost* (2010) which was exhibited in Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary in Vienna is a journey into magnetizing situations

and their electrified effects in a very particular way. The exhibition building was formerly known as the Palais Erdödy Fürstenberg and located in Vienna's first district where Ludwig van Beethoven spent a few months in 1806. Beethoven dedicated a number of works to Countess Anna Maria Erdödy, including the musical New Year's greeting *Glück, Glück zum neuen Jahr*(1819), whose ancestor owned the palace in 1714 and had it expanded in the following years. Besides a web of speculations about the relationship between Beethoven and the countess, Erkmen dealt with the rumor that the ghost of a young girl lives at the palace. Thus she re-composed the *Glück, Glück zum neuen Jahr* for a single voice, a soprano. In the sound installation, the singing voice of the soprano could be heard from nine speakers installed at the illuminated ceiling of the palace room. The singing voice coming from nine different speakers had a magnetic presence and a magnetized affect. This is partly because this had a bodiless voice, an 'acoustic' voice, to put it in Michael Chion's words. There was nothing to look in the bright gallery room except the speakers and light bulbs, but certainly there was something to listen. Being neither inside nor outside the voice of the soprano distributed in all nine speakers behaves like separate magnets each wandering around the room seeking a place to settle. *Ghost* stretches the relationship of voice to a certain place and bodies. Enveloping the empty gallery room, the singing voices urged the audiences to move across the space to engage with immaterial histories, intangible realities, hidden places, speculative facts, lost stories, and repressed presences. By reducing the many-voices cannon to a single soprano voice and diffusing the musical fragment in the nine-channel speaker system, Erkmen introduced an original dispersion to the gallery space. Sound environment magnetized its visitors, their bodies, their senses and their minds. The ear of the audience detected the depth from a sound blend producing a sonic perspective. *Ghost* therefore led its audiences to move through its stark yet dense soundscapes. As Sean Cubitt has written:

... sound ... must be approached, walked into, penetrated, and, in walking into it, as your body subtly moulds the acoustic around it, the sound will penetrate you. ...an open soundscape is a world in which others exist as well as yourself. [8]

In a sound environment, we cannot perceive like that of the visual field of perception. In *Ghost* the audience inevitably oscillated between one visualized situation and the other sensed one, between what we can see and what we can listen and feel. An 'aesthetic community' emerges as the installation creates its own auditory public culture of the digital. *Ghost* has required the 'performative act' of listening as well as looking, it has created its own audiences who are urged to engage with a relationship of power and possession, to participate in lodging crucial knowledge, to transmit this, to manufacture public opinion, and to re-compose the cultural material obtained in private ownership for the general public in the age of digital culture.

Installation as an sonorous event that lasted leaves us with a crucial question: "Is it possible to retain the voice in the age of digitalization?" The technology of voice recording and reproduction surely makes possible to capture the voice. However the voice has never been just a pledge of presence, but rather an indicator of an impossible presence where the claim for authenticity or uniqueness becomes impossible.

### Sound Object

Once Gilles Deleuze has remarked upon the fact that "the machine is always social before it is technical. There is always a social machine which selects or assigns the technical elements used." [9] Following this thought, we can suggest that digital technology is a product of digital culture, not the other way around.

This means that our digital worlds encompass the ways of thinking and doing that are embodied within that technology. This involves how we interact to produce that culture. In this context, ‘the magnetic’ refers to a particular connection between art and politics in the age of digital culture. In our times, visual artists use digital technologies to insert themselves into the network of social divisions, hierarchies and obligations in order to produce a counter culture of digitality. Amongst many, one of the strategies is to develop the politics of voice.

In January 1985, the General Directorate of the Turkish State Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) banned the use of 205 words on TV and radio broadcasts on the grounds that they did not comply with the general structure of the Turkish language. As the only broadcast institution both television and radio programmes were under the monopoly of TRT. In collaboration with MC Fuat, hip hop singer and songwriter, Asli Cavusoglu made a song entitled *191/205* (2010) by using 191 banned words found in TRT archives and newspapers. In the installation work with the same title, Asli Cavusoglu invited audiences to play this record in a gallery context. Through the mode of appropriation, old associations have been replaced with new meanings. Singing voice does not act as law or speak in the language of the logos or the power, as written by Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, “languages evolve and learn to speak in new forms, new thoughts.’ [10]

TRT General Director Tunca Toskay explained the motives behind the order in an interview with *Hürriyet* Newspaper on 30 January 1985 in these words: “Our aim is to prevent lingual division” and “to take the language used in the constitution as reference.” The real aim was to erase the words mostly attached to the leftist thought and politics in favor of the right-wing nationalistic world view. Toskay’s words reflect upon the policy of shaping people’s taste with a paternalist approach and the hidden agenda of making the citizens apolitical systematically carried out after the military coup of 1980. The order mostly banned modern Turkish words and replaced them with words of Arabic and Persian origin. [11] Repealed within few months, the censorship was directly linked to the processes of social engineering and State repression.

Pitting the voice against the master signifiers, indeed that of the names of the father, *191/205* engages us with remix and DJ culture. The narrative structure in the song lyrics and the singing voice magnetizes memories of the past in order to give a counter-response to the present social, cultural, political and economical situations in the country as well as in the world such as racism, civil wars, unemployment, etc. The voice in the song pinpoints a dichotomy of the voice and the signifier. Signifier is that in language which can be replicated and thus enables speech. It is in that language which can be linguistically classified, pinned down and dissected into a web of differences. But the voice cannot necessarily contribute to signification. The signifier can be stained by the voice who speaks, who uses the language. [12] According to Dolar voice is always a sound object, not merely the bearer of signification. This is where the effort of poetry lies. He writes:

The signifier has a double nature: apart from its differential, signifying, sense-making properties it also produces erratic sound echoes, reverberations, sound contagions, similarities, the stuff that can be put to use in repetitions, rhythms and rhymes, the stuff that can unexpectedly produce another meaning, inside of what makes sense, signification beyond signification, although both are inextricably tied together. [13]

As an installation in the form of a music set, *191/205* is destined to wait for its performer. As Nicolas Bourriaud points out “the contemporary work of art does not position itself as the termination point of the ‘creative process’ (a ‘finished product’ to be contemplated) but as a site of navigation, a portal, a

generator of activities.” [14] Similarly, emerging as a social form through participation, *191/205* maps out a magnetic field of its own.

### The Acts of Voice

The term ‘magnetic’ refers to a particular sort of potentiality that an audio-visual artwork can carry in itself. This potentiality refers to the co-existence of ‘mobile elements’ (objects, bodies, sounds, voices) that operate like magnets so as to produce a plural form and thus require another kind of material practice and spectator/listener.

Giorgio Agamben argues that in modern world societies have lost their gestures under the action of invisible powers. According to Agamben, art should belong to the realm of ethics and politics and not simply to that of aesthetics. [15] The philosopher inscribes gesture into the sphere of action clearly setting it apart from acting and making. “What characterizes gesture is that,” writes Agamben, “in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported.” [16] Agamben therefore distinguishes gesture from representation that contains a sphere of means as addressing a goal and from a separate and superior sphere of gesture as a movement that has its end in itself. Instead Agamben points out that

[t]he gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such. It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them. [17]

Elements in an audio-visual artwork can arrange themselves in a gesture. I am interested in the use of voices in artworks that exhibits gesture and not image. Voice is not simply ephemeral. It can act, it can produce effects in the world and for the world.

*Istanbul-Amsterdam Audio Tour*, a sound art project, inscribes itself into the city of Istanbul as it was relayed to human beings in gestures. Utilizing the medium of audio guide or guided tour, *Istanbul-Amsterdam Audio Tour* made the voice record not just a signifier, but an act. The audience put on the headphones and listened to the voice narrating, giving information or instructions on certain sites or buildings in the city. An act of listening facilitates a sound walk which is magnetic. *Ticket to Amsterdam* (2010) for instance was a 50-minute sonic journey over the waters of the Bosphorus by the sound artist Justin Bennett and theatre maker Renate Zentschnig. The artists invited its audience to use the inner-city ferry during the tour to create an analogy between the Bosphorus of Istanbul and the IJ river of Amsterdam. According to the instructions given by the voice of the guide, The Turkish and Dutch Leyla Cimen, the audience started the journey by taking the ferry in Karakoy and ended up somehow in Amsterdam. Cimen made links, contrasts and similarities between the two cities, and the audience listened to her interviewing Amsterdammers and Istanbulites commuting from one side to the other on a daily basis. After landing again at Karakoy the audience as performer had the chance to be a sonic tourist as s/he wanders along the streets of Amsterdam even though her/his body was in Istanbul and s/he walks on the streets of Karakoy. *Ticket to Amsterdam* aims at facilitating experiences, experiences that different from the ordinary, from the imposed, from the habitual.

I read *Istanbul-Amsterdam Audio Tour* as an interrogation in the field of the ‘magnetic city’, a mapping of magnetizing situations and their electrified effects. The ‘magnetic’ of which I am speaking is about shifting from space to place and from permanent to temporal through mobile elements that operate like

magnets. A digital record came into existence as sonic as well as visual and tangible events through different elements and various scales relating to or produced by the magnetism. Sound moves the mass of the body and is moved forward with it. As written by Sean Cubitt, "sound enters space not to imitate sculpture or architecture, but, through electronic webs, to weave a geographic art." [18] The 'magnetic' city is not a space for architecture, but a place for people. It is an intensive soundscape and geography made of multiple spaces generated by voices and bodies. Consequently, it moves with the activities that define it. The voice comes from some invisible interior brings out more than one would intend. The audience had the power to decide over the fate of the voice, its effect. The listener as walker could rule over its meaning, or turn a deaf ear. The digital voice took place magnetically.

To conclude, the use of digital voice in contemporary artworks offers an understanding of looking and listening as central to the process of inventive and creative interpretation of and the participation of the world in the age of digitalization.

### **References and Notes:**

1. *William J. Mitchell, Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 16.
2. *Jacques Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. *Gregory Elliott* (London-New York: Verso, 2009), 56-57.
3. *Mladen Dolar, "His Master's Voice,"* in *Amber'07: Art and Technology Festival, Voice and Survival* (catalogue) (Istanbul: Body-Process Art Association, 2010), 110.
4. *Ibid.*, 117.
5. *Michel Chion, Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. *Claudia Gorbman* (New York: Columbia University Pres, 1994), 223.
6. *Ibid.*, 70.
7. *Ibid.*, 70-71.
8. *Sean Cubitt, Digital Aesthetics* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 120-121.
9. *Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Dialogues* (London: Athlone Press, 1977).
10. *Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, Rhythm Science* (Cambridge, MA: Media-work/The MIT Press, 2004), 25.
11. *To give a few examples of the banned words: ulus meaning nation with millet; devinim meaning motion with hareket; devrim meaning revolution with inkilap; özgurluk meaning freedom with hurriyet.*
12. *Mladen Dolar, "What's in a Voice,"* in *Amber'07: Art and Technology Festival, Voice and Survival* (catalogue) (Istanbul: Body-Process Art Association, 2010), 94.
13. *Ibid.*, 95.
14. *Nicolas Bourriaud, Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002), 13.
15. *Giorgio Agamben, Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis, MS: University of Minneapolis Pres, 2000), 56.
16. *Ibid.*, 57.
17. *Ibid.*, 58.
18. *Sean Cubitt, Digital Aesthetics* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 116.