

The Voice and the Lens

Facing Technologies in the Audio-visual Installation

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

The Voice and the Lens is a study of the interconnecting technologies that constitute contemporary audio-visual installations. The thesis focuses on how these technologies 'face' each other – how they are positioned both towards one another and in confrontation. These technologies necessarily include our own corporeal apparatus, and by interrogating 'the voice' the human body is inevitably mobilised. Of fundamental importance to the study is the way in which accepted audio-visual relationships can be displaced while drawing attention to the originative gesture: new sights and sounds are created in the process.

The Voice and the Lens is deliberately iconoclastic in that it seeks to break down a range of physical and theoretical boundaries encapsulating the work. This, I argue, is something that is already being done by sound and its audience in the gallery. This project, therefore, is a study of the spaces, surfaces and technologies that riddle audio-visual installations – topographies that permeate both the work and body.

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Fingal's Cave, work in progress, June 2013

Overture

In June 2013 I travelled to Fingal's Cave, Scotland. This cave, famous for its unique reverberations, has attracted adventurers for hundreds of years.¹ Camera and microphone in hand, I approached the opening, endeavouring to capture any emerging sights and sounds. Whilst there I did what many explorers have done before: I yelled, allowing my voice to echo around the cavern. At the limits of my visual faculties, these vocalisations allowed me to penetrate deeper into the abyss – to explore (from Latin *ex-* 'out' and *plorare* 'utter a cry')² this ancient architecture, while remaining steadfast at its entrance. Vitally, this moment of investigation consisted as much of sonic reverberation as visual reflection; the aural apparatus was functioning in tandem with the oral and ocular openings elsewhere. Standing at the mouth of this extraordinary chamber, I was repeating a series of connections – rehearsing a range of movements that I had made before in previous work, and which now brought me to be here, in dialogue with the cave.

This strange place – a place between two places – both mirrors and extends my own internal architecture. Gateways are continually reconfigured in order to form spaces

¹ The most famous was Felix Mendelssohn, who visited the cave in 1829. In a letter to his sister, enclosing some musical sketches, he wrote: 'In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, I send you the following, which came into my head there.' Building on these emerging, internal resonances Mendelssohn was to write the '*Hebrides*' Overture, Op. 26 (1830), known affectionately by many as *Fingal's Cave*. See Wilfrid Blunt, *On Wings of Song: A Biography of Felix Mendelssohn* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. 108.

² The Oxford English Dictionary in fact explains the word's etymology as 'to make to flow', from Latin *pluere* 'to flow'. Other dictionaries, however, trace it back to *plorare* 'to cry aloud', possibly deriving from the shouts of hunters sighting their prey. "explore, v." *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2015), Web. 11 June 2015. "explore, v." *Collins English Dictionary – Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition* (London, Harper Collins Publishers). Web. 11 June 2015.

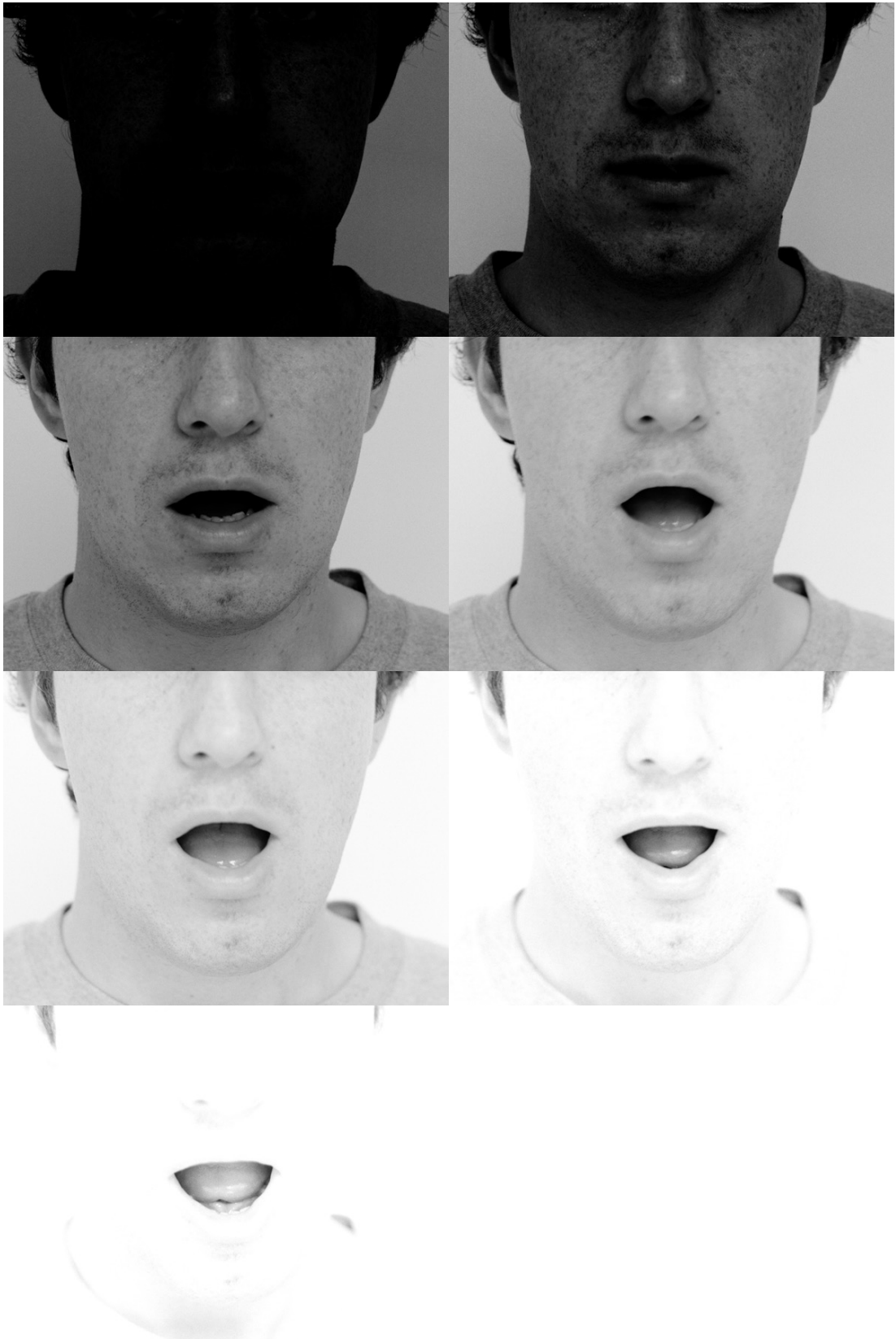


Aperture (2012), Southard Reid, February 2013

necessary for vocal production. This same process is paralleled in the adjacent camera,³ where images are focused and exposed as its own aperture opens and closes. *Aperture* (2011) was the first of my works to mine these relationships, and can be seen as a matrix for the subsequent explorations that form this PhD. The work consists of a series of seven photographs that record me performing an ascending scale. As the scale goes up I move from a hum to an 'aah' sound, changing my mouth shape to enable the higher notes. Paralleling this movement, the camera's own aperture is widened on each step of the scale; the image gradually emerges, as the sound did in the initial performance.

Whether one concentrates on the physical movements, or the theoretical machinations that went on in the darkroom where the work emerged, *Aperture* strikes together opposing technologies and their corresponding modes of thought. This action is both visual and auditory in nature; a resonating tone accompanies any sparks of light or inspiration. *The Voice and the Lens* as a thesis seeks to re-stage this movement, paying special attention to

³ Camera comes from the classical Latin *camera*, meaning a chamber or room, and is therefore also itself a space. "camera, n." *OED Online*. Web. 16 June 2015.



Sam Belinfante, *Aperture*, 2011
C-Type prints, seven prints, 40 x 30cm each

the acoustic event.⁴ However, this is not in spite of any visual incidences that play their part. Whether through curation, writing or art-making I endeavour to choreograph these various technologies – to set them in motion – but also to allow them to resound, and to listen to that resonance.⁵ Often, in the process, it is actually the technologies that choreograph me: audio-visual relationships are forcibly reorientated along with my sensory organs. The aim, though, is to identify spaces where the technological apparatus can reverberate, and to be sensitive to the resulting movements, whether they be tremors of entrainment or repulsion.

Facing Technologies

As the title of this thesis suggests, my whole doctoral project is concerned with relationships between audio-visual technologies – relationships that are activated, though often disavowed, within contemporary exhibitions. In the dark, cavernous spaces to which this kind of work is so often relegated, light and sound coexist and vie for our attention. The differences between how these phenomena (and their corresponding technical apparatus) operate are of fundamental importance here; I certainly do not wish to equalise their nature and effects.⁶ What is important is the way in which these devices interact and play with one another.

⁴ 'The Voice and the Lens' is not only the title of this work but also the name of a series of parallel curatorial projects in collaboration with Third Ear music production. The project began with a three-day festival at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, in November 2012 and grew into a series of events at Rich Mix and Whitechapel Gallery, London as part of the 2014 Spitalfields Festival.

⁵ The Latin word *chorus* (Greek χορός), from which 'choreography' is derived, was used to describe not only a band of dancers but also an organised group of singers. This mixture of movement and vocalisation is extremely important to me. When using the word choreography I intend to retain this sonic resonance. "chorus, n." *OED Online*. Web. 23 June 2015.

⁶ There are important differences in the ways in which light and sound operate. Jonathan Rée explains, for example, that the mixing of colours is not analogous to the blending of sonic tones. Music depends on the way sounds combine, whereas the mixing of colour will always result in a new entity – the constituent parts will be indeterminate: '[t]he root of the difference – and one of the abiding riddles of physical thought – is that beams of light pass chastely through each other without being affected at all, whereas sounds waves are constantly colliding and combining and mutually interfering.' Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: A Philosophical History of the Senses* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 31.

The mythological story of Echo and Narcissus is prototypically deconstructive in the way that it correlates sound and vision. According to John Hollander: '[i]n the association of Echo with Narcissus, the profoundest relations between light and sound, emptiness and fullness of self, absorption and reflection, are established'.⁷ Narcissus' love of his own visual reflection is paired with Echo's reverberant voice. As George Sandy adds in his translation of Ausonius, the image of Echo's voice parallels Narcissus' own reflected image: 'from one glasse to another; melting by degrees, and every reflection more weak and shady than the former'.⁸ Both sonic and visual images are reflected and refracted through a mediating lens,⁹ though with considerably different effects. The use of the Latin 'imago' for both Echo's voice and Narcissus' self-image challenges the hegemony of visual language and experience that eventually took hold within the history of western metaphysics: as Hollander argues, the designation of echo as *imago*, or sometimes *imago voces*, 'precedes, rather than tropes, our primarily visual use of the word image'.¹⁰ Vially, the story of Echo and Narcissus argues for being in (and through) resonance alongside a specular ontology. Echo's voice frees itself from the cancelling negation of ocular repetition; she learns to use her vocal reflections to create meaning, compensating for the inability to speak her own words.¹¹

In *The Voice and the Lens* technologies face each other – they are positioned both towards one another and in confrontation. This is not, however, a straightforward encounter. It is a *collision*,¹² where stability is threatened while new sounds and visuals are produced. Cracks

⁷ John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 8.

⁸ Quoted by Hollander, p. 11.

⁹ The lens, like Echo's rocky dwelling, is con-cave: a depression in the surface is required for the image to come into focus.

¹⁰ Hollander, p. 11.

¹¹ When conversing with Narcissus, for example, Echo repeats the words 'Come here!' as both a *double entendre* and a reversal of power. Echo is able to locate both herself and Narcissus without a body of her own.

¹² From the Latin *collidēre* 'to strike or clash together', from *col-* 'together' and *laedēre* 'to injure, damage'. "collide, v." *OED Online*. Web. 16 June 2015.



Fingal's Cave, work in progress, June 2013

are both seen and heard, they open up in the process. Of fundamental importance to me is the way in which accepted audio-visual relationships can be displaced while drawing attention to the originaive gesture. Throughout this work attempts are made to focus in on such moments of interface. At a series of architectural and ontological thresholds, languages and technologies are docked – they are conjoined whilst being inevitably curtailed. Bodies are coupled together in ways that undermine the authority of the constituent parts. The same kiss that breathes life into one thing, sucks it out of another. This is a messy business, as things don't fit together that neatly. Seals are inevitably inadequate as thoughts, meanings and media escape us. Even with tightly closed lips the odd sound escapes and light floods in. *The Voice and the Lens* revolves around these moments of slippage.

The Body

Both the theory and practice of this PhD require a reorientation of the body and its connected technologies. The work is not confined to the body but deliberately grows out of, and back towards it. Comprised of a series of antechambers – curated spaces, installed

artworks and interlocking technologies – the project mirrors the compartmentalisation of our own bodies, spaces that are consciously (and unconsciously) activated at the mouth of the cave. Singing out into the cave, in an inevitably reflexive move, I am compelled to engage with the voice in space and, by extension, with the spaces which form and carry it. Significantly, these spaces include the physiological compartments *within* my own body.

The body is the ultimate terra incognita to be mapped and explored by the voice. As this 'preface' attests, there are things before, beyond and behind the mouth that must be brought forth. Inchoate sounds are summoned from deep in the body long before syllables are carved out by the lips and tongue. Though it is undeniably connected to language, the voice operates outside and beyond it – one of the many boundaries traversed by this project. As a human technology, the voice upsets any accepted ideas of interiority/ exteriority and calls into question the delineation of body, space and language. Like Jonathan Rée, I see the body as 'the first communication technology',¹³ an idea Rée relates back to Marcel Mauss's influential 'techniques of the body':

the body is man's first and most natural instrument [...] Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man's first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body.¹⁴

Self-consciously, the body is the primary technical apparatus of this study. The system of cavities, skin and residing organs that amalgamate there not only functions as a technology, but is itself comprised of a series of interconnecting technologies that run in both harmony and conflict. These technologies incorporate a mixture of sensory organs, an arrangement that is difficult if not impossible to dissolve. The senses fold into one another and are easily confused. Vitally, though, ocular experience is augmented through the use of other senses and technologies. In the dark spaces that punctuate this project, one is forced to rely on other modes of existence. The artworks installed in this opus are of interest to me for the

¹³ Rée, p. 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

way they reorientate the body in relationship to the work: one must lend an ear to this material, must listen as well as simply look.

Once resonant, things inevitably open up. In fact, to be resonant is to be always already open(ing), to be spacing out – filling the void. It seems strange, therefore, that the primary site for time-based media in the art exhibition, biennale and art fair has become the blacked-out box, an installation¹⁵ designed to keep things out or in, to define particular thresholds between media and languages. The various acts of spelunking in *The Voice and the Lens* are deliberately iconoclastic in that they break down a range of physical and theoretical boundaries encapsulating the work. This, I would argue, is something that is already being done by sound and its audience in the gallery. This project is a study of the spaces, surfaces and technologies that riddle audio-visual installations – topographies that permeate both work and body.

¹⁵ I refer here, as I do throughout, to the genre of art known as 'installation art'. In her influential study of this subject, Claire Bishop sites the term as something 'that loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as "theatrical", "immersive" or "experimental"'. She goes on to say that the term has expanded to colloquially include any art that is installed unusually or experimentally. With Bishop, I want to hold on to the immersive and theatrical aspects of installation art while paying special attention to moments of technological and sensory mixing and/or interference. Furthermore, there is something seemingly paradoxical about installing (or putting into place) things as fleeting and ephemeral as sound and the voice. These theoretical and practical difficulties are ones to which I will keep returning. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p. 6.



Many Chambers, Many Mouths, work in progress, 2012

1. Many Chambers, Many Mouths

A voice detaches itself, that is its way of 'attaching itself'. In any case, if there is any 'locus' where the figure of connection (attachment/detachment, binding/unbinding) no longer offers the least security, then surely it is atypical voice, this madness of the voice. Instead of exchanging arguments through the mail, we should listen-demonstrate this by way of song. The vocal operation of which I speak is also opera.¹

Jacques Derrida (1982)

I am in a position where I must account for myself. I must lay down my research and place it within both the field of contemporary arts practices and the context of my own work. How does writing sit in relationship to other practices in my oeuvre? How does the work and writing sit in relationship to me? This whole 'thesis' is in fact, literally, an act of positioning – the putting-into-place of both me and the work.² Before the words themselves materialise, I must consider the various objects and ideas involved and place them within the 'locus' of my research – the body of my work.

Antithetically, however, the primary subject of this thesis is 'the voice', a phenomenon that is, in fact, entirely non-localisable and, fundamentally, exists only through a process of dislocation. As Derrida explains (in conversation), the voice cannot be assigned to a space or

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Voice II', in *Points ... : Interviews, 1974-1994*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf and others (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 156-170 (p. 160).

² Thesis comes from the Greek θέσις, meaning 'putting, placing; a proposition'. "thesis, n." OED Online. Web. 23 June 2015.



Many Chambers, Many Mouths (2012), Southard Reid, February 2013

even a region but is instead characterised by ‘a strange force of dislocation’.³ Although the voice is undoubtedly connected to the various aforementioned bodies, this connection is established by means of a thorough divorcement that has considerable ramifications for the whole organisation. This seemingly paradoxical rupture-through-interconnection results in a peculiar topography that is, by definition, impossible to navigate and highly ambivalent (on both a semantic and an ontological level). Moreover, it is these uncertainties that make the voice so luring, and, importantly for me, so fertile as both medium and subject matter.

Viva Voce

Through this writing, then, as well as the viva voce I must ‘present’ the work – bring it into being, put it into my own words. I must situate it within a context of work by myself and others. As a practising artist I have many different voices. They are comprised by a

³ Derrida, ‘Voice II’, p. 160.

multitude of media that both support and contradict one another. In an attempt to deal with this state of affairs I have choreographed a series of movements across a variety of thresholds, borders and intersections. Importantly, these movements will reference the temporality of the live events that exist within my practice as well as the various philosophical and theoretical moves that run alongside. These movements, therefore, exist both in the following text and in the accompanying art works – the most significant in connection with this chapter being the video installation *Many Chambers, Many Mouths* (2012).⁴

In *Many Chambers, Many Mouths* I attempt to put the difficulties of the voice into a kind of practical consciousness. As I will go on to explain, any encounter with the voice is inevitably also an encounter with a series of gaps, breaks, slips, holes and ellipses. The following texts, therefore, present a series of engagements with the voice in a necessarily discontinuous and fragmentary manner. Empathising with Roland Barthes (who naturally gravitated towards the fragment), I feel obliged to resist a kind of discourse presenting itself as complete and uninterrupted:

The implication from the point of view of an ideology or a counter-ideology of form is that the fragment breaks up what I would call the smooth finish, the composition, discourse constructed to give a final meaning to what one says, which is the general rule of past rhetoric.⁵

Though intentionally diegetic in nature, this writing, along with the video work that parallels it, presents a series of caesuras where thoughts and meanings are separated but inevitably, at times, bleed into one another.

⁴ *Many Chambers, Many Mouths* is a video installation consisting of two side-by-side HD video projections and 5.1 Surround audio. The work was first show at Project Space Leeds in 2012 and then at my solo show with the same name at Southard Reid in February 2013.

⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Twenty Key Words for Roland Barthes', in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 205-232 (p. 209).



Many Chambers, Many Mouths (2012), still from video

Many Chambers, Many Mouths grew out of an invitation by the Anna Mahler International Association and the Istituzione Teatro Lirico Sperimentale di Spoleto to spend time in the ancient town of Spoleto in Umbria, Italy – home to one of the world’s leading opera programmes. Spoleto was first colonised as a place for performance by Gian Carlo Menotti, who identified the town’s variety of spaces for music (both ancient and modern) and used them to host his famous ‘Festival of Two Worlds’. Later, in 1947, the lawyer and musicologist Adriano Belli founded the Teatro Lirico Sperimentale di Spoleto with the aim of helping young singers to start a career in opera. Singers come from all over the world to work intensively on their voices, over two years, after which they present a series of professionally staged operas.

As you walk around the town of Spoleto you can hear the singers’ voices as they grapple with the opera repertoire. This process incorporates both practice and ‘final’ performances, in both public and private contexts. Such work, of course, is never actually finished. True to its etymology, opera is the ‘work’, yet it is far from a complete product – it is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that, in order to be complete, is necessarily unfinished and in progress at all points. The designated spaces for these activities, therefore, are appropriately varied in nature: from the town’s huge concert halls to small interior and exterior spaces around them. The resulting vocalisations are, crucially, both intro- and extrospective. The opera form allows for investigations in and of the voice that traverse a vast array of spaces

(including those of the singer's own body). These explorations are carried out in a multitude of opposing directions and contexts. As Derrida asserts, opera is tied into a dual process of listening and performing: 'Instead of exchanging arguments through the mail, we should listen-demonstrate this by way of song. The vocal operation of which I speak is also opera'.⁶

Their opera/work as singers is to locate their voices in relation to each other as well as to themselves. The singers cannot properly hear themselves (a singer hears mainly internal vibrations and not the voice as others hear it), and furthermore their instrument is, by definition, extremely fugitive in nature. Performers must rely on each other's ears as well as their own. Furthermore, singers must train themselves to use the theatrical spaces that reflect their sounds back to them. Neither of these methods of listening, though, is particularly reliable. As a filmmaker I had similar problems; I could neither see/hear the work nor comprehend it as it revealed itself. The work emerged at the intersection between their conceptions and mine.

Spoleto's spaces are saturated by voices and, importantly for me, these voices are often impossible to place. The sounds of the singers as they practise are inevitably acousmatic; they are both disembodied and placeless. Furthermore the voices are timeless: one does not know if the sounds are contemporary or merely echoed resonances from past events. This acoustic indeterminacy is not a unique phenomenon, however. Instead, it merely amplifies the voice's inherent undecidability. The 'double organisation of the vocal/auditory system', the 'acoustic mirror' as Kaja Silverman calls it, functions to permanently dislocate the voice:

Such a system permits a speaker to function at the same time as listener, his or her voice returning as sound in the process of utterance. The simultaneity of these two actions makes it difficult to situate the voice, to know whether it is 'inside' or 'outside'. The boundary separating interiority from exteriority is blurred by this aural

⁶ Derrida, 'Voice II', p. 160.

undecidability – by the replication within the former arena of something which seems to have its inception in the latter.⁷

In a typically reflexive move the interiority and exteriority of the voice unfolds. Echoing Derrida's vocal tremblings, Silverman reinforces the notion that although we are compelled to locate the voice, by the very process of hearing it we are also acknowledging it as non-localisable: 'it makes itself heard because its place of emission is not fixed'.⁸

Turning back

But of course 'theoretical' doesn't mean 'abstract'; from my point of view it means reflexive, i.e., turning back on itself: a discourse that looks back on itself is thereby a theoretical discourse. After all, the eponymous hero, the mythical hero of theory could be Orpheus, precisely because he is the one who looks back on what he loves, even at the risk of destroying it; in Eurydice, he makes her vanish, he kills her a second time. This retrospection must be done, even at the cost of destruction.⁹

Looking back at my own work is a difficult, though necessary, 'theoretical' move. As Barthes explains so succinctly, the text must be turned back upon itself and this is the importance/power of theory. Theory allows one to flip the work so that it works on itself, so that it can work on the author. Furthermore, the reflexivity of this gesture is doubled in its voicing. The voice, as I have attempted to show, is always already turning. In many ways Orpheus is not only the hero of theory but the example *par excellence* of the voice itself: the legendary musician will traverse all boundaries (topographical, ontological, corporal, to name but a few) and his voice will continue to sound even when literally disembodied.¹⁰

Many Chambers, Many Mouths can also be seen as a series of Orphic turns – images of singers talking and performing are often juxtaposed with images of topographical moves

⁷ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 79.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Dialanguages', in *Points ... : Interviews, 1974-1994*, pp. 132-155 (p. 135).

⁹ Roland Barthes, 'Interview: A Conversation with Roland Barthes', in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, pp. 128-149 (p. 145).

¹⁰ Orpheus was decapitated and eventually his head was buried. Even so, it is said that his voice continues to sing on.



Many Chambers, Many Mouths (2012), still from video

and transitions. Escalators and stairs tunnel through the earth as the protagonists manipulate their own throats and mouths. In a move that is as physiological as it is semantic, the singers must turn on their own bodies as though uncharted territory.

- Ivo: The falsetto is a valid technique in the classical music.
It is, but nobody learns it.
- Sam: So, um, the word 'false' is maybe, uh, a bit misleading?
- Ivo: No, uh, it comes, ahem, there are two pairs of folds in your larynx. The first pair is your vocal cords; a fold – two folds obviously, with muscles in them. So that's your vocal cords. Like, some millimetres above them there's another set, another pair of folds, but without the muscles, they don't do this ... but you can contract your whole larynx to use the second pair, and that's why they're called 'false' vocal cords, because they don't have the muscle inside, so they cannot be controlled obviously like the real vocal cords.
- Sam: Yeah –
- Ivo: But – hence the name 'falsetto'
- Sam: But you can still stop them; like 'uh oh'?
- Ivo: No, you're stopping – you're stopping with your vocal cords. The primary function of the vocal cords actually is not to produce sound but to close the larynx so nothing can enter, like the last line of defence of the mouth, of the lungs – obviously – and the secondary function is the voice producing. So everything here is designed to keep ... to be closed, to keep tight.¹¹

As he talks, Ivo Yordanov is in duet with the cutting, scrapping and drilling present in the landscape around him. While the collateral video emerges, from the depths of the ancient Roman architecture, the baritone turns our attention towards his own interior architecture.

¹¹ Sam Belinfante, *Many Chambers, Many Mouths* (2012), transcription by the artist.



Many Chambers, Many Mouths (2012), still from video

By manipulating his vocal apparatus he can produce sounds that are unnaturally high – ‘false’ sounds, as he calls them. Mechanisms that are designed to seal off the body’s internal channels can be reorientated to expel startling vocal effects. But what is really important in this scene is the supplementary utterances emitted by me, the artist. Off camera and out of sight, my questions introduce the authorial voice (quite literally) into the chorus of vocalisations already present. My own voice bleeds in. As Jean-Luc Nancy asserts, however, each and every voice (including mine) is never solo, never exclusive: ‘[v]oice is always shared, it is in a sense sharing itself. Voice begins where the retrenchment of the singular being begins’.¹²

Neither the voice nor the work is entirely owned, controlled or operated by me, and these facts are reinstated with every declaration. Mimicking the internal structure of the vocal apparatus (as described so eloquently by Yordanov), the realm of these voices is constituted by gaps and spaces. Disparity between each ‘individual’ voice is paralleled in the architecture that produces it: ‘[e]ach one is different, each one is formed by a gap, by an opening, a tube, a larynx, throat, and mouth, traversed by this nothing, by this utterance, by this expulsion of voice. The voice cries in the wilderness because it is itself initially such a wilderness extending through the very centre of the body, beyond words’.¹³

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Vox Clamans in Deserto’, in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. by Brian Holmes and others (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 234-247 (p. 237).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Voice and Void

Besides their closely related orthography, the sound of the two terms may link them together. While in the first the vowel is stretched by the 's' sound at its ending, the other is closed by the 'd', a touching of the tongue on the back side of the front teeth. In addition to that, the connection between both terms has a long etymological history, starting with the medieval vulgar Latin where 'vox, vocis' (voice, language, utterance) comes very close to 'vocitus', which is an alteration of Latin 'vacivus' (emptiness) that still sounds in 'vacancy' and 'vacuum'.¹⁴

The phonetic and etymological closeness of voice and void that Trummer expounds here is important in the way I think about the voice. As the voice is formed through a series of interconnecting chambers, it comes into being (and instantly dies away) across a chain of spaces.¹⁵ Spaces are formed and spaces are left behind. From cavities to chasms the voice extends out from the throat into the world; each space is subtly formed and reformed by successive apertures. As the various tunnels expand and contract, gateways (such as the glottis, the mouth, the tongue, the lips) open and close temporarily in order to form spaces vital for voice production and impediment. These divisions or chambers are not reserved to the body, but proceed into the exterior architecture of adjacent rooms and corridors.

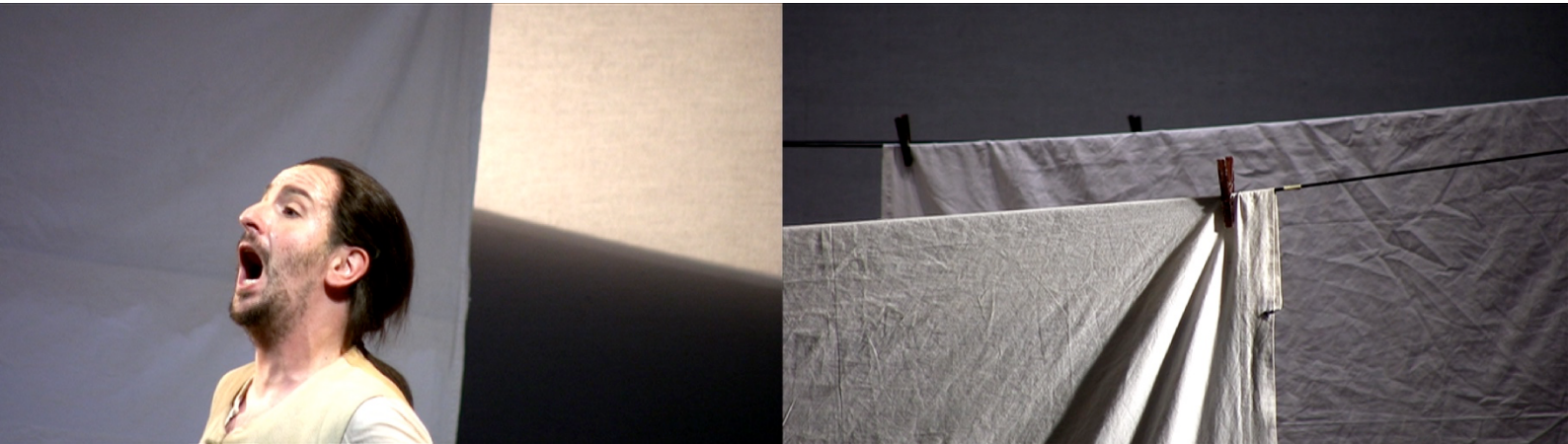
Typically, sounds produced by the voice cannot be simply assigned to the interior bodily spaces of the human, but instead move incessantly away from the person into the void – the 'wilderness',¹⁶ as Nancy refers to it. Furthermore, the voice cannot be separated from the spaces that both create and carry its vibrations. As Steven Connor explains, the 'voice takes place in space, because the voice is space'.¹⁷ The voice is both characterised by, and manifests itself as, space and spacing. Moreover, the voice is not only spaced but functions

¹⁴ *Voice and Void*, ed. by Thomas Trummer (Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2007), p. 7.

¹⁵ Vitally (as I will attempt to demonstrate later), this all happens in or around language but is always extra-linguistic.

¹⁶ Nancy, 'Vox Clamans in Deserto', p. 238.

¹⁷ Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 12.



Many Chambers, Many Mouths (2012), still from video

to space the area in and around it, for, as Michel Chion states, 'the presence of a human voice structures the sonic place that contains it'.¹⁸

As is becoming clear, the voice is formed through and by a series of detachments and divorcements. Often, the voice appears in conversation only when we lose it, when it fails us: 'I cannot find my voice,' 'I have lost my voice.' These moments, where the voice typically enters language, are indicative of a wider reality of the voice. The voice is perpetually lost (or lacking), and as a result is always representative of loss and losing:

A voice may detach itself from the body, from the very first instant it may cease to belong to it. By which it traces, it is a trace, a spacing, a writing, but neither a simple presence nor a dispersion of meaning. It is part of the body but because it traverses the body, because it disposes of it, it retains almost nothing of it, it comes from elsewhere and goes elsewhere, and in passing it may give to this body a locus but does not depend upon it.¹⁹

The voice, as it is expelled from the body, is always already disembodied. Significantly, however, an infinitesimal tracing of the body remains. As the voice passes across the various interior and exterior spaces that it depends on, the same spaces inscribe themselves onto the voice. The resulting tremblings are marked with and by their origins. As Roland Barthes famously registers when listening to a Russian bass cantor:

¹⁸ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 5.

¹⁹ Derrida, 'Voice II', pp. 160-161.

[S]omething is there, manifest and stubborn (one hears only that) beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form (the litany), the melisma, and even the style of execution: something which is directly the cantor's body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the Slavonic language, as though a single skin lines the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings.²⁰

Neither fixed to the body or language, yet marked by both, the 'grain of the voice' saturates the entire organisation of the body and space(s) activated by the voice. Interestingly, Barthes describes this as a kind of phonetic skin, as though the many differences that the voice puts into play are tenuously held at a permeable boundary – a 'fringe of contact' that must be continually displaced.²¹

The 'next to'

At every moment of my life, wherever I go, even walking in the street, when I think, react, I constantly find myself on the side of thought that grapples with what is discontinuous and combinatory. Today, for example, I was reading a text by Brecht, admirable, as always, a text on Chinese painting, in which he says that Chinese painting puts things next to each other, side by side with each other. That's a very simple way of putting it, but very beautiful, and quite true, and what I want, after all, is precisely to feel the juxtaposition of things, the 'next to'.²²

When you enter the video installation *Many Chambers, Many Mouths* you are immediately confronted with difference. The binary and antiphonal arrangement of projectors and speakers places the visitor in the middle of divided sights and sounds. Images are projected,²³ 'thrown forth', and the resulting 'installation' tenuously fixes into place its constituent moving parts. In the same way that Barthes is presented with the singer's grain, the audience of *Many Chambers, Many Mouths* is introduced face-on to a dividing line. At

²⁰ Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 181.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Barthes, 'Interview: A Conversation with Roland Barthes', p. 132.

²³ From classical Latin *prōiect-*, past participial stem of *prōicere* 'to throw forth, to throw or cast away, to reject, to cause to jut out, to cast'. "project, v." *OED Online*. Web. 26 June 2015.



Imogen Stidworthy, *The Whisper Heard* (2003), Matt's Gallery, London

the centre you are faced with this seam, and although the images are mostly discrete in nature, sounds bleed from side to side and relationships are inevitably formed. Some of these relationships are 'composed' and some are entirely accidental. Vitally, though, sounds are never added or manipulated; their levels are simply adjusted to maintain a tenuous balance.

The audio-visual installation has the ability to separate out a variety of media and to stage it in a manner that dictates how the visitor is to behave. Like an exploded diagram the video installation can pull apart the objects that it contains, allowing one to traverse the spaces in-between. For me, the most successful of these installations allows its audience to read things as both distinct and detached. Within the topographical and temporal spaces of the installation one can straddle a range of oppositions. This, of course, parallels the voice's own transitory nature. Through the complicated apparatus of audio-visual equipment the voice is heard, and importantly, it is traversed.

The Whisper Heard

In 2003, the artist Imogen Stidworthy presented a ground-breaking installation that was

both a meditation on the voice as well as an audio-visual actualisation of the thing itself. In 2015 I restaged this work in collaboration with Stidworthy, as part of my touring exhibition *Listening* at Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool. *The Whisper Heard* (2003) presents a mixture of video and sound of two people, each struggling with their voice. The first, Tony O'Donnell, has aphasia, a condition which can affect the language faculty of the brain following a stroke. The second, Severin Domela, is a three-year-old boy learning to speak. Sounds and images are configured into three zones of the gallery, where one can experience each component discretely whilst simultaneously engaging with the whole assembly. Typically for Stidworthy's work, *The Whisper Heard* has the effect of dislocating and disorientating the visitor as he or she moves around it. As the writer Laura Mclean-Ferris experienced in another of Stidworthy's installations, entering the work results in an inevitable 'stumbling around'; from the moment you come in, you are already off course:

Confusion already reigns, but it is a carefully constructed kind of disorientation that I have arrived at here, echoing the artist's concerns with how to locate oneself or find located at a fixed point. Stidworthy is suggesting that we have to get a little lost in order, as it were, to come to our senses.²⁴

This feeling of disorientation is extremely present in *The Whisper Heard* as well. Its mixture of screens, curtains, speakers and walls result in a labyrinthine landscape that is both unknown and discombobulating. Significantly, both O'Donnell and Domela are reading from Jules Verne's nineteenth-century novel *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. Stumbling in to Stidworthy's installation, one has the impression that the protagonists are faced with a corporal landscape that is as unfamiliar as the mysterious subterranean world of Verne's book. It is not merely the voice, though, that proves to be so difficult for the two speakers; it is the closely allied problems of language that both they and we are confronted with at every turn. As Paul Sullivan notes:

one key element of Stidworthy's work is that it questions the notion of translation – to move a thing from one space to another space – not necessarily in the process of the

²⁴ Laura Mclean-Ferris, 'Imogen Stidworthy: (.)', *Art Monthly*, July-August 2011, p. 36.



Imogen Stidworthy, *The Whisper Heard* (2003), production shot

production of art, but rather by concentrating on the breakdowns and inevitable slippages in this utopian ideal, mainly through an ongoing investigation into the vagaries of language itself.²⁵

As we move across and through Stidworthy's installations we mimic the transitions and translations of language itself. No boundary in *A Whisper Heard* is impermeable; curtains don't touch the floor, parabolic speakers are open in the room. The result is that various texts slip and collide as meaning gradually forms. Voices emerge from deep within the belly of the installation, voices that are appropriately neither discrete nor completely shared. By using subtitles on LED screens to supplement the emergent text, Stidworthy allows language to operate on the edge of the voice without being fully consumed by it. In the same way that the voice attaches and detaches to/from the body, language cannot be entirely separated from the voice that carries it:

²⁵ Paul Sullivan, 'Imogen Stidworthy', *Northern Art Prize* (Leeds City Art Gallery, 2008).

[the] voice, which is something other than phonation, belongs to language in that it is anterior to it, even exterior to it in a way. Voice is language's intimate precession even if a stranger to language itself.²⁶

Whether the languages are visual or auditory – whether they belong to those inside or outside the work – the audio-visual installation has the ability to mobilise all of its signifying components in a way that allows both artist and viewer to move freely among them. These movements can be carefully choreographed by the artist, but inevitably spaces and bodies are also orientated by the work's technological components and subject matter.

Language/Tongue

Kanae: When I sing in Japanese, the tongue is really low.
 But when I sing in Italian, I have to keep the tongue up.
 So, it is very important in Japanese aria ... that the tongue is behind.
 But when I sing Italian opera ... the tongue is always up.
 So, the tongue is very different ...
 When I sing Italian opera I don't want to speak Japanese, because I am so used to having the tongue down. So when I come to Italy I always speak Italian so that it's not so difficult to think the tongue/language.²⁷

As the soprano Kanae Fujitani expounds the problems of the Japanese language in relation to the Italian 'bel canto' style of singing, the translator mistranslates the Italian 'lingua' as 'language' rather than 'tongue'. Whilst editing the film, I highlighted this mistake through subtitling of the final 'lingua' in the sequence. Rather than edit out the slip I choose to leave it in – allowing it to be both seen and heard. This (mis)translation was extremely telling in relation to language and the voice; other problems were emerging alongside Fujitani's own phonetic difficulties. As Fujitani explained, her Japanese speaking style proves to be an obstruction in the way she produces the operatic sound; the linguistic collides with the

²⁶ Nancy, 'Vox Clamans in Deserto', p. 235.

²⁷ Sam Belinfante, *Many Chambers, Many Mouths* (2012), transcription by the artist.



Many Chambers, Many Mouths (2012), still from video

musical aspects of the voice. This is how Barthes explains the 'grain of the voice' – language and music are produced simultaneously:

the grain of the voice when the latter is in a dual posture, a dual production – of language and of music.²⁸

As Kanae modifies her vocal apparatus to sing, she also repositions language and her linguistic faculties. Speaking to me in Italian (not her mother tongue), relationships between language and the voice are continually displaced and reorientated.

Technology

A distancing of the voice from the body made possible by technology can bring the body close to the listener, for technology enables us to listen into the body. This is what makes the technical retrieval of the voice so questionable.²⁹

Petra Maria Meyer (2012)

As I make films about the voice – as I make films with the voice – this human technology is inevitably confronted by newer, inorganic machines. The aperture of the mouth is mirrored by that of the camera; our aural apparatus is supplemented by the microphone and audio

²⁸ Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', p. 181.

²⁹ Petra Maria Meyer, 'Listen to your skin', *Parole #2: Phonetic Skin* (2012), p. 9.



Sonus Corpus (2012), Turner Contemporary, Margate, April 2012

recorder. Furthermore, in the same way that our own bodies mark their emerging voices, these technologies can leave their traces on the sounds that pass through them. As I came to the end of *Many Chambers, Many Mouths*, I realised that my own voice was being augmented – countered, even – by the voices of technology.

The presence of the camera was letting itself be seen and heard. In a recent string of live performance works I have been turning my attention to this technological presence – a strange mechanical conscience of sorts. In these performances I attempt to articulate the voice in a manner similar to that of the audio-visual installation yet within the context of the live event, without the security of post-production in the studio. In fact, the ‘post-production’ of these works happens at the site of the performance itself.

For *Sonus Corpus* (2012), for example, a choir is instructed to perform William Byrd’s *Ave Verum Corpus* (1605), as written by the composer in the score. As the choir perform, however, they are to record their voices onto dictaphones, recording the work as they sing

it, from their position. After performing the piece the choir rewind the tape-players and then move outwards in order to fill the performance space. Once in their new positions, one by one, the players begin to play back their recordings and the piece is re-performed in an entirely new polyphonic arrangement. Individual parts move out of sync and new relationships are formed between the melodic lines. The extent of this temporal slippage is determined entirely by the performance space and the extent to which the singers must move to evenly distribute themselves within it. The resulting sonic body exists as a hyper-mediated ghosting of the initial performance; individual voices are both translated and transcribed by the spaces and technologies that they pass through.

Vitality for the work, the dictaphones offer extremely low-fidelity recordings, and their presence comes through in the form of pitch-shifts and the sounds of electronic static. For theorists such as Adorno and Benjamin such sounds are welcome reminders of the mediation that the technology has effected; the presence of the vocalist and voice has been radically altered – deferred, even. For me, the distorted sound of the tape-player functions only to further extend the effects of mediation already present at the site of the vocalist's own body and surrounding environment (albeit in an exaggerated manner).

The voice (as with all sound) is an inevitable metaphor for impermanence and ephemerality; sounds do not perpetuate themselves on their own, they can barely survive the moment of their creation. As Jonathan Rée explains:

the basic truth about sounds, it would seem, is that they never last ... [I]t is a peculiarity of sounds, it seems, that they cannot be conserved, but only recorded and reproduced.³⁰

Technologies such as the tape recorder, however, can radically alter the temporality of sounds (such as those associated with the voice). Though already disembodied at origin, the voice can pass into the space of the digital recorder and exist for a time in another

³⁰ Rée, *I See a Voice*, p. 23.



Sonus Corpus (2012), Turner Contemporary, Margate, April 2012

space and body. Perversely, these sounds can be scanned over, paused, rewound, played in reverse, allowing the performer to scrutinise him- or herself. Rather than a mere prosthesis to the voice, the dictaphone is a metaphor for the thesis – for *this* thesis, many of whose theoretical moves are paralleled by the use of the tape recorder and player. *The Voice and the Lens*, along with its connected artwork, endeavours to position the voice in relationship to other technologies, a process that is expressed most succinctly in and through the audio-visual installation. At their best, these installations can demonstrate (and reconfigure) the way various technologies reflect each other and, furthermore, how they are inscribed on and through themselves.



Focus (2012), Ikon Gallery, November 2012

2. Resistances

The locality in question is the entrance to the very cave in respect of which Plato is known to guide us towards the exit, whereas people imagine they see the psychoanalyst going in. But things are less simple, because this is an entrance that you never reach until the moment they're closing (this locality will never attract the tourists), and because the only way of getting it to open a little is to call from the inside.¹

Jacques Lacan (1966)

In 2012, I set about making the work *Focus*² with the extraordinary singer Elaine Mitchener. From the outset, the work was subject to a series of difficulties, both in its making and in the parallel processes of analysis and theorisation. Whether the problems were with the technology or the collaborative process itself, 'the work' was interrupted and production came to a halt. One might say that all creative endeavours regularly come face to face with such difficulties. In *Focus*, however, all of these complications were to become the work's primary subject matter as well as the stage on which it was to be performed.³ Straining both the eyes and ears towards these moments of disturbance, we were able not only to

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 838; trans. by Malcolm Bowie in *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 198-199.

² Here I attempt to retain the various meanings of focus. I both made the work *Focus* and attempted to make it focus. The focal point of these movements was also in constant flux, a situation I will endeavour to demonstrate in the following text.

³ 'Focus' in theatre is also the best-illuminated part of the stage. "focus, n." *OED Online*. Web. 30 June 2015.



Focus (2012), still from video

continue (and eventually complete) the work, but to uncover a whole series of collateral and interdependent interferences.⁴

As Mitchener and I 'opened up', as we focused our respective instruments – entering into discourse – there was also a closing-down of both technology and communication. *Focus* is a testament to the way that for everything said, there are also things that go unsaid, that remain unheard. Every moment of 'insight' is inevitably accompanied by simultaneous moments of blindness and deafness. Fascinatingly, these anaesthetic effects are often caused by the same processes that allow any instances of cognisance in the first place.

⁴ The words 'disturbance' and 'interference' in this opening paragraph should register sonically, as I want to allow the various resistances in this chapter to resonate as well as to appear visually. This is also important in the word 'focus' – as much a place where sound converges as light. "focus, n." 'The focal length (of a lens); also, the adjustment (of the eye, or an eyeglass) necessary to produce a clear image [...] Similarly in *Acoustics*. The point or space towards which the sound waves converge.' *OED Online*. Web. 30 June 2015.

There is undoubtedly a psychoanalytical dimension to all of this, the tone of which I want to make resoundingly clear. In the epigraph to this chapter Lacan describes the unconscious as a cave which the analyst must approach in order to receive (and presumably interpret) the visual and acoustic images that manifest there.⁵ But entry is obstructed: the cave shuts up and the meanings contained are occluded. Lacan is undoubtedly invoking here the idea of 'resistance', a foundational psychoanalytic concept that describes words and actions that restrict access to the unconscious.

Resistance

As Laplanche and Pontalis explain, the concept of resistance was introduced by Freud early on in his writings and 'may be said to have played a decisive part in the foundation of psychoanalysis'.⁶ In a letter to his friend and collaborator Wilhelm Fliess,⁷ Freud describes resistance as something that 'brings the work to a halt'⁸ – there is something in the work (he digs it out by his work)⁹ that effects a sort of *productive* impasse.¹⁰ This 'object' presents itself in the work and seems to have a character of its own: 'it struggles'.¹¹ Resistance is an

⁵ Though musical references in psychoanalysis are often suppressed (a fact that I will later elaborate on), in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud did acknowledge that in dreams sonic imagery emerges in tandem with the visual. 'Auditory hallucinations of words, names and so on can also occur hypnagogically in the same way as visual images, and may then be repeated in a dream – just as an overture announces the principal themes which are to be heard in the opera that is to follow.' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1964), IV, p. 32.

⁶ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press, 2004), p. 394.

⁷ It should be noted that like psychoanalysis, *Focus* was something conceived (of) in collaboration.

⁸ 'An idea about resistance has enabled me to put back on course all those cases of mine that had gone somewhat astray, so that they are now proceeding satisfactorily. Resistance, which finally brings the work to a halt, is nothing other than the child's former character, the degenerative character, which developed or would have developed as a result of those experiences that one finds as a conscious memory in the so-called degenerative cases, but which here is overlaid by the development of repression. I dig it out by my work; it struggles [...] resistance has become something actual and tangible to me, and I wish that instead of the concept of repression I already had what lies concealed behind it as well.' *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess*, ed. and trans. by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 274-275.

⁹ 'I dig it out by my work'. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹⁰ It stops production whilst at the same time moving the work on.

¹¹ *Complete Letters*, p. 275.

oppositional force, a contrary motion working against Freud's work, whilst growing out of this very same activity. Interestingly for me, this resistance is not only conceptual in nature but is 'actual and tangible';¹² its force is repeatedly felt. The conception (and birth) of psychoanalysis is undoubtedly tied up with these physio-psychological resistances. In order to understand the interruptive forces that delivered *Focus*, I must probe further into the different resistances at play within it. This work may begin as 'analysis' but will necessarily open up to include different, though interrelated, forms of labour.

One of the most quoted passages on resistance is in *The Interpretation of Dreams*,¹³ a text in which Freud establishes psychoanalysis through a radical process of self-analysis. As I intimated earlier, Freud 'conceived' of psychoanalysis whilst analysing a dream, a dream that is itself full of references to opening and closing, to conception and birth. This dream (Freud's own) would become known as the 'Irma dream', and it has become one of the most contested texts in Freud's oeuvre. I have little space here to contribute to this discourse with my own interpretation, though I feel that an analysis that really *listens* to the dream's panoply of condensed voices is necessary and long overdue.

In the context of this study, however, it is important to point out that Irma (the protagonist of Freud's infamous dream) is the subject of both visual and aural examination by Freud and his colleagues. Throughout this process, Irma shows 'signs of recalcitrance, like women with artificial dentures',¹⁴ and is unwilling to accept Freud's 'solution'.¹⁵ In short, Freud interprets the dream as the fulfilment of a wish: the wish to absolve himself of responsibility for Irma's illness. Freud's self-conscious discovery in *The Interpretation of Dreams* was that all dreams

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Over time this dream has become extremely important to me in that it rehearses a series of movements, relationships and figures that operate repeatedly in my work and, inevitably, in its interpretation. It would not be surprising to me if the reader of this text were to sense echoes of the Irma dream in *Focus*, for example. Indeed, I endeavour, in placing these scenes together, to generate some kind of sympathetic resonance.

¹⁴ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE IV, p. 107.

¹⁵ In Freud's text, *Lösung* is both the 'solution' of the problem and the contents of the dirty syringe that supposedly caused Irma's pains. Ibid.

centre on such wish-fulfilments, a notion that he would later displace in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Significantly, it is in this context of recalcitrance and stubborn refusal that Freud talks of resistance: it is 'whatever interrupts the progress of [analytic] work'.¹⁶ Importantly for my own thesis, Lacan notes that in the original German Freud uses the word *Arbeit*: '[i]n order to make it perfectly unambiguous, Freud did not say *Behandlung*, which could mean the cure. No, what is at issue is work. *Arbeit*.'¹⁷ The work is interrupted, and this *Störung* is as much a sonic disturbance as a visual interruption. In her excellent analysis of Freud and the Irma Dream, Shoshana Felman suggests that this issue of resistance was a collateral revelation within *The Interpretation of Dreams* (though this nascent theory was itself inevitably resisted).¹⁸ Standing at the throat of Irma and at the threshold of psychoanalysis, Freud was confronted by a resistance that was not only an obstruction but the primary route of investigation.¹⁹ It is telling, furthermore, that Freud was at times deaf to the call of this resistance. Engaging with the work of Freud, and with the most significant resistances in my own practice, has allowed me be more sensitive to these stubborn tones – reverberant beds that are potentially also the most fertile grounds.

Focus

Focus came about as part of a festival that I curated at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (and later Whitechapel Gallery, London) called *The Voice and the Lens*. This festival explored vocal

¹⁶ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE V, p. 517.

¹⁷ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. and trans. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 34.

¹⁸ '[T]he Irma dream is a key dream that, in the search that was to be psychoanalysis, yields the fruit of the discovery not just of wish fulfilment and of the theory of dreams, but of the question of resistance as a psychoanalytic question (as yet unexplored, unformulated, but obscurely grasped, intuited).' Shoshana Felman, 'Competing Pregnancies: The Dream from which Psychoanalysis Proceeds', in *What Does A Woman Want?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 90.

¹⁹ Laplanche and Pontalis explain that in the course of his work Freud moved from seeing resistance as something to be avoided to something that should be approached directly. He realised 'that resistance was itself a means of reaching the repressed and unveiling the secret of neurosis; in fact the forces to be seen at work in resistance and in repression were one and the same'. Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 394.



Focus (2012), still from video

and focal relationships in contemporary art and featured a diverse range of film, video and performance. As a fulcrum for these investigations I commissioned five new film works that paired established artists with leading experimental vocalists. I saw this as an opportunity to work with Mitchener, a performer known for her virtuosity in a range of styles including contemporary classical, gospel, jazz and free-improvisation. *Focus*, the resulting composition, has been presented in a series of contexts and has come to be emblematic of both my approach to both film and collaboration. In the process of planning and production, however, I never imagined that I would end up with a work that I was happy with (that we were *both* happy with).

From the beginning the work was extremely unusual, anomalous even, in that I knew little about what the work was and how the various components might fit together. When the shoot day arrived I simply hoped that something would come in the conjunction of people and technology. The first shoot felt more like a rehearsal or an exercise than the production



Focus (2012), still from video

of a final piece. In retrospect, however, I realise that the work unconsciously grew out of this shared exercise: 'exercise' as both a device to practise and test techniques and a repetitive activity that requires great physical effort.

Alongside her strenuous performance schedule, Mitchener regularly engaged in extraordinarily intensive exercise routines, pushing the physical limits of her body in rapid episodes. We started discussing the relationship between these exercises and the vocal warm-ups that are more familiar to those 'practising' as professional musicians. The shoots were to be structured around Mitchener's various routines, the aforementioned intensive workouts interspersing, overlapping and inevitably affecting markedly the collateral musical material.

Alongside these exercises, I filmed a series of choreographed moves paced by each wind of the machine. The hand-wound Bolex structured each shot to be no longer than thirty

seconds. Each move consisted of either 'static' tripod shots, dolly tracking or handheld shots. Though I preplanned these movements, within these temporal frames I had little knowledge of what might happen. Shots had to be improvised both in response to, and independent of, Mitchener's manoeuvres. As an artist new to analogue film (and to the camera-machine), I was exploring the limits and idiosyncrasies of the filmmaking apparatus.²⁰ Paralleling the way in which Mitchener's exertions modified and distorted her vocalisations, each shot would be marked distinctly through my grappling with the camera.

Strains of the Voice

As soon as one has a handle on the voice, it is already gone – it is always already gone, continuously impossible to *grasp*. The voice is completely un-clutchable. Vitally (and somewhat paradoxically), though, the voice is formed through and by a centripetal force that closes around it. The voice is expressed, pushed out through a series of closing apertures, sculpted by the throat, larynx, tongue, mouth and so on. As Steven Connor writes so evocatively:

Everything that is said about the exercise of the voice – by coaches, experts, trainers and voice professionals of all kinds – implies that it should be easy and relaxed, an effortless effect of the breath. The voice must be produced without inordinate stress, which will damage or distort it. But there is no voice without strain; without the constraining of sound in general by the particular habits and accidents that, taken collectively, constitute a voice, and the constraining of the body to produce voice. The breath is drawn as a bow is drawn, by applying a force against the resistance of the diaphragm and intercostal muscles.²¹

The voice is formed out of resistance, a particular physiological type of resistance that works alongside, out of and beyond those resistances of the mind. Significantly, whether sounds

²⁰ It is important to mention here that of course Mitchener was not at all new to her own (vocal) apparatus; in fact she demonstrates absolute mastery. At times, however, Mitchener's improvisations are structured in a way that suggest she is learning about her body and voice anew – as though her body is a kind of *terra incognita* that must be mapped and explored through each performance.

²¹ Steven Connor, 'The Strains of the Voice', *Parole*, 1 (2009), 6-12 (p. 6).

are produced through 'habit' or by 'accident', they are strained. Straining to voice,²² one discovers that each and every resonating tone is marked by tension: '[w]hen there is voice, the percussions of the air seem to have formed a determinate shape, a style or signature of duress. In a voice, some syntax organises the inchoate roar or rattle of pure noise into a dance of opposed internal stresses'.²³

Though 'internal', these stresses are flung from the body with their accompanying voices and inevitably they are externalised. To further complicate matters we cannot talk simply of resistance, of *the* resistance. In the same way that the body employs secondary and tertiary resistances to the air, in vocal production – for example when the diaphragm tenses in tandem with, and in opposition to, the vocal cords – resistances themselves can also be resisted.²⁴

I should confess now that the physical, aesthetic and formal struggles that coalesce in *Focus* operated in tandem with a series of complications in my and Mitchener's relationship. Beyond the mutual respect we had for each other's work there was undoubtedly a tension in our partnership. One possible cause of this tension was Mitchener's unease at being 'on camera'. Though I was acutely aware of the long and problematic history of the 'male gaze', it was impossible to escape a certain hierarchical arrangement, not only one of gendered difference but of the interrelated binary of the visual and sonic. Mitchener wanted the focus

²² 'Strain' from Old French *estreindre*, from Latin *stringere* 'to draw tight'. "strain, v." *OED Online*. Web. 30 June 2015.

²³ Connor, p. 6.

²⁴ As I write this I hear in the background Freud's strained voice as he relates the story of the birth of psychoanalysis and its accompanying resistances. This recording (the only known recording of Sigmund Freud's voice) was made by the BBC in 1938. Only a year later, the pain caused by this illness of the mouth would become unbearable, and Freud would make a plea to his doctor to end his life: 'Now it is nothing but torture and makes no sense.' Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (London: Dent, 1988), p. 651. Significantly, at the very end of his life Freud talks of 'making sense' – a phrase that carries both the ideas of meaning formation and of the senses and sensing. Though Freud may not have intended such a playful use of the word, it nevertheless echoes the complex way in which resistances are operating (and 'communicated') in the voice, whether these be psychological, physiological or semantic (to name but a few).

to be on her voice rather than on her *visual* image.²⁵ In the process of filming, Mitchener was to utter the words 'focus, focus, focus' in strained repetition, an act that would eventually inspire the work's title – although surprisingly, it wasn't until Mitchener and I reviewed the footage that we realised these words were ever expressed. Though this initially seemed rather ironic (did she not want to remain out of focus?), I now see this utterance as a key to unlocking the work and displacing its constituent hierarchies. By *unconsciously* articulating these words, Mitchener activated a series of associations, many of which I have attempted to foreground in this text. My gaze was unavoidable, the hierarchies seemed unfixable. However, by acknowledging the limits of our knowledge and understanding – by probing these very limits – we could undermine the ideological structures that we had inherited. Any 'exposure' of Mitchener was to be doubled (and countered) in the leaking of both sound and light.

Listening back, something is there resolutely in Mitchener's voice, calling out from within: the mark of resistance. Perhaps this is partly what Roland Barthes identified as the 'grain of the voice':

[S]omething is there, manifest and stubborn (one hears only that) beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form (the litany), the melisma, and even the style of execution: something which is directly the cantor's body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the Slavonic language, as though a single skin lines the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings.²⁶

Hearing this text again, the grain of the voice clearly has a *psychoanalytical* dimension.

'Something is there, manifest and stubborn'²⁷: something beyond (or before) meaning resists interpretation. In hindsight I cannot help but see this work through the lens of

²⁵ It is worth mentioning that when I drafted this passage, in 2014, there was a media frenzy relating to criticism of Tara Erraught's Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*; whose tremendous vocal performance had been overshadowed by comments about her physique. See: Guardian Online, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/may/20/opera-figures-angry-at-description-of-soprano-stars-weight>, Web. 10 March 2015.

²⁶ Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', p. 181.

²⁷ Ibid.

'resistance'. Or to be more accurate, through the *prism* of resistance, as both *Focus* and the very concept of resistance can be split into a spectrum of complex and interrelated resistances. However, optical metaphors such as these are in danger of dampening the sonic resistances that reverberate throughout.²⁸ I cannot help but think of Mitchener's strained 'focus' as an injunction to *listen* as well as to merely look. As Roland Barthes explains, '[t]he unconscious, structured like a language, is the object of a special and at the same time exemplary listening, that of the psychoanalyst'.²⁹ It seems strange, then, that little has been done (by Freud or others) to explore the territory of listening in psychoanalysis. There is clearly a resistance to thinking about (and with) sound in the work.

Freud and Music

In their study 'Off the Beaten Track', Francesco Barale and Vera Minazzi investigate Freud's perplexing relationship to sound and music.³⁰ In the text the pair look at Freud's antecedents, and identify musical roots in the gestation of psychoanalysis. Whilst developing *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud was in the process of reading Lipps' *The Basic Facts of Psychic Life*, and noted that the work connected strongly with his own nascent theories.³¹ Reading his letters, however, Barale and Minazzi explain that there was a 'fundamental bifurcation' in Freud's connection with Lipps' treatise:

Freud writes that he has read a good part of Lipps's book but 'stopped', or 'got stuck' [bin ich stehen geblieben], 'at "sound relationships"', which 'always vexed me because here I lack the most elementary knowledge, thanks to the atrophy of my acoustic sensibilities'.³²

²⁸ In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud deploys an optical model to describe the process of psychoanalysis: '[w]e should picture the instrument which carries out our mental functions as resembling a compound microscope or a photographic apparatus, or something of the kind'. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE V, p. 536.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, 'Listening', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), pp. 245-260.

³⁰ Francesco Barale and Vera Minazzi, 'Off the Beaten Track: Freud, Sound and Music', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 89 (2008), pp. 937-957 (p. 942).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 942.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 943.

Rather than turning away from Lipps' work in disagreement, Freud 'gets stuck' at the writer's references to sound. Furthermore, prophesying the deterioration of his own facial anatomy Freud talks of an 'atrophy' in relation to acoustic sensibility. Importantly, for me, this account does not represent a disavowal of the sonic but rather presents a particular difficulty in both sensation and comprehension.

For his biographers, any resistance to sound and hearing in psychoanalysis is undoubtedly connected to Freud's supposed 'tone-deafness'. In his essay 'Freud, Music and Working Through', Darian Leader challenges the mythology around Freud's apparent lack of enthusiasm for music, reassessing much of the so-called evidence.³³ Famously, in *Moses of Michelangelo* Freud refuses to analyse the work's musical references and claims that in the instance of music, he was 'almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure'.³⁴ The 'almost' of Freud's aural capabilities is of real importance here. There exists a possibility that the slightest of musical tones may have stimulated Freud. I would argue that music's 'difficulty' is precisely what makes it so appropriate for analysis (as both a tool and something itself to be investigated).

In his canonical biography of Freud, Peter Gay writes of how, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the doctor 'virtually boasted about his tone-deafness'.³⁵ The moment that Gay alludes to is a preamble to yet another dream. Whilst waiting for a train Freud is humming to himself:

Meantime I had been humming a tune to myself which I recognized as Figaro's aria from *Le Nozze di Figaro*:

*Se vuol ballare, Signor Contino,
Se vuol ballare, Signor Contino,
Il chitarino le suonerò.*³⁶

³³ Darian Leader, *Freud's Footnotes* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).

³⁴ Quoted by Leader, p. 88.

³⁵ Gay, p. 168.

³⁶ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE IV, p. 208.



Focus (2012), still from video

For Gay and others, this anecdote is typical of Freud's difficulty with music. Freud's emanating tones were difficult both to control and to comprehend; in parentheses at the end of the passage he writes: '[i]t is a little doubtful whether anyone else would have recognized the tune'.³⁷ Nevertheless, the operatic tune emerged from Freud's pursed lips and found its way into the body of his work. Importantly, too, Freud recognises the Mozart aria that snakes out from his unconscious; both the melody and the action that enables it are significant in their familiarity. In spite of the closing of both his mouth and consciousness, Freud's escaping vocalisations 'make sense' – to *him* and only to him. Recalling Lacan, the only way of getting the unconscious to open up is to 'call from the inside'.³⁸ Something from far down within Freud is re-called, emerging sonically at the point of closing.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 838.

Listening on to Figaro's 'Se vuol ballare' reveals the text 'Tutte le macchine rovescerò. Rovescerò, rovescerò' – 'all of your schemes I'll turn inside out'. Figaro's ventriloquised melody disrupts all sense of interiority and exteriority; secrets are both revealed and concealed, openings are closed and vice versa. Fundamentally, though, this process of invagination is doubled in the convolution of 'sense' and meaning. Freud's unconscious is rendered conscious through the mechanics of his oral/aural apparatus. The hidden workings of Freud's mental functioning (his own psychological *macchine*) are similarly exposed. Every moment of cognisance, however, is paralleled by instances of obfuscation and misapprehension. As Freud recognises the unrecognisable sounds of his unconscious, the sensorium functions simultaneously to distort and conceal, supporting the concurrent psycho-physiological resistances at play.

What Freud balks at, as he encounters music – and sound in general – is not a problem of recognition, but the converse: resonant ideas and concepts that are in fact entirely unknown. Confronted by Freud's supposed apathy towards music, Leader cites a letter to the writer Deszo Mosonyi. On receiving Mosonyi's manuscript of the pioneering *Psychologie der Musik* in 1929, Freud replied:

You suppose correctly that music is foreign to me, but you naturally cannot know to what extent it is foreign, incomprehensible and inaccessible. Informed by previous experience, I have made no effort whatsoever to read your work, but have sent it to the competent section of the board of [the journal] *Imago*.³⁹

This quotation is typical of many comments by Freud. Music is established as a foreign, unintelligible language. Yet as Freud distances himself from music, he inadvertently aligns the phenomenon with his own foundational theories of the unconscious; one cannot measure the depths of the unconscious, it is always beyond our reach and its 'extent' is fundamentally unknowable. The unconscious and the sonic both share an abyssal quality that challenges Freud's access to meaning. As the unconscious is voiced, a differential

³⁹ Quoted by Leader, p. 89.

space is opened up; the further one descends, the greater the gulf. It is the analyst's job to overcome any resistances and unlock the hidden meanings, to close this space down.

'Analysis' descends etymologically from the Greek ἀνάλυσις – 'to untie, to detach, to untangle'.⁴⁰ Psycho-analysis is completely tied up in a teleological narrative of disentanglement. The psychoanalytic 'solution' is similarly concerned with processes of detachment and dissolution. However, at the heart of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in the middle of his own (self-)analysis Freud conjures a place that is in fact entirely unknowable: '[t]here is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable – a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown'.⁴¹ In direct opposition to the interpretive moves of analysis there is 'a navel', an area so densely tied that meanings will inevitably remain tangled and obscure. This knotted figure, buried deep in the margins of Freud's text, is also foreshadowed in Irma's throat as a painful lump: 'If you only knew what pains I've got now in my throat and stomach and abdomen – "it's choking me" [es schnürt mich zusammen] – "it's tying me up in knots"'.⁴²

At the centre of the work is a conceptual omphalos that marks a limit to processes of interpretation. With the figure of the navel, Freud posits a formation that undoes the essential formula of analysis. The navel of the dream is connected absolutely (insolubly) to the unknown [*Unerkannten*] – that which is unknowable. This nodal point of each and every dream extends far into the infinite abyss of meaning, eroding the very concept of meaning (and interpretation) in the process. As Derrida explains, the idea of the navel challenges the hermeneutic reasoning of analysis:

What forever exceeds the analysis of the dream is indeed a knot that cannot be untied, a thread that, even if it is cut, like an umbilical cord, nevertheless remains forever

⁴⁰ "analysis, n." OED Online. Web. 30 June 2015.

⁴¹ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 111.

⁴² *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 107.

knotted, right on the body, at the place of the navel. The scar is a knot against which analysis can do nothing.⁴³

There are things which are unknowable and forever ungraspable by both Freud and psychoanalysis. The more Freud untangles in analysis, the tighter this uninterpretable knot becomes. This is the double bind of analysis, a formation that is also itself open to analysis. For Freud, this process is doubled and reaffirmed in music.

As Freud encounters music he is faced with an impossible truth: there will always be something which is 'foreign, incomprehensible and inaccessible',⁴⁴ that will not open up to him and that will challenge the very ideas of truth and meaning. This (sonic) navel is not an endpoint, however, but opens out into a space where new sights and sounds spring forth:

[t]he dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.⁴⁵

As Derrida explains, the rhetorical density of this knot and thread 'challenges analysis as a methodological operation of unknotting and technique of untying'.⁴⁶ Furthermore, it is also the point of origin for the dream-wish itself; this 'meshwork' [Geflecht – network/ weave] is the place where the most important meanings emerge:

Freud tells us that the dream-wish arises, grows up, surges forth [*erhebt sich*] at the densest point of this *Geflecht*, of this meshwork, like a mushroom out of its mycelium. The place of origin of this desire would thus be the very place where the analysis must come to a halt, the place that must be left in obscurity [*muss man im Dunkel lassen*].

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, 'Resistances', in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 11.

⁴⁴ Leader, p. 89.

⁴⁵ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE V, p. 525.

⁴⁶ Derrida, 'Resistances', p. 15.



Focus (2012), still from video

And this place would be a knot or a tangled mess of threads, in short, an unanalyzable synthesis.⁴⁷

In a move that simultaneously opens and closes – that tightens and loosens – Freud aligns the limits of interpretative possibility with the limitless potential of meaning production. The space of *différance* is opened up in the form of a spiralling ouroboros.

'The navel' is something always present in the work. It constantly rears its head in my work and I find myself repeatedly *facing* it. The navel points towards a wilderness of unknowable, unanalysable space – a space which gives birth to the very meanings that it occludes. Vitality for this thesis, *the voice* emerges similarly from such a wilderness. The chorus of condensed voices within this doctoral project articulate this spacing *throughout*, irrespective of their

⁴⁷ Ibid.

apparent muteness and in spite of any technological difficulties. Recalling Nancy, each voice

is formed by a gap, by an opening, a tube, a larynx, throat, and mouth, traversed by this nothing, by this utterance, by this expulsion of voice. The voice cries in the wilderness because it is itself initially such a wilderness extending through the very centre of the body, beyond words.⁴⁸

What led me on an interpretative journey, towards Freud and psychoanalysis and inevitably bending back towards my own work and body, is the voice: a thing that, though expelled, is absolutely, insolubly connected to the body. Following the various loose ends that comprise my work inevitably leads to a preoccupation with this space of (dis)connection. Looking back at *Focus*, I realise that I am relentlessly preoccupied with the framing of limits and boundaries; I push against these and allow them to resist. Indeed, I draw attention to the fact that they are always already resisting; the grain of both voice and film is testament to this. Significantly, any visual demarcation is doubled by sonic delimitation: reflected images are both visual and sonic in nature. This is not to say that there is an equivalence between optical and aural experience, but simply to say that they are both equally in operation.

The incessant whirring of the Bolex is a constant reminder of film passing the camera's gate while, simultaneously, Mitchener's vocalisations are marked by the strains of air expressed through her body. All efforts to explain the work must begin at these moments of tension. Fundamentally, though, any interpretation of the work, of the body – of the *bodies* at play – must take into account the limits of both interpretation and production, for this space, this *spacing*, this wilderness extending out from the work and body, is an extraordinarily fertile ground.

⁴⁸ Nancy, 'Vox Clamans in Deserto', p. 237.



Listening, Baltic 39, Newcastle, October 2014. Image: Colin Davison.

3. Listening

Imagine an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Some way off, behind and higher up, a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets.

Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, projecting above it and including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and all sorts of other materials, and that some of these men, as you would expect, are talking and some not.¹

Plato, *The Republic*.

As an artist and curator working in audio-visual installation I am often reminded of Plato's famous allegory of the cave.² Though I would like to think that I am one of the 'men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall',³ projecting images with a variety of materials and choreographed movements, I more often than not embody the prisoner: forced to watch the show unfold, head unable to turn. Whether operating within the blacked-out spaces within which this kind of work is inevitably confined, or with a particular technical apparatus at hand, the artist or curator can feel shackled to a particular mode of presentation.

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 2007), Book XII, 514a–515a.

² Plato, *The Republic*, 514a–521b.

³ *Ibid.*, 514c.

In February 2014 I began a long, difficult, but extremely enlightening journey as curator of a touring exhibition in collaboration with Hayward Touring and four UK art galleries. My exhibition, *Listening*,⁴ was a direct response to the positioning of sound – and indeed, more importantly, ‘the audience’ – within contemporary art spaces, spaces that are invariably wholly inadequate for this kind of work and activity.

The hegemony of the visual within Western thought is nowhere more evident⁵ than in the art gallery or museum, where the white-cube space has evolved to be the ultimate stage for art within a long-established paradigm of spectatorship and phenomenological experience. Visitors⁶ are moved from space to space, from work to work, heads and eyes are fixed to each work one at a time. There is no overlap, no seepage between media, not unless it is accidental or designed as some kind of curatorial intervention or intentionally collaborative practice.

Writers such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy have written in detail on how philosophy is inextricably tied to visual experience. Knowledge and understanding is essentially gained through ocular perception, which is supported by a language that is similarly ocularcentric. Within this paradigm, the ontology of people and things is to be grasped exclusively on a visual plane. In his astonishing book, however, Nancy uses listening to both expose and displace this kind of phenomenology:

If, from Kant to Heidegger, the major concern of philosophy has been found in the appearance, or manifestation of being, in a ‘phenomenology’, the ultimate truth of the phenomenon (as something that appears precisely distinct as possible from everything that has already appeared and, consequently, too, as something that disappears),

⁴ *Listening* was a Hayward Touring exhibition in collaboration with BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead; the Bluecoat, Liverpool; Site Gallery and Sheffield Institute of Arts; and Norwich University of the Arts. It opened at BALTIC’s Project Space at BALTIC 39, Newcastle upon Tyne, in September 2014.

⁵ ‘Evident’ is from the Latin *ēvident-em*, derived from the present participle of *vidēre* ‘to see’. “evident, adj. and n.” *OED Online*. Web. 5 July 2015.

⁶ ‘Visit’ is derived from the Old French *visiter* or Latin *vīsītāre* ‘to go to see’, ‘to inspect’, etc., frequentative of *vīsāre*. “visit, v.” *OED Online*. Web. 5 July 2015.

shouldn't truth 'itself', as transitivity and incessant transition of a continual coming and going, be listened to rather than seen?⁷

Following in the footsteps of Nancy, *Listening* is an exhibition that should be listened to rather than merely seen. To experience this 'show', one must reorientate one's body as well as the body of thought that structures it. *Listening* is an attempt to strain the ears as well as the eyes,⁸ to turn the whole body in relation to the work and ourselves, to audition these things and, in the process, undermine the authority of these very categories.

As Nancy suggests, listening is an entirely appropriate activity when dealing with things as transitory as 'truth' and 'self'. What is at stake in the art gallery, when one starts to think of the gallery-goer as a member of an audience rather than simply a visitor? *Listening* – as a project, an activity and a chapter in this thesis – asks ontological questions of the spaces, technologies and subjects at play within the contemporary art exhibition, all of which have historically revolved around optical language and experience.

The Cave

The scene for this chapter, as has already been implied and set, is Plato's Allegory of the Cave.⁹ Plato's cave is paradigmatic in its depiction of the quest for truth as a visual journey. On the one hand, it is a series of luminous projections that give the prisoners the illusion of their 'reality'. Yet, on the other, it is the prisoners' ability to make the difficult climb out of

⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 3.

⁸ With the use of the word 'strain', I mean not only to force oneself or one's body, but also the potential for injury or overexertion. Moving in favour of any of the senses brings with it the possibility of distortion or even failure of perception.

⁹ The word 'scene' comes from the Latin *scēna*, (stage, scene) which in turn comes from the Greek σκηνή ('tent or booth, stage, scene'). Of particular interest to me is the fact that 'scene' can describe not only the action or representation of a work but can also be the space (or even surface) that receives the sounds or images that comprise it. "scene, n." *OED Online*. Web. 27 June 2015.

the darkness and into the light – to overcome any temporary blindness that this journey might effect – that will, in the end, allow for greater knowledge to be obtained.¹⁰

In the context of what I have already begun to stage – the hegemony of the visual within Western thought and culture – Plato’s tale of enlightenment (and accompanying blindness) may seem a little ironic. As Martin Iddon comments, ‘[i]t is hardly surprising that, in the ocularcentric culture of the Modern West, Plato’s Allegory of the Cave [...] has been interpreted in modes related almost without exception to vision’.¹¹ However, like Iddon, I do not conjure the image of Plato’s Cave merely to denigrate its ideological view.¹² Instead, I hear something within the assembly of people and technology that resonates strongly with my own project. Let us not forget that in Plato’s Cave there are sounds – vocal projections – that operate in tandem with the play of light and shadow. Yet as Nancy asserts, although Plato animates his scene with echoing voices, any sonic detail is ‘quickly set aside by Plato himself in favor of the visual and luminous scheme exclusively’.¹³ The prisoners are locked down as spectators, irrespective of their aural abilities. Significantly though, *they are listening*, they always have been. Before they were children imprisoned in the cave, they were undoubtedly listening (there is no deafness in the way that there is blindness, there is always resonance to be felt). Before they were even born these subjects were listening, perceiving sound while trapped deep within their mothers’ wombs.

¹⁰ It is important to point out that Plato describes blindness in both directions of the journey. It is not simply enough to leave the cave for the light of the world outside: ‘But anyone with any sense [...] will remember that the eyes may be unsighted in two ways, by a transition either from light to darkness or from darkness to light, and will recognize that the same thing applies to the mind.’ Plato, *The Republic*, 518a.

¹¹ Martin Iddon, ‘Plato’s Chamber of Secrets: On Eavesdropping and truth(s)’, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 15/3 (2010), pp. 6-10 (p. 8).

¹² That said, etymologically speaking I am extremely interested in the fact that to denigrate is ‘to blacken’, ‘to make dark’, from Latin *denigrat- denigrare* (*de-* ‘away, completely’ and *niger* ‘black’). “denigrate, v.” *OED Online*. Web. 27 June 2015. By turning the lights out one has no choice but to perceive things in a different way.

¹³ Nancy, *Listening*, p. 75, n. 42.



Imogen Stidworthy, *Sacha* (2011), still from video.

Nonetheless, these 'subjects' of Western thought have come into being as spectators, and the mere 'presence' of sound within the cave (if we can even talk of sound in this way) is not enough to challenge the hegemony of the visual, a situation that is paralleled in both the gallery and the cinema. The odd sonic reverberation will not disrupt the visual flow. If anything, sounds will be pinned to pictures (whether moving or still) and reinforce the pervading audio-visual hierarchies. It is not enough to simply 'go through the motions' when it comes to sound in the gallery. What is required is not only a rethink in the way that sound is organised within the gallery/cave, but an imperative need to think in and through resonance.

To Be All Ears

In *Listening* Jean-Luc Nancy asks what it is 'to be all ears' [*être à l'écoute*, to be listening].¹⁴ This questioning is not simply in terms of perception, but within an ontological register: what would it mean 'for a being to be immersed entirely in listening, formed by listening or in listening, listening with all his being'?¹⁵ My own *Listening* project poses similar questions

¹⁴ Nancy, *Listening*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*



Listening, Baltic 39, Newcastle, October 2014. Image: Colin Davison.

by imposing a certain level of reflexivity in the visitor. This whole process relies on an ambitious re-positioning of the 'subject' in the gallery. This move is initially focused on the gallery-goer, artist and his or her subject matter, but quickly expands to interrogate ideas of subjecthood as a multiplicity.

Sacha (2011), an installation by British artist Imogen Stidworthy, is emblematic of the way *Listening* endeavours to mobilise listening (and its audience) within the gallery. Like many of the time-based works in the show, *Sacha* bursts into life as part of a choreography of audio-visual elements. *Sacha* announces itself through an incessant tapping sound, the sound of its eponymous subject typing and also an allusion to the tiny hammering bones of our inner ears. Sonic breadcrumbs such as these are used repeatedly in *Listening* to (mis)direct its audience and to allow for different arrangements of knowledge and perception. When the visitor finally arrives at *Sacha*, he or she is confronted with a work (and subject) that continues to resist visual manifestation. Though we inevitably observe Stidworthy's video

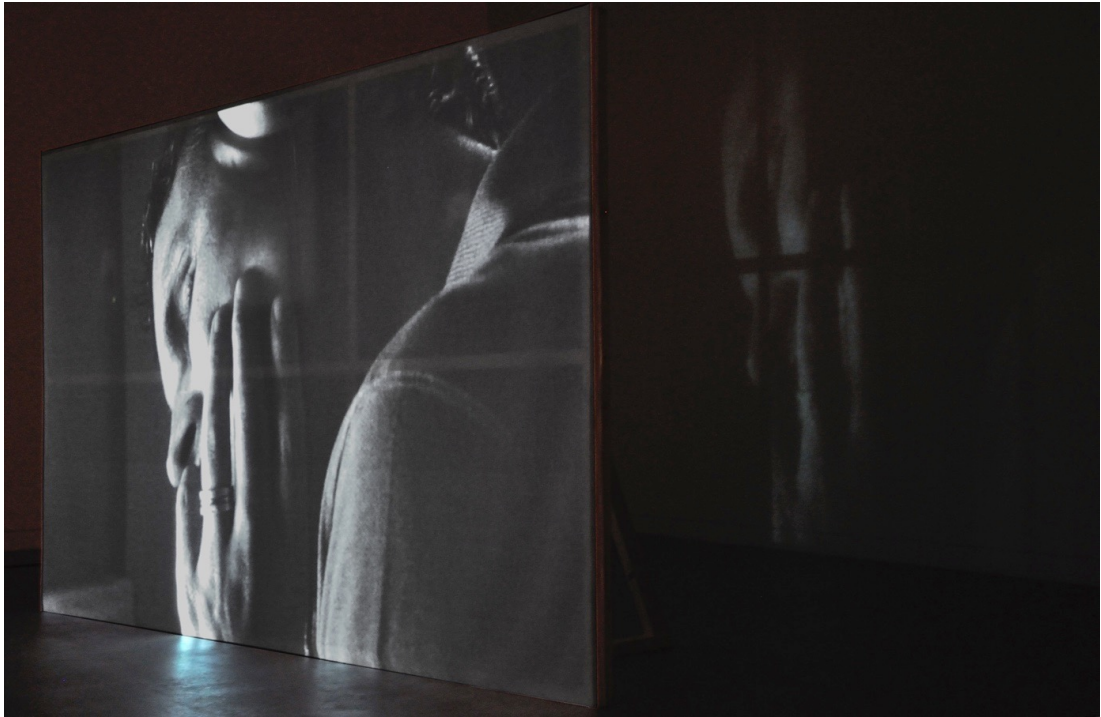
work unfold, we soon become acutely aware of our voyeurism, as we realise that Sacha is in fact blind. We are suddenly aware that we are watching Sacha as he listens.

Blind since birth, Sacha Van Loo understands and pictures the world primarily through sound. Through the process of auditioning the world (and of course inevitably himself) Sacha has developed remarkable aural abilities. He is fluent in several languages including Romany, Russian and Arabic, and recognises a multitude of different accents and dialects. Furthermore, Sacha can position himself and others through processes of echolocation; this involves, in the first instance, the production of clicking vocal sounds (and listening out for their reflection) and, in the second, aurally dissecting sonic recordings.

All of these skills have led Sacha to be employed by the Belgian police for the purposes of auditory surveillance. Stidworthy's installation catches Sacha in the act of forensic listening as he scrutinises a recording supplied by the artist.¹⁶ The seemingly oxymoronic idea of 'auditory surveillance' is a useful and important figure within this project, and is one of many collisions of sensory terminology that pervade the exhibition and accompanying literature.¹⁷ This formal and linguistic conflict is apparent in an accompanying video animation of a three-dimensional scan. Projected straight onto the black fabric-covered walls of the installation, this strange, inside-out drawing is an extraordinarily detailed rendering of a typical urban street. Surprisingly, the image was created using no optical technologies, but instead through a sonar mapping of this urban space, akin to Sacha's own practice of echolocation.

¹⁶ The recording that Stidworthy offers to Sacha contains spoken fragments from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *In the First Circle* (1968). The story tells of a group of imprisoned Soviet scientists who are ordered by Stalin to invent a voice scrambler (to protect Stalin's own voice) and a voice printing machine that would allow the KGB to identify people through recordings of their voices. Within the setting of this chapter, it is interesting that this text references both the destruction and preservation of voice, all within the context of incarceration.

¹⁷ 'Surveillance' is derived from the 19th-century French *surveiller*, from *sur-* 'over' and *veiller* 'watch'. "surveillance, n." *OED Online*. Web. 27 June 2015.



Imogen Stidworthy, *Sacha* (2011), detail, as installed at *In the First Circle*, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, October 2011.

Through a disassembly of the audio-visual installation, Stidworthy displaces the dominance of optical experience. This is not achieved merely by focusing on Sacha as a listening subject. Instead, the work continually reminds us that we are all, in fact, always already listening. Importantly, Stidworthy does not jettison the visual apparatus: we watch Sacha listening; an ocular voyeurism parallels the protagonist's aural investigation. Instead, the artist allows (and encourages) a subtle reorientation of the senses and their corresponding technologies. The screen that receives Sacha's image, for example, is not constructed in traditional projection fabric but in an 'acoustically transparent' cloth that allows both sound and light to bleed through. Vitally, though, the sonic image remains unobstructed whereas the visual one is somewhat dimmed. Indeed, this screen (unlike the one imagined in Plato's Cave) is not only a surface for the projection of light but is itself projecting, the speakers built into the body of this screen making the whole assembly a resonating instrument.¹⁸

¹⁸ In fact, one of the three speakers in the screen is a square 'Panphonics' focusing speaker, which makes the whole surface resonant with the sounds of the work.

Typically for *Listening*, it is the technology that announces itself, often calling itself into question in the process. The blinking LED of one of the speakers (visible through the panel's translucent surface) is a pulsating beacon that draws the eyes before deflecting them outwards again. Significantly, this is not a singular sensory apparatus, but a blended chorus of moving parts: digital and analogue, visual and sonic, ocular and aural.

Nevertheless, in this darkened corner of the gallery, it is primarily our ears that guide us.¹⁹ There is no aural blink, the ears have no lids;²⁰ we never stop hearing and the auditory apparatus can never be simply shut off. Stepping into Stidworthy's installation reminds us of all this whilst presenting a different ontology of its subjects.

On Reflection

Sacha as a work (and Sacha as a perceiving being) challenge(s) preconceived notions of 'self' and its emergence or acquisition. Finding oneself within the locus of Stidworthy's installation forces one to reflect on the nature of one's being, and, as a corollary, challenges the dominance of visual 'reflection' within these formations. As I have intimated throughout this chapter, the structuring of self is canonically tied to this kind of ocular experience. This is nowhere more evident than in Lacan's famous 'mirror stage', where the young child assumes its specular image in the formation of his/her self. The process is fundamentally one of *mis*-recognition: instead of his or her own image, the child is in fact assuming the image of the Other. This spurious image reflects the desires of the Other but is adopted under the illusory image of 'me'.

¹⁹ It is important to mention here that we have two ears, and recent studies have shown that it is this binaural setup that allows us locate objects (and ourselves) successfully. This can be also used to great illusory effect, however, as demonstrated elsewhere in the exhibition. In Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *Cabin Fever* (2004), for instance, the artists have used binaural recording to produce an extraordinarily realistic and immersive experience. Footsteps seem to appear from behind you and sounds are uncannily distant or close in proximity to your position. The result is the soundscape of *Cabin Fever* extends far beyond the physical limits of the work. See Daniel Rowan, 'Use of binaural and monaural cues to identify the lateral position of a virtual object using echoes', *Hearing Research*, 323 (May 2015), pp. 32–39.

²⁰ This idiom, now commonplace, has a long history. Rabelais, for instance, writes: 'Nature, I am persuaded, did not without a cause frame our ears open, putting thereto no gate at all, nor shutting them up with any manner of enclosures, as she hath done unto the tongue, the eyes, and other such out-jetting parts of the body.' Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. by Peter Antony Motteux and Thomas Urquhart, Book 3, Chapter XVI.

For Jean-Louis Baudry, this stage (which is as much a theatrical platform as a particular period of development) is prophesied in Plato's Allegory of the Cave and rehearsed throughout the history of cinema:

[F]or this imaginary constitution of the self to be possible, there must be – Lacan strongly emphasizes this point – two complementary conditions: immature powers of mobility and a precocious maturation of visual organization (apparent in the first few days of life). If one considers that these two conditions are repeated during cinematographic projection – suspension of mobility and predominance of the visual function – perhaps one could suppose that this is more than a simple analogy.²¹

Whether confined in the cave or the cinema – in fact, wherever you 'are' – this particular conjunction of immobility and ocular predominance is constantly repeated and reaffirmed. By truly listening, however, one can displace the notion of self as a subject to be given or assumed. As Nancy explains, with a different emphasis: '[t]o be listening is thus to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to self: not, it should be emphasized, a relationship to "me" (the supposedly given subject), or to the "self" of the other'.²²

To listen (and to be in resonance) is to accept that we are always already shared, and that our 'image' is in continual transition. 'Self' is not itself a presence, but a referral to or from another being: 'I am not him,' 'I am what he sees.' In its re-sonance, the sonic functions as a constant reminder and endless reference to this process of *différance*. Riffing on the French word *renvoi* (to return, but also to send back, repeat, refrain and to allude back), Nancy explains that if a self is to be found anywhere, it is within this acoustic spacing, this 'distancing of a repeat [*renvoi*]'²³:

²¹ Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. by Philip Rosen (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 294.

²² Nancy, *Listening*, p. 12.

²³ *Ibid.*

One can say, then, at least, that meaning and sound share the space of a referral, in which at the same time they refer to each other, and that, in a general way, this space can be defined as the space of a *self*, a subject. A *self* is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a *self* is made of a relationship to *self*, or of a presence to *self*, which is nothing other than the mutual referral between a perceptible individuation and an intelligible identity [...].²⁴

To be listening is to be always stretching, reaching toward the self, moving both towards the Other and into one's own body. Unlike the sense of self received through ocular reflection, this self is always already mobile, spreading away whilst incessantly referring back. It is an echoing image (felt throughout the body) rather than one perceived externally as visual mimesis. If anything it is this feeling, this very sense, that approaches the self.²⁵ A subject feels (*se sentir*),²⁶ and this, for Nancy, is both his or her characteristic and definition:

To feel is always also to feel oneself feel [*se sentir sentir*], but the subject who feels 'himself' thus does not exist or is 'himself' only in this feeling, through it and even actually as it. There is no subject that is not a sentient subject. No feeling – no sensation, emotion, or sense in any sense of the word – that does not on its own form the recursion or loop by which a subject takes place.²⁷

To be listening, then, is also inevitably to hear oneself listening: to reverberate, to turn inward. This is not in opposition to, but alongside any outward-facing subjectivity. For, as Nancy explains, '[s]ound has no hidden face; it is all in front, in back and outside inside, *inside out*'.²⁸ To be listening is to open up a space inside you as well as beyond and in front of you. It is a space that is constantly spreading and expanding. *Listening* is a show that operates within this sonorous present, or perhaps endeavours to open up such a presence within the exhibition, a presence that is always already emerging at the site of its audience.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ In French, the word *sens* means one of the five senses and sense as in meaning, but also feeling, intuition and direction. Nancy employs this polysemy to great effect in playing with sense and meaning in *Listening*.

²⁶ *Se sentir* is a reflexive verb in French, 'to feel [to] oneself', meaning 'to feel', 'to sense'.

²⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Ascoltando', in Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 9.

²⁸ Nancy, *Listening*, pp. 13-14.



Haroon Mirza, *A Million cm² of Quiet Space*, as installed in *Listening*, Baltic 39, Newcastle, October 2014. Image: Colin Davison.

The Resounding Cave

In his work *A Million cm² of Quiet Space*, Haroon Mirza creates a work that opens up space in *Listening* for silent contemplation. Hanging in the middle of the exhibition, this anechoic chamber invites its visitors to climb inside and escape the din outside.²⁹ *A Million cm² ...* questions entrenched notions of subjectivity, such as those typified by Lacan's mirror stage. Ducking into this dark chamber, one must confront one's resonant self.³⁰ Furthermore, the stool provided for the visitor to sit on is an artwork by Ryan Gander, *Everything is learned, iv* (2010), comprised of a piece of Purbeck marble with a shallow recess cut into its upper surface. Evoking Rodin's famous *The Thinker*, the rock bears the imprint of a solitary, sedentary being. This thinker has been emancipated, however – mobilised in order to exist

²⁹ *A Million cm² of Quiet Space* consists of a 1m x 1m padded box hanging from the ceiling. On the floor, beneath the box, is a rock which acts as a seat for the work. Visitors are actively encouraged to duck into the chamber and feel its quasi-anechoic effects.

³⁰ '[I]t is a question of going back to, or opening oneself up to, the resonance of being, or to being as resonance. "Silence" in fact must be understood [*s'entendre*, heard] not as a privation but as an arrangement of resonance: a little – or even exactly ... – as when in a perfect condition of silence you hear your own body resonate, your own breath, your heart and all its resounding cave.' Nancy, *Listening*, p. 21.

in a different ontological register. By appropriating this work, Mirza suggests that listening offers a different kind of subjectivity, a different kind of presence.

Mirza is undoubtedly also referencing John Cage's famous visit to an anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Expecting to hear silence, Cage was surprised to perceive two sounds: the beating of his heart and the humming of his central nervous system. Mirza's anechoic chamber is unable to effect such an extreme situation; this maquette only half-envelops the listener. The result is the same, however: one becomes acutely aware of one's listening body, and the nature of silence as 'a privation of sound' is significantly challenged.³¹ To exist is to listen, to feel. Moreover, to exist is to be resonant, to make sound. This is even more evident when one acknowledges the presence of otoacoustic emissions: the aural apparatus is producing its own sounds in the process of hearing.³²

A Non-cochlear Sound Art

Listening repeatedly enforces a sensory recalibration, resulting in certain ontological shifts. This is often achieved through imposition of either darkness or silence in the gallery space. Whilst the former is relatively easy to manage, it is impossible to stop sound spreading throughout the building: from penetrating through walls, from emanating out of our own bodies. The risk of all this is that aural experience is privileged to the extent that other senses are ignored or overwritten. In the last fifteen years, in exhibitions ranging from *Sonic Boom* (Hayward, 2000) to MoMA's recent *Soundings ...* (2013), 'sound art' has been foregrounded and placed firmly into the canon. These exhibitions, however, run the risk of further ghettoising sound, and increasing the perceived distance between the senses. In the *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato is careful to explain that the organ which truly learns is 'like an

³¹ Ibid.

³² David Toop suggests that Cage may have actually been hearing spontaneous otoacoustic emissions in his own ears rather than the humming of his central nervous system. These sounds could not be sufficiently measured until the late 1970s. See David Toop, *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 126-127.



Laurie Anderson, *The Handphone Table* (1978), mac LYON collection. Image: Blaise Adilon.

eye which cannot be turned from darkness to light unless the whole body is turned'.³³ Even within his overtly ocularcentric context, Plato cannot simply abandon the rest of the corpus.

Works such as Laurie Anderson's *The Handphone Table* encourage us to think of listening beyond the ears. Consisting of a wooden table and hidden electronics, the work invites its audience to rest their elbows on its surface whilst placing hands on their ears. As they touch their bodies to the work the participants hear the soundtrack conducted through the bones of their arms. Recalling Michel Serres' description of our skin as a 'generalised eardrum',³⁴ *The Handphone Table* demands an expansion of our aural physiology, as well as of any preconceived notions of listening. In his book *In the Blink of an Ear*, Seth Kim-Cohen echoes Duchamp's desire for a non-retinal visual art in calling for sonic art that engages the whole sensorium:

³³ Plato, *The Republic*, 518d.

³⁴ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 119.

If a non-retinal visual art is liberated to ask questions that the eye alone cannot answer, then a non-cochlear sonic art appeals to exigencies out of earshot. But the eye and the ear are not denied or discarded. A conceptual sonic art would necessarily engage both the non-cochlear and the cochlear, and the constituting trace of each in the other.³⁵

Listening takes a similarly holistic approach to sound and the body within the exhibition: a wide variety of senses are both employed and entangled. The overriding strategy, however, is that a special attention is given to the interplay of these technologies (whether they are human or not), as their presence is felt and provoked.

Magic Electronics

Twentieth-century readers of Plato were quick to draw parallels between the Allegory of the Cave and the arrangement of modern cinema, an analogy that can be easily extended to the contemporary 'multimedia' art gallery or museum. As Francis MacDonald Cornford notes in his translation of *The Republic*:

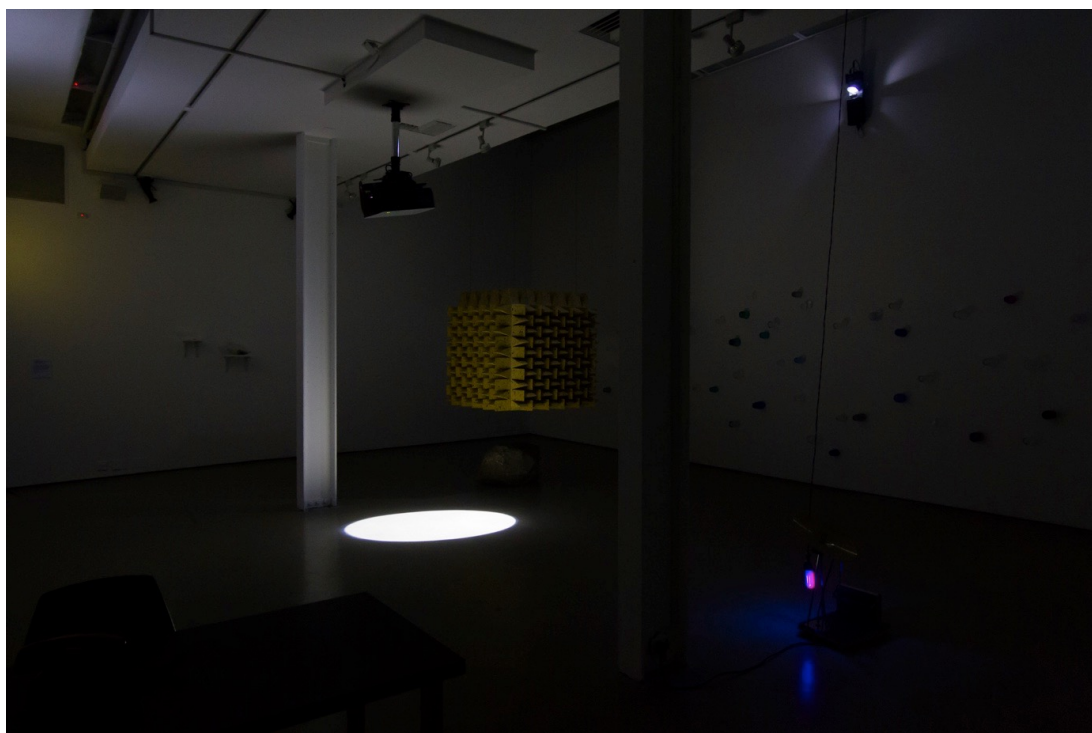
[a] modern Plato would compare his Cave to an underground cinema, where the audience watch the play of shadows thrown by the film passing before a light at their backs. The film itself is only an image of 'real' things and events in the world outside the cinema. For the film Plato has to substitute the clumsier apparatus of a procession of artificial objects carried on their heads by persons who are merely part of the machinery, providing for the movements of the objects and the sounds whose echoes the prisoners hear.³⁶

Like Plato's prisoners, even with the knowledge that the projections before us are mere illusions of reality, we are happiest sitting down watching, suspending our disbelief.

Typically, any sonic resonances are subsumed by the unfolding visual narrative. What really interests me in Cornford's comments, however, is his reference to the 'clumsier' apparatus of Plato's scene. Are the puppets and puppeteers really any clumsier than their modern counterparts? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines clumsy primarily as 'awkward in

³⁵ Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. xxi.

³⁶ *The Republic of Plato*, trans. and ed. by Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 228, n. 2.



Laure Prouvost, *Magic Electronics* (2014), as installed at *Listening*, Site Gallery, Sheffield, April 2015.
Image: Julian Lister.

movement or performance', or 'difficult to handle or use; unwieldy'.³⁷ Of considerable importance to me, in the context both of Plato's Cave and of *Listening*, is this idea of awkward movement, of turning things upside down while simultaneously revealing or drawing attention to the gesture.³⁸ In every move, senses are numbed but also aroused: mobility enables a changing of perspective and, perhaps more importantly, a changing of perception.

In *Listening*, visitors are plunged suddenly into dark spaces where they must reorient their bodies and corresponding sensory apparatuses. At times, visitors' attention is turned inward to their own cavernous physiology, and at other times their attention is demanded elsewhere. Vitally, though, spaces are opened up beyond the limits of their visual faculties.

³⁷ 'Clumsy' is most likely of Scandinavian origin; *klumsen* is 'to strike dumb'. "clumsy, adj." *OED Online*. Web. 29 June 2015.

³⁸ 'Awkward' originated in Middle English with the sense 'the wrong way round, upside down', itself derived from the dialect *awk* (from Old Norse *afugr*). "awkward, adj." *OED Online*. Web. 29 June 2015.



Christian Marclay, *Sound Holes* (2007), as installed at *Listening*, Baltic 39, Newcastle, October 2014.
Image: Colin Davison.

Often this happens by surprise and not by the visitors' choice, but through a choreography of the technical apparatus in the gallery. Sometimes this is carefully timed; sometimes things happen entirely by chance.³⁹ By using techniques borrowed from the theatre to orchestrate the exhibition,⁴⁰ seemingly conventional white-cube-type environments are instantly reinvented as blacked-out cinema spaces. This all happens unexpectedly and instantaneously, at the flick of a switch.

Laure Prouvost's *Magic Electronics* (2014) responds directly to this choreography, and has become a fulcrum around which other works and visitors revolve. The sound of a female voice fills the gallery space. 'Look,' she says, before, with a click of her own fingers, the gallery goes pitch-black and only a single spotlight remains:

³⁹ Events in *Listening* never happen entirely by random. Comprised of a series of independently looping scenes (or movements perhaps), relationships between works are constantly changing and evolving; indeterminate programming allows the space for serendipitous events to occur. Timings have been designed, however, to allow the possibility for each work to be heard individually. *Listening* is a choreography of visual and sonic elements that incorporates chance – a series of convolutions, perhaps, rather than a cacophony.

⁴⁰ The whole exhibition is programmed using DMX, a system normally used for theatrical lighting displays. As well as lighting, DMX is used to time video and sound work throughout the gallery.

I know, I know, I'm just a light here on the floor, but,
 You know they think they can control me like this, or that, you know,
 get me moving from here to there.
 I can do what I want ...⁴¹

Prouvost (or this strange disembodied voice) has seemingly taken control of the gallery's sound and lighting, momentarily turning off other works and centring our attention on a solitary light. Like many of the works in *Listening, Magic Electronics* is unusually attentive to the technologies that enable it: it demands a level of reflexivity that extends to our own corporal apparatus. Importantly for me, it is a sound that initially presents itself and begins this reflexive move – a sharp snap grabs and reorientates our bodies and minds.

Listening is an exhibition where participants are guided by their ears as much as their eyes. The audience of *Magic Electronics*, like the ventriloquised spotlight at its centre, can 'do what [they] want', they can leave the space – move on to another part of the gallery – yet this strange display captures and holds their focus. Like many works in the exhibition this uncanny voice is an 'acousmatic' presence. It is 'present' without actually manifesting visually, without attaching itself to a mouth or body.⁴² It is what Michel Chion describes as the *acousmêtre*:

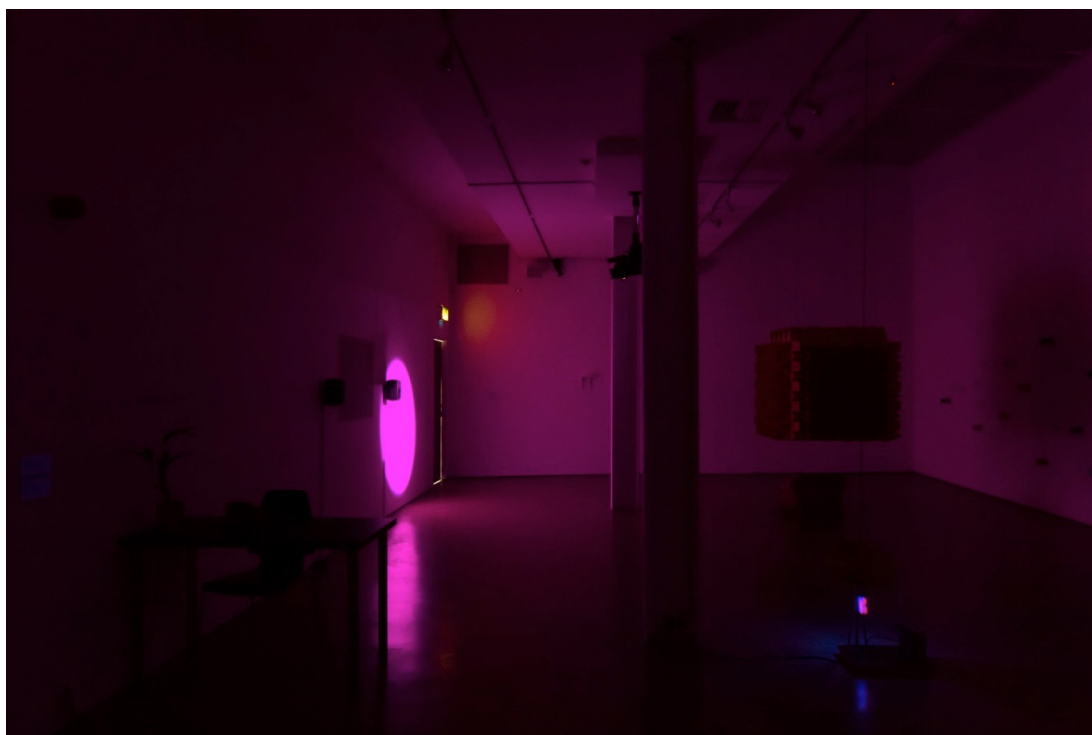
When the acousmatic presence is a voice, and especially when this voice has not yet been visualized – that is, when we cannot yet connect it to a face – we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow to which we attach the name *acousmêtre*.⁴³

The 'subject' of Prouvost's work emerges from the darkness as nothing but vocal resonance. This soft, seductive voice is perhaps that of the artist, but we cannot be sure. The voice is

⁴¹ Laure Prouvost, *Magic Electronics*, 2014.

⁴² In *Listening* there are also a number of works that have mouths without actually giving voice. Christian Marclay's *Sound Holes* (2007), for example, is comprised of a series of photogravures depicting 'mute' images of wall speakers from various elevators and apartment blocks. Conversely, however, these works conjure the memory or imagined possibility of a resounding choir as we perform a kind of inverted 'deacousmatization', connecting these etched mouths 'back' to their missing voices.

⁴³ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. by Claudia Gorman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 21.



Laure Prouvost, *Magic Electronics* (2014), as installed at *Listening*, Site Gallery, Sheffield, April 2015. Image: Julian Lister.

both omnipotent and omnipresent; it commands and controls the gallery and its technology as though it were a domesticated animal. The voice is 'the master', the theatrical lamp and its projecting beam the obedient pet. Furthermore, as the gallery is transformed, onlookers are corralled around the spotlight as it moves. Naturally, these participants are quick to anchor the voice to a body. Without a human body in sight, and guided by its ensuing speech, the voice is connected to the only visual presence in the room – the circular spot of light on the floor. 'I am just a light,' she says, a ridiculous notion that is instantly accepted as a truth; the small shimmering pool of light is anthropomorphised as a theatrical being. This is not a simple and consistent arrangement, however. It is never clear whether the light has a voice or the voice is controlling the light: the ontology of the work is in constant flux, its protagonist never fully emerging. It is clear, however, that there are attempts to 'articulate' the light, in that it is both moved or animated and given a voice. Yet this blinking light is never allowed to materialise fully as a mouth. As always, the voice retains a level of detachment.

Along with the *acousmètre*, Chion describes the process of 'deacousmatization': 'the unveiling of an image and at the same time a place, the human and mortal body where the voice will hence be lodged'.⁴⁴ For Chion, this operation can resemble a striptease, the end point of which is the discovery of 'the mouth from which the voice issues'⁴⁵ rather than the traditional flash of genitals. *Magic Electronics* can, at times, also feel like a tease, a burlesque dance of sound and light.⁴⁶ The audio-visual components play both with the audience and each other. Though it never rewards its audience with full 'deacousmatization', the *acousmètre* of *Magic Electronics* is repeatedly playing with its own status and position. From early on in the work, the 'magic' of the display is undermined; all this spectre can do is flash on, then 'just disappear again'.⁴⁷ The 'reality' of this situation imbues the assemblage with a considerable amount of pathos:

But I know now that I just do this, and I just disappear again.
 We could be much more than just voices, and light, and pure electronics.
 We could be together and be stronger, you're just being used by this.
 They call it magic electronics.
 And anyway, they're going to turn us off like, poof, finished.⁴⁸

For the first time the 'I' of this strange assembly becomes a 'we': a temporary union of light and sound that come together only to break up the whole illusion. It is unclear whether the voice is directing the audience – inviting a new kind of relationship between the artist, work and visitor – or whether the voice is simply addressing the other adjoining technologies. What is clear, however, is that in coming together, the technologies have both exposed their own limits and given rise to a sense of self – a self that is almost immediately in doubt. In what 'appears' to be a moment of tragic realisation, the voice (and connected equipment) become(s) aware of his/her/their shortcomings and redundancy within the

⁴⁴ Chion, p. 28.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ I use the word 'burlesque' here to add a degree of reflexivity and criticality to Prouvost's work. Though the piece often deploys the conventions and devices of seduction, it does so in the form of parody, satirising the apparatus of the spectacle.

⁴⁷ Laure Prouvost, *Magic Electronics*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

context of the exhibition. All that they can do is appear and disappear, manifest temporarily (and visually perhaps) within the space before being switched off again. At any point an unknown Other can pull the plug and reveal (or indeed veil) the reality of the situation. Interestingly, it is the apparatus (itself) that comes to this conclusion; there is an odd moment of cognition before the whole scene dissolves. Yet vitally, it is the voice that disrupts the mirage, exposing the limits of the apparatus and displacing the power of the visual formulation. Existing throughout (and beyond) the show of light, the voice has the potential to threaten the whole organisation.

Similarly, the echoing voices in Plato's Cave have the potential to challenge the whole 'reality' of the prisoners' situation. Without knowledge of the source of these vocal emissions, however, these sounds are connected by the prisoners to the shadow-play before them:

And if the wall of their prison opposite them reflected sound, don't you think they would suppose, whenever one of the passers-by on the road spoke, that the voice belonged to the shadow passing before them?
They would be bound to think so.⁴⁹

Stuck in their particular position (and theoretical context), they are bound to think that these voices are attached to the apparitions unfolding before them. Hidden behind the parapet the puppeteers can speak without the danger of their voices revealing their presence and the truth of their machinations. The echoing voices are not 'images' or copies of real things (like the figures of men and animals that cast shadows in Plato's Cave): they are resounding in and of themselves. As Jean-Louis Baudry explains, '[o]nly their source of emission may partake of illusion; their reality cannot'.⁵⁰ But due to their reverberation (and acousmatic nature) these sounds are still given over to the apparatus and its illusion: 'If a link is missing

⁴⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, 515c.

⁵⁰ Jean-Louis Baudry, 'The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema', in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, p. 305.

in the chain that connects us back to reality, the apparatus corrects this, by taking over the voice's echo, by integrating into itself these excessively real voices.⁵¹

All of this, however, is within a logic of visual phenomenology; the stability of truth and being is entirely undermined when one *really* listens to the echoing voices. Baudry does little to displace the ocularcentric experience and discourse that pervades Plato's allegory. Unable to see the interlocutors, these voices are simply subsumed by the optical scheme. Within Baudry's text is the tone of long-established assumptions about voice and voicing. The 'excessively real voices' that he hears in Plato's Cave perpetuate a well-worn ideology of the essential, idealised voice – a situation that Baudry identifies before himself perpetuating:

Hence, no doubt, one of the basic reasons for the privileged status of voice in idealist philosophy and in religion: voice does not lend itself to games of illusion, or confusion, between the real and its figurativity (because voice cannot be represented figuratively) to which sight seems particularly liable. Music and singing differ qualitatively from painting in their relation to reality.⁵²

Disavowing the voice's ability to charm, confuse and distort silences it all together. Laure Prouvost's *Magic Electronics* playfully sets into motion all of the contradictory abilities of the voice. Plato never imbues his cave-dwellers with the kind of reflexive voices that can both form and dispel the illusion.

The *Listening* show is full of voices that direct you but also lead you astray; that give rise to fantasy but also reveal the trickery behind the scenes. In this way *Listening* fulfils the resonant potential of Plato's Cave by acknowledging its chorus of voices and, vitally, for its inhabitants to be resonant subjects, existing in and through sound. Plato's prisoners are listening and voicing simultaneously, for, as Jonathan Rée explains, '[w]e not only hear, but also vocalise, and we hear ourselves vocalising, too. We cannot make ourselves seen or

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 304.

⁵² Ibid., p. 305.

smelt, or tasted or felt in the way we can make ourselves heard'.⁵³ Irrespective of the shackles that restrict their mobility, Plato's prisoners are both listening and making sound; they are making themselves heard. Moreover, they are existing in and through this resonance, making themselves present as transmitting and receiving instruments.

As they 'themselves' give voice, the prisoners can contribute to the *son et lumière* in a way that they cannot do on the visual plane. By differentiating their own voices from other noises in the cave, by entering into dialogue with their fellow prisoners, and by playing with the echoic reflection of their voices, they can explore both the surrounding cave and the interior caverns of their bodies in ways only conceivable through listening.

Eavesdropping

While we are always hearing (this mechanical sense is always functioning in the background, even whilst we sleep), listening requires us to pay particular attention. When listening we orient our bodies towards a specific acoustic object. This distant resonance may, in fact, be entirely unknown to us. Nonetheless, we direct ourselves towards this (as yet) unheard sound, in the hope that it will be recognised, that its message will be received. To be listening is to be searching for *something*, for some obscure tone and connected hidden meaning. For Nancy, 'to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible'.⁵⁴ This aspect of listening is retained in the French word *écouter* which, according to Nancy, possesses a sense of espionage, of listening in secret: '*être aux écoutes*, "to listen in, to eavesdrop", consisted first in being in a concealed place where you could surprise a conversation or confession'.⁵⁵

In *Listening*, visitors are repeatedly placed in positions where they are self-consciously listening in – positions that, owing to the nature of sound and listening, are in fact in

⁵³ Rée, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁴ Nancy, *Listening*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.



Amalia Pica, *Eavesdropping* (2011), as installed at Site Gallery, Sheffield, April 2015
Image: Julian Lister.

constant flux. Works such as Prem Sahib's *Taking Turns* (2013) present the viewer with inaccessible spaces, to be penetrated only by sound and listening. This work, consisting of a large closed room, throbs with the bass sounds of a hidden party inside. Rather than reveal the space's occluded activity, these sounds have the effect of repeatedly (re)affirming our lack of access.

Often in *Listening* there is, in the end, actually nothing to be found, no perceptibly secreted sound to be heard and no meaning to be unlocked. It is the very act of contorting the body, of directing one's attention, that is so important. In Amalia Pica's *Eavesdropping* (2011), an array of glasses spread across a wall invites a playful game of aural discovery. Though the participant of *Eavesdropping* is rarely rewarded by the detection of distant voices, it is the magical possibility of this discovery that makes the work so enticing.

Both Pica's and Sahib's work also raise ethical questions in regards to listening. The eavesdropper can pay close attention whilst remaining completely unseen. At times in



(left to right) Prem Sahib, *Taking Turns* (2013), Christian Marclay, *Sound Holes* (2007) and Lina Lapelyte, *O* (2014), as installed at Baltic 39, Newcastle, October 2014. Image: Colin Davison.

Listening, participants are confronted by the dilemma of *when* to listen. Often, however, any choice is removed, as sounds catch you off guard and force you to take notice.

Fundamentally, *Listening* revels in these transitory, liminal moments of perception and being. Nancy claims that:

To be listening is always on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin – at least the sound that is musically listened to, that is gathered and scrutinized for itself, not however, as an acoustic phenomenon (or not merely as one) but as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose sense is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance.⁵⁶

Returning to the place where I began this chapter – Plato’s Cave – one might think that I am recommending a similar kind of ‘conversion’, a ‘turning around of the mind’ that might be

⁵⁶ Nancy, *Listening*, p. 7.

subject to a particular professional skill or experience.⁵⁷ Perhaps there is some technique that would allow for a greater understanding of the work: a place or movement that would offer some sort of sonic *enlightenment*. If the marketing for *Listening* were to be believed, I have left the white-cube gallery world for the dark spaces of the theatre and returned with particular knowledge and experience that allows a new arrangement of media and the senses in the gallery.

The 'truth' of the matter is that *Listening* is less a conversion than a reversion of sorts. We are always already listening; we are resonant beings inside and out. Yet to fully accept this is also to upset and displace pervading conceptions of truth, meaning and experience. *Listening* is a disorderly, convoluted environment where collision, slippage and stumbling are extremely likely (and encouraged). In his consciously transcendental process of conversion, Plato shows little regard for the awkward ascent/descent that his prisoners undergo. The philosopher is able to effect a conversion without the messy business of clambering about. By contrast, it is this multifaceted, sensory engagement with the world that *Listening* encourages. Whether groping in the dark or clambering in the blinding light, listening persists – and opens up a different kind of ontology and perception that, in turn, turns the whole body.

⁵⁷ 'Then this turning around of the mind itself might be a subject of professional skill, which would effect the conversion as easily and effectively.' Plato, *The Republic*, 518d. Interestingly, the word Plato uses here for 'professional skill' is *technē*, often translated as art or craft.

Epilogue

I see a voice; now will I to the chink,
To spy an I can hear my Thisbe's face.¹

Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

On 14 May 1832, the night that *Fingal's Cave* was premiered, Mendelssohn was to have another overture performed. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written by the composer at the tender age of seventeen, would – along with the 'Hebrides' Overture – become one of Mendelssohn's best-loved works.² Sixteen years later, towards the end of his life, Mendelssohn would return to this work, developing it into incidental music for a production of Shakespeare's original play.³ As I attempt to bring this opus to a close I cannot help but hear these two works echoing around in my head, bleeding into one another whilst retaining a degree of autonomy. This imagined composition is not only sonic in nature, but is accompanied by a series of mental *visions* that overlap and intermingle. In the mind these various images coexist easily and democratically. However, when I begin to imagine an exhibition existing in a similar way, the inevitably imposed limits of space, time and technology reduce the show to an indiscernible mess.⁴

¹ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Peter Holland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), V. 1. 190-1.

² For a discussion of these interrelated overtures, see Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: The Hebrides and other Overtures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 35.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ In the case of the music, it is likely that I would be able to distinguish the two compositions, even in simultaneity – a kind of polyphony only possible in the sonic domain. However, what is important in the aforementioned daydream is the way sights and sounds can manifest simultaneously and differentially.

Much of my recent work as an artist and curator has been concerned with sorting out audio-visual technologies in a way that allows for interpenetration of media and language while resisting the propensity to replace one modality with another. It has been my ambition to work across the sensorium, displacing any existing hierarchies and mobilising the full gamut of human perception – turning the whole body in relationship to the work and its theorisation.

The primary approach I have taken to this has been to disorientate the senses through a combination of writing and art practices. The voice has been an indispensable figure in these processes; as it throws itself from the body, it sets in motion a variety of corporeal apparatuses and simultaneously disowns them. Though it seems to privilege aural experience, the oral movements effected through voicing easily open out into the territory of ocular and haptic experiences, experiences that are extended and reflected in prosthetic audio-visual technologies.

In the art gallery, I have endeavoured to use the voice to dazzle and dumbfound 'spectators' as they traverse my various installations. Art can be used to knock subjects out of a particular mode of existence, and as the beats continue, as they begin to reverberate, it is impossible to settle back down. A similar process of synaesthetic disturbance is adopted by Shakespeare, who in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* uses the (seemingly) incompetent 'mechanicals' to confuse sensory language and experience. For example, when Quince the carpenter is asked about his fellow mechanical Bottom, he explains that the latter went 'to see a noise that he heard'.⁵ It is Bottom, however, who delivers the most evocative sensory distortion: 'I see a voice,'⁶ he claims, as he and his colleagues act out 'Pyramus and Thisbe', the play-within-a-play at the heart of Shakespeare's work. The possibilities of seeing the voice, of both seeing *through* the voice and of seeing *the* voice are of fundamental

⁵ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III. 1. 85-86.

⁶ *Ibid.*, V. 1. 190-1.

importance in my work. The pursuit of either results inevitably in an expanding field of both sound and vision.

In Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe, two lovers occupy neighbouring properties but are forbidden to communicate. Though the wall between them seems impenetrable, and the division between them insurmountable, they manage to communicate nonetheless, the gap in the wall allowing for even the quietest of whispers:

The walls that divided the two estates had a tiny hole,
a cranny formed long ago at the time the partition was built.
In the course of the years, this imperfection had never been noticed;
but what is not sensed by love? The lovesick pair was the first
to find it, and used it to channel their whispered endearments in safety.⁷

This tiny hole – yet another aperture that opens up within the body of this text – offers a gap for the lovers' voices to emerge; it is a passage that extends and connects their ears and throats into an amalgamated vocal transceiver. Yet surely it allows for the tiniest glimpse of a visual image as well. Whether the pair catch sight of each other through the hole itself or via a pinhole projection on the wall beyond, this opening captures (both literally and figuratively) the kind of visual and sonic imaging so important to this thesis. Many translations of the text use the word 'chink' for this minute crevice: a polysemous expression that signifies, amongst other things, 'a compulsive gasp of breath'; a 'long and narrow aperture' or 'fissure caused by splitting'; an 'imitation of [a] short, sharp sound'; and 'a twist'.⁸ With all of its choreo-, photo-, phono- and echographic tendencies, this word draws out many of the facing technologies and languages at play in this project.

Fundamentally, though, the little slot at the centre of this monolith undermines the whole architecture of the scene. The solid and impenetrable becomes porous and pervious; insurmountable distances are diminished and remote bodies are aligned. Not forgetting the

⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by David Raeburn (London: Penguin Books, 2004), Book 4, 65-70.

⁸ "chink, n.1.", "chink, n.2.", "chink, n.3." and "chink, n.4." OED Online. Web. 4 July 2015.

psychoanalytical resonances, this chink probes vulnerabilities across the whole organisation. Like Tom Snout, who literally embodies the wall in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I have endeavoured to open up spaces in my work that operate between the senses and their corresponding technologies, perforating the dividing walls without completely disintegrating the necessary separations.

In disrupting all notions of interiority and exteriority, of permanence and impermanence, of here and there, the voice is always already opening these kind of deconstructive spaces; its primary locus is one of both dislocation and detachment. We have to be careful, however, not to imbue the voice with an excessively enigmatic and ethereal significance. Relentless discourse in and around the 'disembodied' voice is in danger of reattributing to the voice a transcendental power. Instead, echoing Robin Goodfellow in the middle of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,⁹ we must adopt simultaneously and fluidly the roles of spectator, auditor and actor as we not only contribute to this chorus of voices but, furthermore, become an echo-chamber (or sounding-board) for the voices of others.

⁹ 'I'll be an auditor – I An actor too, perhaps, if I see cause.' *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III. 1. 23-28.

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