

Refiguring the Voice: the work of Iris Garrelfs  
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The interest in capturing the voice finds many instances of artistic and musical expression throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the very inception of recording technology in the late 1870s, materialized with Edison's phonograph, the voice has long served as a looming sonic figure. As Edison himself suggests: singing "Mary had a little lamb" into his newly invented phonograph, the modern voice brings body and machine into dynamic contact to instigate an entire history of electronic (dis)embodiment, fantasy and staging. Such a legacy gives ready evidence of the voice as a material in which numerous potentialities are embedded, and that may unfurl into an array of musicalities when allied with technological machines. Audio recording gives way to a new formation of personhood by taking the inherent fragmentation of the modern subject and recasting this into forms of imaginary life and animation. The voice that fragments or disturbs the body, with so many unconscious quirks, uncertain movements or disarrayed murmurs, may also return as aesthetical sound objects and musical experimentations. Modernity is marked by a new listening culture that includes hearing altered voices, giving expression, as Steven Connor pinpoints, to that sense that we are our own ventriloquist.<sup>1</sup>

Iris Garrelfs' audio projects may be heard as a contemporary expression of this greater cultural history of voice transfiguration. Her performances and music compositions are often based on extending the voice into a wide range of musicalities often treated through digital processing and integrated into modes of improvisation. Though treating the voice in such a way, as Garrelfs' project signals, also gives a surprising expression of often sensual and emotional presence: while the notion of disembodiment, of a body leaving behind its corporeal and sited skin, follows with the incorporation of electronic mediation, the poetical and sonorous work of much contemporary work, including Garrelfs', opens onto another perspective: corporeality finding new material form through the ever-encircling reach of electronics.

*The abstracted voice*

On Iris Garrelfs' CD release, *Specified Encounters*, from 2004, the voice is fully interwoven with digital processing so as to create deeply moving electronic music. The voice comes to appear as a highly suggestive and mutable sound, carrying the intimacy of utterance in and through a process of abstraction. Such a project finds resonance with other practitioners, notably in the work of Meredith Monk. The project of extended vocal technique Monk has developed since the late 70s, mainly in live performance and theater projects, turns the voice into an extremely flexible and highly suggestive instrument. In turn, what distinguishes Monk's work are the ways in which the voice-instrument gives way to a field of emotional and sensual energies. The sonorous vocalizations, most often presented without actual words, form into subtle and poetical music that seems to move beyond semantic content to generate a flow of emotional experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000).

The use of the voice as a highly malleable sound, and its force of sensuality, are brought forward also in Iris Garrelfs' works. Though Garrelfs has also developed a dramatic and musical use of electronic effects and digital processing techniques. Her singular voice appearing throughout *Specified Encounters* is infused with an extended vocalization elaborated with electronic texture and movement. The voice becomes soft matter for the crafting of a musicality that in turn opens out onto a sense of spatiality. The integration of electronic processing dynamically extends not only vocality as a sound but also as an ambient composition, where feelings for distance, placement and atmosphere give dimension to voicing.

Having developed her work within the milieu of both the London improvisation and electronica scenes since the mid 1990s, Garrelfs work is a delicate elaboration of the live event. *Specified Encounters* is constructed mostly from performative sessions, where the artist improvises using her voice as the only sound input. Through live sampling and processing the voice is captured in real-time, digitally manipulated to form an audible base upon which Garrelfs may harmonize with or respond to. The work becomes an ensemble made up of one, where each vocal instant interweaves within a greater flow of sound.

In considering Garrelfs use of the voice, and the interest in an elaborated abstraction of utterance, I'm in turn reminded of the field of sound poetry. The project of sound poetry starting in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stages a confrontation with language, and the ways in which the individual body is located within structures of meaning-making. Language, and by extension, vocalization, forms a cruel intersection of subjectivity and the greater social world by always already contouring speech with linguistic (and ideological) meaning. For example, the Italian Futurist's "words in freedom" (*parole in libertà*) fashioned words into explosive matter while the bombastic performances at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich in 1916 included Hugo Ball's *Lautgedichte* (sound poem) recitals, which according to Ball "gave birth to a *new* sentence that was not limited and confined by any conventional meaning."<sup>2</sup> As Ball further proclaimed in his diary at this time: "In these phonetic poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge. We must give up writing secondhand: that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use."<sup>3</sup> His "jolifanto bambla o falli bambla" provides a route back to the primary voice, that prelinguistic, primal force of voicing, outside or beyond linguistic meaning.

Sound poetry sought to break, reconfigure, and totally annul language in favor of brut utterance. In doing so, it opened up a new field of musical, poetical and visualist materiality, forming concrete and reverberant expressions. As Steve McCaffery claims, sound poetry's essential goal is "the liberation and promotion of phonetic and sub-phonetic features to language to the state of a *materia prima* for creative, subversive

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<sup>2</sup> Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 71.

endeavors.”<sup>4</sup> The voice of sound poetry – while diverse and transcultural – is mostly a broken and performative voice, revealing new trajectories of potential signification.

The tensions around mediation and the authentic voice find deeper expression throughout the 1950s and 60s, within experimental poetry cultures. As Michael Davidson has noted, “For the poets who took up the cause of orality in the mid-1950s, voice was a contested site in a battle over identity and agency.”<sup>5</sup> The recorded and electronic voice were viewed as a highly contentious trespass onto the individual as well as a poetical space allowing new forms of literary imagination.

Garrelfs more contemporary engagement with the recorded voice, and its ultimate reformulation and transfiguration, echoes to some degree the legacy of sound poetry, and related poetical experimentations, in so far as the voice is explored and unfolded as an elaborated instrumentation for the making of tonal-linguistic meaning. Yet the incorporation of digital treatment supplies a new self-directed form of expressivity: whereas the recorded voice (and related technologies) in the 50s and 60s met with scepticism and paranoia, the emergence of new modes of performativity in the 1980s, as in the work of Meredith Monk, as well as Laurie Anderson, can be appreciated as seeking a renewal of vocal identity through its experimental staging. For contemporary practitioners, such as Garrelfs, the ability to capture and distort recorded matter has come to participate within a greater sphere of networked cultures and all the new conditions of subjectivity.

#### *An electronic sensuality*

In following Garrelfs vocal project, and the abstracted processing that in the end comes to release the voice into new configuration, I’m also led to hear her work as giving new sensuality to the electronic body. The cultural historian and theorist Derrick deKerckhove has given great critical detail to the question of the body in the midst of electronic and digital conditions. While the argument is made as to the loss of a particular bodily field of experience in light of the intensification of digital systems and networks, in contrast deKerckhove seeks to map out points of new contact and vitality, or what he calls “tele-sensitivity.”<sup>6</sup>

The body networked and connected, wired and cybernetic, is found to re-establish particular sensualities in which the electronic prosthesis comes to affirm the body as a sensing field: the extensions upon our senses performed by networked technologies open up a sensitive weave that fully elaborates experiences of tactility and interaction. Whereas previous cultural and social conditions often relegated the individual subject to what deKerckhove calls the “ocular paradigm” – that paradigm in which forms of reading and writing, that is, linguistically-oriented experiences, dominate – the more

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<sup>4</sup> Steve McCaffery, “Voice in Extremis” in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 163.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Davidson, “Technologies of Presence: Orality and the Tapevoice of Contemporary Poetics” in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> Derrick deKerckhove, *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality* (Toronto: Somerville House Publishing, 1995).

contemporary paradigm of “networks” and digitally animated exchanges impart new elements of sensing, ultimately expanding and instantiating corporeal energy, forms of sharing, and greater integration.

This new sense of the sensual I find at play in Iris Garrelfs work. As I previously mapped out, her vocal abstractions, through the use of electronic and digital processing, and modes of improvisation, allow the voice to take on new configurations – that is, to speak from a dramatic sounding body, which does not eliminate the skin, but rather delivers it as a flow of evocation: a poetics of abstraction fully tied to a material of embodiment and intimacy. I take this as a theme throughout Garrelfs work: she comes to create an electronic sensuality through which questions of embodiment, machines, abstraction and audition circulate. Her music in this regard is a sort of occupation of that instance where singular, subjective *bodilyness* meets so many points of interface.

In both her works, “Star Maker” and “Swannsong”, such sensuality shifts from the voice to other materiality. The works appear as compositions in reference to historical narrative or worldly phenomena. Whether based on the electronic signals received from the stars, or facts of an individual’s life from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what I’d like to highlight is the way in which such references act as a beginning for the construction of a sound field. For example, “Swannsong” moves across a number of extremely tactile and object-based soundings, including banging and plucking of certain objects, or the abrasive agitation of various materials, that unfold in a rough musical narrative. Along the way, this catalogue of textured activations mutates into various elongations and extractions, softly treated digitally to give way to an elaboration of their sounding: akin to the voice that expands through processing, to become an object full of animating energy, “Swannsong” enfolds the listener in a continual transfigured landscape of materiality that still, also, retain its contact or connection to a source: a textured sensuality always somehow verging on mutation and fluidity.

To return to deKerckhove’s electronic sensuality, the phenomenological field around us comes to fully integrate the machinic abstractedness of digital coding. While mediation carries certain tensions around notions of presence that still must be questioned and complicated, the potentiality of also extending and refiguring the subjective field of experience brings forward a dramatic new spirit for forms of intimacy. Following deKerckhove, and others, the very understanding of the single, delineated body has to be reimagined and rethought, as already our bodies are involved in so many points of contact and sharing as to shift presence onto a medial geography full of multiple incarnations of the here and now.

### *Musicalizing the self*

The practice of sound and sonic art since the 1960s provides a dramatic articulation of experimental work fully wed to questions of mediation, embodiment, spatiality and voicing. Occupying a territory between avant-garde music practices and legacies of avant-garde art, the sonic arts refashion the self into a networked sensuality, whose incorporation into language is always already edging onto other forms of voicing.

Henri Chopin sets the scene for this idea when he writes: “Through these major languages we are no more bound to our roots, our States, our mother tongues. All these are now to be found within the voice which, far from being a mere instrument of

utterance, becomes a sonorous reality inscribing its intonations. One might say, the voice, in leaving the womb, rids itself from water in order to learn how to breathe on the earth, the famous gasp that, with some help from our machines, sets us free in air.”<sup>7</sup> Capturing this “famous gasp” in the form of sonic poetical enactments, Chopin outlines an overall performative space that can be traced historically as setting precedent for how sound may come to signify, shape experiences, and lend to forms of aesthetic production. Such a performative space I might suggest is given additional dimension in the work of contemporary practitioners, as in Iris Garrelfs’ projects, and others, in the works of Atau Tanaka for instance, whose mobile music performances make every movement of the body a signal within a sounding event. Or in the work of LA-based artist Anna Homler, whose own vocal performances utilize a self-constructed language consisting of a mysterious phonetics. Such projects seem to musicalize the self, drawing out another form of sensuality and sensing to reshape what it means to be a signifying body. Garrelfs work further points toward a flow of sonority that leaves us further tuned to all that hovers in and around the voice. In doing so, she fully locates sound as an important route for reimagining the time and space of the contemporary environment.

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<sup>7</sup> Henri Chopin, *The New Media*, April 1995 (translation: Sandeep Bhagwati), found on Ubu Web.