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### On being a body listening

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**On Being a Body Listening: Vocal Expression Beyond Words in Ant Hampton and Britt Hatzius' *This is Not My Voice Speaking* and Nature Theater of Oklahoma's *Life and Times – Episodes 3 & 4***

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Rebecca Collins is an artist researcher working at the intersection between contemporary performance and sound studies. Her practice, grounded in specific sites, communities, or institutional frameworks, investigates the relationships between social, political, and cultural phenomena. She is interested in how critical, fictional, and performative interventions might cultivate attention towards our contemporary condition indicating potential levers for change. For 2022-23 Rebecca is artist-in-residence at the Institute of Theoretical Physics at the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM-CSIC) to undertake [‘Parametres for Understanding Uncertainty’](#), a Royal Society of Edinburgh-funded early career fellowship. She is Lecturer in Contemporary Art Theory at the University of Edinburgh. She is currently completing her first book (co-authored with Johanna Linsley), *Sonic Detection: Necessary Notes for Art and Performance* (forthcoming, Punctum Books).

**On Being a Body Listening: Vocal Expression Beyond Words in Ant Hampton and Britt Hatzius' *This is Not My Voice Speaking*, and Nature Theater of Oklahoma's *Life and Times – Episodes 3 & 4***

Vocal expression beyond words, such as the excess of speech production found in coughs, rhythm, intonation, and humming, offer a mode of being that does not require the endorsement of the world through language, but rather favours the act of dwelling in sonority. I make use of creative and critical writing to evidence how my body listens in the auditorium. I consider Ant Hampton and Britt Hatzius' *This is Not My Voice Speaking* (2011) and Nature Theater of Oklahoma's *Life and Times – Episodes 3 & 4* (2012). The decision to discuss these two pieces arises from an interest in how each makes use (albeit differently) of audio-based instructions and sounds outside of linguistic units. I focus on the respective deployment of disrupted rhythms and altered intonation of spoken language to question how performance and performative writing might reveal, and in turn cultivate our attention towards what is beyond the surface of our dialogical exchanges and vocal interactions. I put forward the idea of dwelling in sonority to extend the moment of perceptive encounter and endorse engagement with more elusive aspects of being.

Keywords: listening; performance; voice; language; sound

### **Beyond words and vocal expression**

As a body listening, I write through my embodied experience from attending two examples of contemporary performance practice. I follow theatre studies scholar Maaïke Bleeker in *Visuality in the Theatre* (2008) where, through a series of case studies, she recognises how the theatrical event, though seldom discussed as such, presents itself as the visual object *par excellence*. Where Bleeker questions the essence of mere looking and what it means to be a body seeing, I ask what it means to be a body listening. My approach sits in the wider context of what Jim Drobnick has hailed as ‘the sonic turn’ (2004) within the arts and humanities and I recognise how writing through listening, as Don Ihde (2007) and Salome Voegelin (2013) have noted, poses a challenge to image- and text- based theories. As, whilst sound shares issues of representation and interpretation with pictures and text, it alters these by inflecting them with embodiment and affect (Drobnick 2004, 8). In this article, I shape my argument from the perspective of being a body listening in relation to being an audience member, and in relation to the aural architecture (Blessner & Salter 2009) unfolding within the theatre auditorium.<sup>1</sup> Within the scope of this article, the postdramatic (Lehmann 1999) notion of the spectator as a free entity, liberated from specific obligations to understand and adopt a unique or singular viewpoint, is shared. In relation to the aural sense, I am reluctant to adopt only one singular viewpoint and, through listening, the presentation of the world ‘as is’ is brought into question. Taking a distinct approach to Bleeker, I

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<sup>1</sup> Blessner and Salter describe aural architecture as ‘the composite of numerous surfaces, objects, and geometries in a complicated environment’ (2009, 2) and, more broadly this refers to how the space is experienced through listening. This can often be in tension with how a place can appear.

construct my argument by focussing on the physical disposition of the body grounded in a listening practice.

The first example of contemporary performance practice I discuss is Ant Hampton and Britt Hatzius' *This is Not My Voice Speaking* (2011). This is an installation that makes use of pre-recorded audio and out-dated technology using principles of autoteatro. This technique, in its original conception, consists of instructions delivered to audience members, sometimes through in-ear headphones; autoteatro often requires small groups or individuals to activate and complete the work thereby performing for each other.<sup>2</sup>

The second piece, by Nature Theater of Oklahoma, titled *Life and Times – Episodes 3 & 4* (2012), is an epic three-hour dramatization of a telephone conversation between company directors, Kelly Copper and Pavol Liska and company member, Kristin Worrall.<sup>3</sup> Founded in 2004 in New York by Liska and Copper on their website they describe themselves as an 'art and performance enterprise' making use of 'readymade material, found space, gifted properties, cosmic accident, extreme formal manipulation and plain hard work'.<sup>4</sup> To date, their work has been considered in relation to an aesthetics of fun (Anderson-Rabern 2010) and a collection of essays on the company's work was recently published (Malzacher 2019). Where vocal expression and sounds beyond words feature in both works, I follow the thoughts of Adriana Cavarero (2005) for whom it is in the elements outside of articulate verbalising, that our uniqueness is

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<sup>2</sup> See the short trailer 'This is Not My Voice Speaking' uploaded by Dublin Theatre Festival <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ziSvmi5ues> (accessed 28 June 2023) and images featured on the websites of each artist, Britt Hatzius and Ant Hampton, respectively <http://www.britthatzius.co.uk/notmyvoice.html> <https://www.anthampton.com/notmyvoice.html> (accessed 28 June 2023).

<sup>3</sup> The source text from the performance, *NTOK: Life and Times Episodes 3 & 4* is published and available from 53<sup>rd</sup> State Press. See <https://www.53rdstatepress.org/NTOK-Life-Times-Ep-3-4> (accessed 28 June 2023).

<sup>4</sup> See the description on their website <https://oktheater.org/news> (accessed 18 November 2022).

communicated. For Cavarero, the voice is always in excess of its final communicative destination and, if we pay attention to this, as she argues, it ‘challenges the very coherence of that system’ (11). The uniqueness of the voice cannot be disguised and, when listened to, is able to reveal something more of the speaker. Ultimately, Cavarero warns of the excess of speech as that which can emit an ‘extraverbal realm of meaningless emissions that are dangerously bodily, if not seductive or quasi-animal’ (13). The lack of ascension toward meaning alarms, as this operates outside of our ability to place or to categorise and indicates potential perils of vocalisations which might brim over, or be beyond control, and thereby reveal something outside of that which was intended.

### **Methods for being a body listening**

My methods stem from cultural theorist Mieke Bal’s concept of the theoretical object. I shape the term for my purposes, namely to engage in a process of close listening, as I set out to dwell in the sonority of the aforementioned examples. Though Bal claims her approach to be less a of method, and more of an attitude, the phrase ‘theoretical object’, was originally coined by Hubert Damisch, and attempts to account for the dissatisfaction felt towards its close equivalent, the ‘case study’, which Bal argues not only gives connotations of being under scrutiny from the ‘scholar’s scalpel’ but also tends to mar the specificity of the artworks presented.<sup>5</sup> Bal’s concept of the theoretical object refers to the notion that artworks deploy their own artistic medium to offer and articulate thought about art. Bal claims that ‘instead of being a substitute, a good text about art is a *supplement* to it’ (2001, xii: original emphasis), foregrounding the

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<sup>5</sup> Hubert Damisch coined this term at a colloquia in Urbino during the late 1980s.

importance of the artwork as an object of thought. In building on Bal's concept of the theoretical object as a writing method for being a body listening, I attempt to bring the reader into more immersive, closer engagement with the work. In doing so I seek to explore connections between listening and performance studies.<sup>6</sup> Where Bal's emphasis is on the visual experience, my emphasis is on the aural encounter. I therefore substitute Bal's close looking for close listening. In doing this, I do not disregard the visual; instead, I seek to articulate how the visual and the aural co-constitute each other as creative and critical challenges to sensible modes of being. I am listening for the revolutionary potential, about which Julia Kristeva writes in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). Here, Kristeva argues for the relevance of both the Symbolic and the Semiotic. For her, the Symbolic refers to the reason and order found within language and understood as forming all of culture's codes e.g. grammar, logic, rhetoric, law. The Semiotic, then, refers to a psychosomatic modality, formless and undetermined, where sensuous drives can be located and are more commonly found in poetic writing or in the rhythm of music, for example. Both are needed, Kristeva asserts, if we are to feel capable of change and to unleash the revolutionary potential in our forms of expression. To unravel how this operates in my two examples of contemporary performance practice, I build on Bal's approach, as demonstrated in *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-writing* (2001). Bal privileges the art form and art writing by uncovering how artworks compel, entice, and motivate thought as dialogical partners. By expressing dissatisfaction with shortfalls in art criticism, claiming that 'so little is said about what we see and what kind of seeing is involved' (27), Bal highlights the necessity to spend *time* in front of the work, arguing that there is an inability to

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<sup>6</sup> This forms part of an ongoing body of work which stems from my unpublished PhD thesis 'On Becoming Audience: Performing Aural Attention' (University of Aberystwyth, 2016). See Collins (2017; 2018; 2021; 2022).

experience an entire work in the blink of an eye. Bal's promulgation of the theoretical object necessitates a practice of close looking over an extended period of time, as she states that:

the closer the engagement with the work of art, the more adequate the result of the analysis will be, *both* in terms of that particular work *and* as an account of the process of looking.

(xiii; original emphasis)

I make use of Bal's concept of the theoretical object as part of my method by using it to write and think in the space between the ear of the spectator and the mouth of the performer, or between gallery-goer and installation, and in turn between myself, the writer, and you, the reader. I do so in order to interrogate and indulge the idea of dwelling in sonority as a means to remain in thought about these works, to extend and expand the experience. In doing so I seek a connection between listening and performance, attempting to stage on the page an experience of the aural-as-encountered. Dwelling in sonority therefore aims to offer a means by which these works continue to reverberate, or to reveal their revolutionary potential. Indeed, the writing of each theoretical object allows each work to be experienced as a resonant point of encounter, encouraging an immersive involvement with the textures and rhythms of each piece. The aim is to open the works to unknown threads of thought emerging *from* the practices discussed, thereby positing an aural-based format for writing performance and attending to the nuances of the heard within sites of contemporary performance practice.



To explore these ideas, I construct each theoretical object as a separate ‘aurientation’, a word I am using to combine two key elements of the investigation at this stage: the aural and orientation. The aural describes the sensorial mode of engagement that is privileged by emphasising the turning of the ear toward the world. Orientation is inspired by Sara Ahmed’s use of the word as she investigates ‘how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable’ (2006, 543). I adopt the term to describe a queer listening position, one that takes shape through the mode in which it causes bodies to turn towards objects, spaces, and other beings (and non-beings) and in turn how our time and space might be commanded in relation to aurality. Through detailed accounts based on my perspective as a body listening, I draw attention to how space and time is organised within each chosen theatrical event, arguing that orientation, or in this case or/aurientation towards other beings, objects, or spaces might, through listening, create another sensible order or mode of being. The queer potential of being a body listening does not therefore describe a fixed position. I seek instead to articulate how the body, through its sensorial orientations, can destabilise hegemonic norms.

**Or/Aurientation A: *This is Not My Voice Speaking*, Ant Hampton and Britt Hatzius**

Autumn 2012. I am a temporary resident on Rue Antoine Dansaert, a street in the central area of downtown Brussels, the Beursschouwburg, and a multidisciplinary arts centre is particularly close by. I leave my rented apartment situated on the third floor by taking the rickety (somewhat dated) lift to ground level. The buttons – simple, small, round, and black – indicate the floor numbers. If the door is not completely shut, the

mechanism jams, temporarily sticking between floors. On this occasion it runs smoothly, no automated voice to instruct me, the rickety, open cage-like structure of the lift makes evident my arrival to the ground floor. I head east along Rue Antoine Dansaert, the building of the Brussels Stock Exchange looming in the background. I cross onto Rue Auguste Orts and take a right to arrive on time to the Beursschouwburg. An usher greets me; three of us in total will make up the audience. We begin to climb the stairs of the venue to the very top, heading for the attic space. At the top of the stairs, we stop on a small landing in front of a closed door. Assessing the three of us carefully, the usher distributes one small green sticker with a number 'One' to the blonde-haired lady to my right and one round orange sticker with a 'Zero' to me. The renaming as 'One' and 'Zero' reminds me of the on/off positions found at the back of most technological devices. The third audience member is not given a specific role but is informed to help where necessary.

The usher opens the cave-like door to the attic space; no windows are visible, directional lighting spills from the machines illuminating the dust particles in the semi-darkness. A self-standing projector screen faces us. The diagram of a hand is shown with a small green sticker operating a wired remote control brightly illuminated by the beam from the projector behind it. The image directly addresses us via the inclusion of the same small green sticker that 'One' has. The hand shown is touching the wired remote control. Our gaze falls upon each other, then on our own hands. She (I never learn her name) remembers she is named 'One' and in recognising her own hand reflected in the image, reaches out toward the device. Her gesture, almost an exact mimetic copy of the diagram, casts a further shadow onto the white fabric. This pressing onto the world (of the small attic space) prompts the appearance of the next

image ready for the gaze of the other spectators (namely me and the one other person present). The rest of the room and other technological relics remain in semi-darkness. Each is staged on a plinth of differing height; the shadowy outlines of a turntable and a 16mm slide projector emerge in the background, yet it is their low machine-like hum that attunes my attention to their presence.

The act of placing the hand on the remote control reminds me of the imprint on the grotto wall at Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc cave in the Ardèche region of south-eastern France, argued as the birthplace of the spectator (Herzog 2010, Mondzain 2007). In *Homo Spectator* (2009), French art historian and philosopher Marie-José Mondzain focuses on the relationship developed between the hand and the mouth. As *Homo Faber* (Latin for '[hu]man maker') outstretches an arm onto the cave wall, an order of reception is initiated; the eye looks at the hand, then at the wall providing the horizon and surface for the look. This is followed by coating the hand in pigment or holding it as a liquid in the mouth, before blowing it onto the hand as the human presses onto the surface of the world.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in removing the hand, an object is left that is separate to the human body. Not interested in the meaning or interpretation of these signs, Mondzain focuses on the image as a form of address; the silent image (one that can span centuries) addresses a look to the other, to the spectator. Therefore, in Mondzain's words, 'the spectator is born of our hands through the force of the breath' (2007, 17) as the mouth and the hands are used for purposes other than 'tasks of everyday survival and conservation' (3) and the body becomes involved in making images for the other to

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<sup>7</sup> I have altered what is frequently referred to as 'man' in the texts of Mondzain and Agamben to '[hu]man' to avoid an over emphasis on the male gender when referring to humanity in general.

see.<sup>8</sup> Back in the attic space ‘One’ engages her hand in what, following Mondzain’s approach, can be thought of as a ‘gesture of separation and connection’ (6) placing an image on the surface of the world, or in this case, on the surface of a small attic.

Though initially addressed in silence, the diagrammatic representation on the first slide clearly demarcates what is required. With no further vocal instructions at this stage, by taking the remote control, we trigger the theatrical mechanism. This marks our complicit participation and our initiation into active spectatorship. The piece makes a game of the theatrical relationship as we are each instructed to make images for the other to see in this cave-like setting.

I read this opening gesture in line with what Giorgio Agamben terms as human beings ‘*nota characteristic*’ (2004, 26; original emphasis), which is namely that ‘[the hu]man has no specific identity other than the *ability* to recognise [them]self’ (ibid; original emphasis). Writing in *The Open*, Agamben considers the distinct ways humans can be considered as separate from animals and, in particular, what can result from the practical and political separation of humanity from something potentially more animalistic. Therefore, if what ultimately separates humans from animals is that ‘[the hu]man is the animal that must recognise itself as human to be human’ (ibid), then a certain danger might occur when the human begins to see an altered image of themselves, such as, in the form of an ape (2004, 27). In the opening vignette he recalls the messianic banquet of the last day where those present are depicted with ‘unmistakably animal heads’ (2). Agamben, however, defines human beings’ essential essence as the ability to speak and use language, as he states that ‘[the hu]man either has language, or

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<sup>8</sup> I am using an English translation of Mondzain’s text by Patrick Ffrench created for the ‘Caves’ Symposium at The Anatomy Theatre, King’s College London (2011).

he simply is not' (Steinthal, 1871, 355-56 cited in Agamben, 2004, 35). It therefore follows, back in the attic, that after an initial mute negotiation of pressing and placing images on the space that language, in the form of spoken instructions from the pre-recorded audio, is brought to bear on the room and on those within it. However, Agamben also states that '[i]n identifying himself with language, the speaking [hu]man places his own muteness outside of himself, as already and not yet human' (2004, 34-35). Such indications show that a reliance on language to humanise might be built on false promises, as it masks and separates the human being from their more animalistic nature.

My ear catches on the amplified rhythmic crackling sound of a seemingly aged record as I hear it spin on the turntable, dominating the soundscape.

phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut phut

The sound envelops and surrounds us in this attic space. Drawing on Kristeva here, it could be that we are experiencing, in an embodied manner, the nuances of the Symbolic and the Semiotic. What is evoked perhaps relates to the 'space of the Semiotic, that borderland of meaning' as 'a space of the not-yet-intelligible, of the as-yet-extra-logical' (Morton 1986, 97). Or, perhaps this is a kind of 'chora', a further term identified by Kristeva, which describes 'a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated' (ibid., 25). We turn our attention to the sound that is somewhat undetermined, to some extent formless.

The minimal lighting combined with the staged juxtaposition of the devices make these once familiar objects unfamiliar. This adds to a heightened sense of expectation to deliver and perform the instructions for each other. Aside from the pre-recorded aged voice giving the casual impression that the whole piece was found at a flea market, the only other noise that fills the attic is the whirl of a projector, visibly titled 'Elf'. The background noise fills the room; its sound marks a rhythm in the space and between those present, creating a kind of tension between man and machine, desire and order. The rhythm lulls us further into the piece, physically drawing us in. A pace distinctly other to that of our own breath and heartbeats (still slightly risen after the climb up from the ground floor) delimits a space of control and grounds the behaviour of those in the room. Here, we are almost alone in the company of these technological machines; the usher and Britt Hatzius both linger in the shadows in case a cue is not met that might interrupt the pulsating rhythms.

KEEP IN HAND the diagram silently suggests referring to the remote control.

PING = NEXT SLIDE

We follow the projected text-based instructions throughout the opening sequence, accompanied by the background rhythms. The third slide reads:

This is a 35mm slide, it can contain image and/or text  
when there is not enough space, projected text can also be

A cough from a small nineties style cassette player announces a mediated presence. Though not intelligible as part of language's system of signs, the technologically reproduced cough interrupts and erupts into the dusty air space. Though seemingly devoid of content, it structurally serves to create a space for what is about to take place. The voice speaks the second line of the above text, completing it by adding 'spoken out loud'. The room becomes dominated by the pre-recorded voice that addresses us by our numbers throughout as it calls for the specific completion of instructions often reinforcing what is pictured on the slide. All carefully timed, the voice emerges as another mechanism in the room as it is mixed with the rhythmic sound of a 'PING' or 'BEEP', prompting the rapid press of a button or slide change. The whole piece relies on a fast-paced execution of actions; there is not much, or indeed any room for human error, or to dwell in the moment. This is confirmed as I accidentally press down a little too forcefully on the record, increasing the speed of the turntable and delivery of the voice, quickly prompting Britt Hatzius to step forward from the shadows and correct my action.

In the space of the small attic, the emergence of unplanned interruptions on the pre-recorded tape serve to produce something more human in this environment that is almost devoid of actual human presence. In *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), Mladen Dolar argues the voice is not a vehicle for transmitting meaning or aesthetic contemplation, it is an object that can be seen as a lever of thought. In his account, Dolar does not only consider that which is in words, but also 'prelinguistic' (Parret, 2002, 28 cited in Dolar 2006, 23), elements such as the cough, the hiccup, the sneeze etc. Dolar claims these are all indications of the voice located 'outside speech', far from the realm of the signifier. Such emissions break through in a 'physiological

manifestation' (2006, 23) and essentially serve as eruptions, disrupting 'the ascent toward meaning' (24) that Dolar notes seems to 'tie the human voice to animal nature' (23). In this particular context, the cough signals the presence of a body with flesh, a being with a throat from which this emission must have, in the recording stage, issued forth. This reminds me of the psychosomatic modality that Kristeva refers to in relation to her articulation of the Semiotic. The revolutionary potential of the voice is not wholly communicative but is that which serves to interrupt order and reason. It communicates something *more* than the instructions, implying the presence of a body and a reminder of the interiority of the voice. On the surface, the voice seems to be mechanised and under control, but by listening *in*, the surging of a more visceral quality pulsating underneath operates as a reminder of the human animal within.

The voice in the attic space, through the relentless delivery of instructions, gives the impression that it is also mechanized like the other devices in the room. It repeatedly reminds us that it is not 'caught' in the mechanism itself. This raises the question as to which *mechanism* it might form part of. On slide 26, a diagram of the vocal folds is shown; the voice adds the following explanation:

If you took her apart you would be able to see her vocal folds stretched across her larynx. When it vibrates it makes a sound – this is also difficult to see.

The monotonous tone and formal register in the recording make this suggestion seem an acceptable (albeit violent) mode to uncover the non-visible bodily functions of speech production. There is a further interiority to the voice within the vocal folds; even this is a *mechanism* to a certain extent, hinting at a further inner being to which we have no access. The quest for the actual source of the voice is always met with impossibility,



for example when we, as 'One' and 'Zero', are told to 'inspect the record'. The voice urges us to identify a material trace of the voice speaking in the grooves of the vinyl, to locate the vibrations and movements produced in the human and reproduced in the machine by the movement of the needle. This operates as a practical intervention into the order and structured system of language. The emphasis on the material presence of the objects and exposure of their working mechanisms foregrounds a lack and hints at the fleeting ephemeral nature of the human voice, one almost impossible to pin down.

An immaterial voice without a locatable source, the voice allows an imagined aura of what art historian and critical theorist Kaja Silverman describes as the 'here and now' (1988, 43) to arise despite this being channelled through a pre-recorded device.

Silverman notes how the voice sits within the metaphysical 'Western episteme' where it is linked with a sense of closeness, of proximity, and, ultimately, associates 'speech as the very essence of presence' (ibid.). However, in *This is Not My Voice Speaking* (2011), the staging of the voice breaks with this idea, as it is revealed to be without an identifiable core. The lack of a face or source to which the voice can be adhered creates what film theorist Michel Chion might describe as 'a special being', 'a kind of talking and acting shadow' (1999, 21) associated with what he terms as the *acousmetre* (1999). It is in this unaccountable void that the power of the bodiless voice reigns. As Chion notes, the '*acousmetre* is everywhere', describing its four 'powers' as 'ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence' (1999, 24; original emphasis). Silverman, following Western metaphysics, claims the speech of the speaking subject is an inner expression, a 'part' (2000, 43) of him or her leading us to believe that the voice is somehow the innermost expression of the self.

In the attic our own voices, as bodies listening, are muted as the fast-paced delivery of instructions leaves little room to respond or comment on the action throughout the duration of the piece. We are reduced to small nods and glances shared between us, confirming the correct conduct of our actions in relation to what the voice asks. The sounds and rhythms of the devices in the room provide what French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes as a ‘tendentially methexic’ (2007, 10), in other words, a participatory environment, wrapping us in ‘sonorous time’ (13), an immediate present that is like

waves on a swell, not in a point on a line; it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelopes or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts, and so on. (ibid)

Following Nancy, throughout the installation our bodies seemingly resonate in tune to the hum of the machines around us, providing a steady rhythmical sound. The hum creates a ceaseless background noise, a reminder perhaps of philosopher Michel Serres’ assertion that this ‘may well be the ground of our being’ (2003, 13). This background noise mixed with the voice, which also emits a sound that is very measured and controlled in its delivery, one that avoids any dramatic change in tone or pitch, encourages a mode of attending, one that is marked by tones and rhythms. In this sense, we respond to the instructions given without thinking or further reflecting on the consequence of our actions, lulled by the whirring sounds of the machines in the room and urged on by the steady interpellation of the voice. The sounds of the devices provide us with another rhythm of being, one that is not our own. It therefore creates a space between us, as our attention is turned away from our own being and that of others to the surrounding sounds of the technology enveloping us. Therefore, the sounds in the room don’t necessarily mark our own presence as they sound in and beyond themselves

their whirs very much audible. Our own interior whirs fade into the darkness next to the machine as we lose a sense of our own interior hum, drowned out by machinic sound. If I read this in reference to Kristeva's thinking on the Symbolic then perhaps it is an awareness of the existence of the Semiotic that we are missing here. The machines stand in for reason and order. We are not being heard, not vocal at all; there is the sense of a lost connection to the other in the room as the sound of the projector, turntable, and cassette player create a gap between us. Our own live presence becomes somewhat precarious as we tune out of each other and into the objects in the room.

In this or/aurientation, it is only through a practice of listening to the elements outside of words in the pre-recorded voice, such as the cough, the breath in and the sound of saliva, that I locate a glimpse of another mode of being, one that allows us to engage in the possibility of dwelling in sonority, attuned to the presence of something other than words that resides in the voice, as language here creates a presence somewhat less human and somehow more mechanical. Again, in relation to Kristeva's use of the Symbolic, this could evidence the role of order, the hegemonic force that dominates our emotions, thoughts, and actions. In a carefully controlled and choreographed time frame, voiced instructions place physical demands on those present. The willingness to obey the acousmatic voice is coupled with an unquestioned execution of actions.

Temporal relations are forged through vocal emissions. In this particular case, the language of instructions serves to impose specific and strict orders of being on those in the room. Language acts as another apparatus, one that frames and controls; there is nothing outside of this, except for the possibility of pressing on the record with added emphasis that might allow us to resist the non-stop pressure to participate in this attic environment, though even that is quickly corrected. Finally, we are reminded 'we have

been here before’, as some familiar slides reappear; the whole piece seems to be on a loop, ready to be repeated exactly as it was. A final instruction to ‘press ff/cue’ on the cassette player is issued, the rhythmic sound of the record on the turntable resumes (I didn’t notice when it stopped), and we leave the room. Where instruction-based language and the acousmatic voice controlled, limited, and directed actions, a reminder, perhaps that both Kristeva’s notions of the Semiotic and Symbolic are required to co-exist with each other. In the next or/aurientation my attention is drawn to how other aspects of aurality, such as rhythm and tone, alter and shape my experience of space.

### **Or/Aurientation B: Nature Theater of Oklahoma, *Life and Times – Episodes 3 & 4***

Close to the city centre of Brussels, I follow the canal north towards the Kaaitheter, an arts centre programming theatre and dance, to see Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s *Life and Times – Episodes 3 & 4*. This piece forms part of an eight-part epic theatre marathon unfolding in a variety of formats between 2009 and 2015. The performance text is a sixteen-hour transcript of a series of conversations secretly recorded when company directors, Copper and Liska, called company member Kristin Worrall and asked her to recount her life story. The conversation includes all the pauses, ums, and ahs, digressions and meanderings you might expect from an oral account. In *Episodes 3 & 4* (2012) the audio transcript from the telephone conversation is staged, scripted, and split amongst multiple cast members as Worrall transitions from her pre- to late teenage years in a show that lasts a little under three hours. All cast members use headphones throughout, channelling the script directly to their ears. The stage setting, the costumes, and the dramaturgical arc of the piece closely resemble Agatha Christie’s *The*

*Mousetrap* (1954), a show which continues to play in London's West End. Here I focus on the deployment of disrupted rhythms and altered intonation of spoken language to further my argument that the remnants, or excess of speech production, might not require the endorsement of the world through language, but might favour dwelling in sonority.

I walk into the theatre and take up my seat in the auditorium. My attention turns to the naturalistic backcloth already visible onstage, the representation of a bourgeois living room, evocative of an English manor house rich in strong hues of browns, oranges, and yellows. An elaborately painted roaring fire is detailed, complete with mantelpiece, ornaments, and a portrait. Painted wooden panels serve as walls; there is even a window depicting an exterior winter snow scene. In a promotional trailer on YouTube, directors Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper stand in front of the stage as the back cloth is raised, unfolding as it is mechanically lifted.<sup>9</sup> The rising panels of the painted cloth determine the parameters of the temporary world onto which the performers will appear. The simulacrum of the tackily painted home scene domesticates the space as the slightly industrial looking backstage area behind the cloth is exposed before being covered up.

This initial encounter with the backdrop depicting a faux, luxurious interior provides a reminder of the habitat that I, or in Agamben's terms, the '[hu]man', operates within, one that is neatly framed and separated from the 'out there' of the outside world. The window, clearly painted on, is reminiscent of Agamben's observation in *The Open*, as

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<sup>9</sup> See Nature Theater of Oklahoma's *Life and Times – Episodes 3 & 4*, a Soho Rep production <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14eiETn-724> (accessed 19 November 2022).

he claims that though the '[hu]man always has the world before him' (2004, 57), he seldom 'enters the "pure space" of the outside' and instead, 'only stands "facing opposite" (*gegenüber*)' (ibid.; original emphasis). Indeed, throughout the piece, myself and other audience members all sit opposite an outside framed by the apparent stillness and stability of a comfortable, bourgeois living room. Confronted with a set that offers no depth or perspective, all appears to be present and fixed, encouraging me to interpret what I see as is. The setting generates expectations for a particular kind of behaviour, one associated with social realism, bringing with it certain speech conventions, acting style, and line delivery. However, within the first words spoken, it becomes clear that these expectations will not be met. Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter in *Spaces Speak* (2007), argue that our experience of space is heavily influenced by the acoustics of architecture, one they claim is heavily overlooked in favour of visual aesthetics. Blesser and Salter claim that by changing vocal behaviours, our fabricated environments can also change. Accordingly, in *Episodes 3 & 4*, though one particular world is visually invoked by the aural architecture, quite another is brought into existence by the vocal.

In the opening scene, one female figure enters, smartly dressed in a suit with incredibly shiny shoulder-length dark brown hair cut in a neat bob. She enters with a light presence taking a seat on one of the only actual objects in the room, the satin divan. With an intense gaze directed outwards into the space of the auditorium, she begins to speak very rapidly. Concentration clearly evident on her face, she delivers lines from the edited transcript of Worrall's fairly mundane biography, not wholly dissimilar to American theatre director Richard Maxwell's characteristic flat vocals (see Kear 2012). Another female figure enters suddenly; she is dressed in a turtleneck jumper and tartan

skirt. She starts to speak in a style akin to the previous performer, out into the space of the auditorium towards the audience. At this stage, the two figures don't address each other or make eye contact with the audience. The words and sentences play on the performers as their speech digresses, interrupts itself, and finishes abruptly, rapidly emerging as though from the surface of their bodies, rather than from a more interior location. This gives the impression that the words are not their own but are temporarily housed in their mouths, thus drawing attention to the process of acting.

The words stand out, somewhat incongruous to the surroundings as language is layered onto the interior environment of the auditorium, brought into play as another kind of happening, born on the vocal. The emphasis lies in the rhythmic and musical potentiality of words and resisting language as a tool for naming. Words are poised as what philosopher Jeff Malpas terms as 'the between', or that which 'lies between word and thing' (2006, 265-66), a between that is not quite the 'concreteness of the inscribed word – sounding or the script – and the generality of its sense' (ibid., 266). The disrupted delivery implicit in the characters' voices challenges the coherence of linguistics as a set system of semantics (Cavarero 2005, 11) and seems to foreground what Paul Zumthor would regard as 'the functioning of the voice as the bearer of language' (1990, 44). Where words might usually be the final destination for what is produced by the voice, here they are treated as insignificant leftovers in contrast to the more musical and rhythmic possibilities on offer. The use of the words displays poetic motion, or even a sense of political exigency. This reminds me of Kristeva's 'chora' whereby 'vocal and kinetic rhythm' offer mobile and uncertain articulation. As audience, we thereby attune to the excess of this poetic motion and the otherness of musical rhythm.

An example from the piece reads as follows:

So I was – I was a pretty – like – serious kid, though. I mean I – I do remember  
– like – liking everybody, but – and it wasn't like I was....it wasn't like I was  
like – but I was just like, 'eh'.<sup>10</sup>

The text is not dissimilar to the typical everyday dialect of an American adolescent. The vocal emphasis afforded to words such as 'like' within the piece is not clear here on the page. Rising intonation used mid-sentence, when the lines are delivered, combined with an increased emphasis put on the word gives the impression that something more meaningful is occurring. The inclusion of other shorter interjections, such as 'but', 'um', 'urrr', also serves to create the sense that there might be some further meaning behind them. Typically used to indicate a pause in the speaker's thinking, here this is clearly not the case as the aforementioned in-ear headphones channel the words directly to the performers' ears. The unusual intonation and rhythm given to the words as spoken against this backdrop in the auditorium make it seem as though it were, as Liska himself describes, some kind of 'epic poetry'.<sup>11</sup> The irregular emphasis makes common everyday language unfamiliar, prolonging the act of listening, as the sensations associated with quotidian conversations become problematic to perceive.

As the performers speak, my ear attempts to catch what is said; as Nancy states, when 'we listen to someone giving a speech we want to understand' (2007, 6). Stretching my

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<sup>10</sup> Text of script taken from review of *Episodes 3 & 4* at Under the Radar Festival 'Like, Innocence, and Um Experience' Charles Isherwood, Jan 22, 2013. *The New York Times* <http://theater.nytimes.com/2013/01/23/theater/reviews/life-and-times-episodes-1-4-at-the-public-theater.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> (accessed 19 November 2022).

<sup>11</sup> See 'Screen Test No.7 (Shizuoka) for video of actor Robert M. Johanson rehearsing speech patterns with Pavol Liska, <http://vimeo.com/44843870> (accessed 19 November 2022).



sphere of attention out into the dark, something jars. I recognise the words but they reach me as though they were unknown. My ear extends outwards from the limits of my seat, a silent dialogical partner trying to make meaning from the sounds I hear, I attempt to engage in the dramatic landscape opened through the vocal. The essential function of speech to communicate a given context in what Walter Benjamin calls the ‘bourgeois conception of language’ (1996, 67 cited in Cavarero 2005, 21) is challenged. As Nancy notes, ‘to listen is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity’ (2007, 7). The limits of meaning are outlined as I attempt to capture the whole sound of something no longer familiar to me in this form. I cannot contain the words as they spill over, outside of recognition, tripping me up in my attempt to understand. The set of referrals born on language spreading in space are disrupted by the irregular stress given to the words in the sentences. Unexpected rhythmical delivery puts emphasis on the redundant elements of conversation, indeed more emphasis than might normally be granted. As an audience member, the length of attention is expanded as I dwell in the sonority of the aural experience.

From my seat, I lean in to hear the rapid, unusually spoken words, expecting to receive a coherent account of Worrall’s teenage years. However, as I listen *in*, the climax of most sentences ends in ‘eh’ or something equally meaningless. In attempting to follow the repeated usage of the word ‘like’, I become disorientated. However, as I learn to distrust my instinctual nature that words contain some kind of content, I lean back in an attempt to tune into something else. Just as the words themselves emanate from the surface of the performers’ bodies, they also pass through my ears as surfaces and textures, as opposed to something more meaningful. Though the words themselves might not be the most profound, their resonance and rhythm creates a lyrical lull that

we, as audience, become locked into within the aural architecture of the auditorium. As I lean back from listening out for any kind of specific meaning, I retreat into a more personal space of reflection, only drawn back to the onstage action by an alteration in the music or gestures.

The gestures that accompany the words do not fit; there is a disjuncture between the minimalistic movements of the actors and textual delivery. An actor will suddenly receive a cue to go and stand by the fire to warm their hands with what appears to be an intention from another context. Similarly, a character might suddenly move threateningly in front of another, though there is no apparent textual motivation for it. Originally rehearsed with the text of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* (1954), the audio tracks were switched a few days before. The disjuncture between word and image is reminiscent of Chions' aforementioned concept of 'the acousmetre' (1999), an image (in this case the set and costumes) is combined with words that don't quite fit, like a badly dubbed movie. Here, however, this effect allows several worlds to be set into play: that of Worrall's biography, present in the spoken content, and Christie's *The Mousetrap*, evident in the backdrop, costumes, and movements. This overlapping of worlds allows an uncanny in-between to arise, extending and expanding my sphere of attention. The familiar keying of events, usually achieved through coherence between setting, action, and speech, is disrupted. This allows the co-existence of these separate worlds to emerge simultaneously. An uncanny atmosphere becomes palpable beyond the words and glances that oscillate between the empty spaces on the stage amongst the characters and between audience and orator.

Various figures appear and disappear, dressed as though characters from *The Mousetrap*, speaking throughout in the same signature style, Worrall's fragmented biographical details advance in painstaking detail: teenage anxieties over what to wear to the prom, concerns about getting a date, her first period, her first kiss. The vocal emissions, a mix between words and sounds, allow the audience to navigate the rapidly altering landscape of a growing teenager against the static bourgeois living room backdrop. The mundane events begin to take on further significance within this setting through the atmospheric music that creeps in and via intense suspicious glances exchanged between the performers on stage. As details of Worrall's first period are told, an air of suspense is generated through an increase in dramatic pauses, intense directional lighting, and eerie music to the extent that it could be read as something much more serious. These moments of increased intensity provide some respite in what is otherwise a fairly steady and monotonous life journey of a middle-class American growing up in Rhode Island. Though at times the episodes described make you, as an audience member, reminiscent of your own life experiences as the show's publicity informs, 'it could be you', a sense of boredom emerges. The almost three-hour duration becomes agonising as the piece continues in the same style. Despite moments of heightened tension and suspense brought about through the music, lighting, and suspicious gestures, essentially these serve to draw further attention to the fact that relatively little changes.

The content is almost secondary as we become involved in what Cavarero describes as 'the communication of oneself to another quite beyond any content' (2005, 31). By stretching my ear towards the content in an act of listening, I consider, as Nancy does, 'what is at stake when one truly listens' (2007, 4). In this case, it is clearly not about the

transference of a message per se, yet more about listening to a sound ‘just for itself’ (5), where ‘to be listening is to be inclined toward the opening of listening’ (27). It is in this opening that, as an audience member (or a body listening), I am drawn back to my position within the auditorium amongst other listeners. As we bend our ears toward the stage and the mouths of the performers, we are reminded of the theatre as the ideal site for this ontological relation. In this or/aurientation the irregular and unusual rhythms modified how my body listens. This foregrounded the more musical elements of vocal emissions and their ability to create an atmosphere, one that shapes and almost imperceptibly guides my attention in and out of focus.

## **Conclusion**

When being a body listening, attention is not necessarily commanded through the semantic content of words but in the act of the listener who actively chooses to tune out of linguistic units. By giving the ears over to tones and rhythms operating within the theatrical environment, choosing to dwell in sonority can offer a mode of being that refuses to be dominated by hegemonic structures of control. This was most acutely experienced in the dramaturgical structure of *This is Not My Voice Speaking* (2011), as by tuning out of the instructions, the possibility to dwell in the sonority of tones and rhythms arose, allowing for a sensitivity to the atmosphere occurring in the room and between bodies to unfold. By attuning my attention to what is aurally available, rather than solely focussing on Kristeva’s notion of the Symbolic, I become aware of how sounds, beyond their linguistic value, act on and influence the movement and direction of my body within the space. It would seem that beyond words, sound carves an atmosphere that either accompanies or is incongruent to the words spoken. This was

particularly evident in the excessive use of the word ‘like’ and other typical conversational interjections embedded in the dramaturgical structure of *Episodes 3 & 4* which, by encouraging attention to the sounds of language, especially its rhythms and intonations, incited a sense of lingering heightened through the content of the piece, as the text spoken was often semantically empty or superfluous.

To summarise, the idea of dwelling in sonority offers a way of extending and expanding my attention to relations with voices, beings, and objects within the space of contemporary performance. Ahmed asks, ‘What difference does it make what we are oriented toward?’ (2006, 543) claiming that ‘we are not only directed toward objects, but those objects also take us in a certain direction’ (544). Following Ahmed, within these two examples of contemporary performance practice, I have evidenced how bodies take shape and are shaped by how they are aurally affected. At this point, listening emerges as a barely visible act influencing the trajectory of the audience member’s body within the space of an installation (in the case of *This is Not My Voice Speaking*) and within the space of the theatre auditorium. This can be described as a turn towards the atmospheric properties and the potential of sound, a turn that offers a choreographic intervention in attentional focus with poetic revolutionary potential.

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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