

Touching Vocal Landscape: Compositional Implications

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Introduction. In 2007, independent curator Rahma Khazam asked me a question about the future of sound art. “What if,” she said, “sound could *become* the walls of a building? What if it could become architecture and you could touch it, or even build rooms out of it?” This question conjoined a number of concerns explored by the recent-historical avant-garde to notions of the architectural and the spatial. From the Fluxus movement’s theatricalisation of sound-within-objects (in particular the early work of Nam Jun Paik and Yoko Ono) to conceptual sound artist Alvin Lucier’s *oeuvre* within which sound is a material source of contemplative practice, music-and-sound-as-material were brought into explicit dialogue with ‘live’ (or staged) visuality and spatiality throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Moving beyond the history of music/musical/operatic theatre traditions into the white cube gallery setting, this dialogue took place within frameworks that evoked the kinds of practices of contemplation historically reserved to visual art. Indeed, we might characterise the shift from these artists identifying as *musicians* to identifying as *something else* (sound artists, visual artists, conceptual artists, or just plain artists) as the logical outcome of the Cageian shift to attending to sound as a kind of object rather than attending to sound as music.

Vibratory objects and voice-as-material. What might we mean by sound – and in particular, vocal sound – as a genuinely tactile *object*?¹ A range of world music traditions has long considered what we might call the ‘touch quality’ of sound to be a core component of musical practice. However, from Western musicological and theatrological perspectives, imagining sound in the performance space as having touchable, *material* qualities is relatively recent. To help us grapple with a framework within which we might imagine music, and more particularly, vocal sound, to be material, I introduce concepts from two key thinkers’ work.

In his extended meditation on the nature of ventriloquism, Stephen Connor (2000) introduces two key concepts that can be of use to us. The first is the concept of *vocalic space* (12 – 13). For him, vocalic space is where ‘the voice may be grasped as the mediation between the phenomenological body and its social and cultural contexts.’ (12) If the voice is constantly moving away from us (after we emanate sound), it occupies, maps and charts this kind of space, and those of us who speak or sing negotiate the way we move through, and embed ourselves within this space both routinely, and largely unconsciously. ‘Vocalic space,’ claims Connor, ‘signifies the ways in which the voice is held to both operate in, and itself to articulate, different conceptions of space, as well as to enact the different relations between the body, community, time and divinity.’ (12) If we are making music theatre, and if that theatre includes voices, vocalic spaces are clearly continually at stake in the process of relating to audiences. These spaces bridge the biological body, the acoustic environment, and the culturally constructed understanding of how the body and environment shape perception and relationships within that space. We might call the process of consciously engaging with vocalic

¹ There is plenty of discourse in the sound studies field that explores the materiality of sound, but this avowed materiality as almost always metaphorical rather than literal in nature. There is also, in a cultural studies framework, the concept of voice-object derived from Kleinian psychoanalytic theories, which I also understand as metaphorical rather than literal. I thus use the concept of sound as ‘tactile’ (and touchable) to underscore the literal nature of these contentions.

space a kind of vocal *landscaping* that is both dependent on (and highly interactive with), and distinct from, the actual physical environment in which it occurs.

Connor also introduces the concept of the 'vocalic body'. As he says, '[V]oices are produced by bodies, but can also themselves produce bodies. The vocalic body is the idea – which can take the form of a dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination – of a surrogate or secondary body... formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice.' (35) We might consider the material operation of this body. The vocalic body is the body we imagine when we hear a voice. That voice may 'look' nothing like the *real* body that *actually* produced the voice. That body is fabricated by our psyche from a vibratory field: a vocalic field. As I have asserted in other writing, that vibratory field is the sculptural shape of the voice moving through space. It is a kinetic sculpture, *made* of vibration. Other body parts and nerve endings than those in our eardrums can perceive it too, if the frequencies are 'right' and the source of the vocal sound close enough to us, or amplified. We might say this field is *another* kind of vocalic body, a body of vocal vibration that sculpts vocalic space. When we hear (and otherwise perceive) voice, we negotiate the gap between these two kinds of bodies: the imagined, and the 'real'/vibratory.

Indeed, in her recent work *Sensing Sound* (2015) Nina Sun Eidsheim argues for understanding vocal sound as (material) vibration. Through her extended discourse militating for a conception of sound as literally, rather than metaphorically, material, she asks the reader to try to stop hearing sound, but rather to *feel* it, and to attempt to analyse its potency and aesthetic content through embodied sensation rather than mere hearing, thereby escaping the tendency toward cold, disembodied cerebral analysis of sound derived from ocularcentric engagement. Through analysing, in the first instance, Julia Snapper's underwater operatic singing and workshops, Eidsheim points out that vocal sound's interaction with the material world essentially makes it a material medium: voicing felt through water makes this evident. What's more, 'hard science' shows that we perceive a wide range of vibrations through nerve endings in our abdomens among other body segments (172-179). In other terms, we might say that Eidsheim asks us to perceive sound *somatically*, as a whole-body, rather than an aural, experience.

Architecting the voice as material. If we understand the voice as (vibratory) material, we can then begin to think in new ways about how that material is shaped and constructed. We can think of how it creates both architectures and landscapes, but these architectures and landscapes are *haptic* and *tactile* rather than auditory or visual in nature. These become a kind of haptic architecture – to use the term coined by Juhanni Pallasmaa (2005). As voices move through space, the intersubjective qualities of the bodies with which they interact come into play. Voices become a kind of haptic glue-field that vocalisers and listeners negotiate together, and this glue-field is touchable, and its touchability can be amplified by passing vocalic bodies through material: liquids, sheet metal, glue, fences, glass... They can also be amplified by technology. So, how does this then interact with the landscape within which this voice-architecting occurs? Can this vocal *material* invent, shape or influence landscape?

Audience involvement, 'politics', power. Our project has proposed that music, theatre and landscape might be able to dialogue with one another in ways that re-imagine the inclusion of people, and in particular othered people, within a framework of interdisciplinary creative place-making. One tension at the core of this work is the following. Vocalic space is transitory and

ephemeral and invented by people's bodies as they inhabit spaces. Landscaped space is, by comparison, relatively 'permanent' and fixed. The two conceptions of space rub against one another. The power relations at their cores function differently.

To help us grapple with this, I introduce Jennifer Stoever's concept of the 'sonic colour line' (articulated in depth in her monograph) (2016 (forthcoming)). Stoever points out that race has always been constructed sonically, in addition to visually, in America:

Through multiple simultaneous processes of dominant representation ... particular sounds are identified, exaggerated, and sutured to racialized bodies. These sounds include musical ones like the drums [YB's note: such as often attributed to American 'blackness'], vocal sounds like accents, dialects, "slang," and extraverbal utterances, as well as ambient domestic and street sounds (Stoever-Ackerman 2010).

We are familiar across Europe with the stereotype of the 'noisy migrant' (and often, the vocalic body of that migrant is imagined as 'browner' than the dominant culture's imagined skin tone). In her work, Stoever shows how racialized *othering* is bound together with vocal stylings, perceptions of timbre and texture in the voice, and perceived sonic habits that surround vocalisation. We might extend this concept to queered sung voicings (Bonenfant 2010), which Jarman-Ivens constructs as glorying in, exaggerating, and rendering virtuosic, their 'flaws' (2011) while irritating and subverting mainstream vocal value systems. What's more, in most European contexts, where the traces of aristocratically construed class hierarchy are omnipresent, we are also familiar with vocal and sound-world characteristics that we attribute to *class*. The 'poor' sound 'different' (from an imagined norm) within patriarchally structured cultures; their vocalic bodies are imagined as having qualities of untouchability. When we seek to include marginalised publics in our vocal landscaping practices, we cannot do so without considering the intersectionality of these kinds of dynamics.

If our intention is genuinely to make work across singing and landscape that suggests the undoing of these divides, or at least, that makes space for new kinds of imaginings of contact, we need to deeply reconsider how the vibrational materiality of voice creates power relations with audiences: aesthetically, relationally, emotionally and corporeally. Our mission becomes to *consciously re-compose with and through* vocalic space using the vocalic body as our principal medium, while consciously attempting to invite othered bodies into the vocalic space and into the landscaped environment. The vocalic space must thus invite, pull, reach, extend a hand to these communities; and, these communities must be invited to *voice back* so that their voices also construct the space's vibrational architectures. The somatic modes of attention developed by virtuosically trained singers [as per Csordas (1993)] could be of great use in perceiving the subtleties of these somatic dynamics. This brings to conscious creative engagement aspects of our artistic practice that are usually denied, ignored and deemed irrelevant. And, if the landscape itself is not fixed, but rather also composable, we can explore whether vocalic space itself might not be a design tool we can put at the disposal of landscape architects to give them a new tool in their basket that would help imagine the dynamics of landscape in whole new ways – beyond the acoustic and into the vocally ephemeral, but somatically potent, experience of vocal exchange. Intimacy, privacy, relationships, are dramatically altered by considering the functional dynamics of material vocalic space.

So how might we do this? Compositional strategies – toward a vibratory vocal-somatic dramaturgy. Clearly, the preceding compositional project is utopian in stance, and this brief paper

doesn't allow for self-critical engagement with the complexities of the assertions made here, including some sweeping generalisations about the construction of dynamics across bodies and communities. However, I am interested in understanding how we might invent a compositional process that bridges voice and landscape in ways that engage the amorphous entity we call the 'public', and am also interested in how we bring learners inside processes that might help them do this consciously and with interesting and challenging aesthetic results. While the well documented audience-inclusive or public responsive 'turn' in Western contemporary 'high art' practices, (ranging from the visual to the performing arts) is well-documented, and while both highly critical (Claire Bishop, etc) and more generous (Shannon Jackson, etc.) readings of how attempts to do this have 'succeeded' or 'failed' are well-articulated, it is rare that such creative work is done with virtuosically-trained ['classical'] singers; it is also rare that such work is done in collaboration with landscape architects. From my perspective of someone who makes art from voice, here are some suggestions as conclusion:

- We can undertake devising processes that have at their starting point the exploration of the somatic qualities of vocalisation and the conscious use of these compositionally. Preparatory exercises and exploration with singers of the material vibrations they emit could re-configure their understandings of what they are EXCHANGING with audiences (vibratory material: not mere 'sound') and other kinds of sonic/vibrational material developed than our canonic understandings of 'repertoire' usually permit.
- To do the preceding, it is probably necessary to abandon pre-scored material and focus on singers inventing material, so that they can stay close to the material's touch and vibratory qualities in the first instance, and to take them into the challenges of outdoor, acoustically 'difficult' space, where abandoning hearing for 'feeling' sound becomes an advantage, since our sound will rarely be reflected back to us in the ways to which we are habituated.
- We can explore methods for taking the results of these explorations, and for 'scoring' with them. In particular, graphic scores, combined with digital media sampling and documentation, could help us think through and plan the spatialisation of our work. That scoring must include 'intentions' vis-à-vis the (likely diversity of) intersectionally-constructed communities that inhabit these spaces, or the communities we are trying to (literally) reach (toward with vibration).
- We can explore the vocal-acoustic characteristics of existing spaces with landscape architects. We can try to understand the way they 'map' space and layer this mapping with traces of our own somatic mappings of these spaces.
- The compositional process would of course have to include serious, long-term observational fieldwork regarding our perceptions of 'who' uses/doesn't use the given space(s) in question and how we, as singers, culturally construct our notions of our and their identities within those spaces. This includes mapping – probably literally, verbally, visually mapping – as many of the power dynamics at play in order to make conscious choices about how to work within these and bring our intentions to them.

The compositional process that would result from the preceding would be deeply relational in nature, and the ensemble's somatic self-awareness would be nested within nests of larger loops of other kinds of self-aware sensitivities. Listening from sensation and producing work that intends to evoke sensation would mean that the entire ensemble would need to take on not only a generative,

but what we might call a somatic-dramaturgical role with dramaturgical responsibilities. The role might be imagined as being made up of the following two aspects:

- Aspects of dramaturgical practice that Turner and Behrndt characterise as *map-making* and *compass-bearing* (176-180). This would incorporate a literal approach to compass-bearing as a kind of spatial practice, based in the (impossibly ephemeral) transient, vocalic space. This space would have to be mapped through charting conflicting layers of sensation exchange and through representing vocalic space literally and metaphorically (symbols, digital creations), within scoring processes. A collaborative framework of 'planning' for landscape, scoring for the vocal body's intentions, imagining the shapes and structures of the vocalic body, and representations of how we shape vocalic space within this landscape would likely all form a part of this map-making process.
- The shaping of a relational 'story of exchange', where the 'story' being told is made up of intended sequences of sensation experienced between vocaliser and listener, mediated by the material landscape of the performance environment, and the transient qualities of its means of inhabiting that environment. The exact sensations experienced could never be accurately described or represented, because the nature of sensation is so changeable and ephemeral, and because bodies don't perceive sensation in a given way just because we want them to. Nonetheless, *intentions* are mappable. This, however, means that emphasis on the exchange of subjectivities, and the mystery of the response of other humans, would form an integral part of the 'story' being told. This story could be represented using combined media, with an emphasis on the vocalicity of this representation and audio files that literally embody multiple voices and vocal intentions within the shaping of this 'story'. (For examples of this kind of vocalicity in action within the articulation of research outcomes, see Thomaidis (2015)).

So, in terms of conceiving a potential work of art, where vocalic space dialogues with notions of landscape design and urban planning,

- The voicings themselves (of performers, of audience)
- A complex devising and scoring process that integrates a wide variety of literal and metaphorical devices of representation – map-making
- Mappings of intentions vis-à-vis the sculpting of vocalic space
- Somatic self-awareness of the intentions of given voice production, and the resultant possible vocalic bodies
- Understanding somatic experience (for both performers and audience) as a kind of narrative framework
- Mappings of the material environments through which the sound passes, and with which it interacts
- Tactile mappings and intentions

... could all be brought together, and brought to the table, when working with landscape architects and urban planners. This constellation of representations could conceivably then dialogue with a sensation-oriented mapping and planning process with and around landscape architects. These could then be incorporated into a flow of architectural concepts and ways of reading space, but would also ground these in the exchange of vocalic sensation.

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