

Doing Things With The Mouth

An Excursion

*Gibberish, in being peripheral to voice proper,
occupies a rather central position within the oral imaginary.*¹

Brandon LaBelle

One thread that I consistently aim to follow, regarding my vocal practice, is to consider the mouth as an exclusive site for producing sounds. What interests me is the question concerning the entrenchment of a practice that emphasises the mouth as mere sound generator and that doesn't involve the vocal cords. Such a concept no longer prioritises the mouth limited to a linguistic function, but in fact unleashes a plethora of oral sounds. It is a basic prerequisite of my practice to consider the glottis and the mouth as two different, possibly separated sound generators and therefore to differentiate between a vocal and an oral sphere. This dualistic approach to vocal sound production within one vocal mechanism or, in other words, the equal share of vocal and oral aspects within the potential of a voice, is an important premise for recognising the voice as a whole. It is my view that a practice of various different oral art forms, a *creative orality*, not only enriches and expands, but in fact seems to *complete* the field of vocal arts.

There are basically two entities that work together, but these should be differentiated when it comes down to the question concerning the production of sounds; the vocal cords concealed in the throat and the components of the mouth consisting of lips, tongue, teeth and hard as well as soft palate. The mouth can be compared with the ending of the tube of a brass instrument that, serving as amplifier, modulates the sound produced by the vibration of the lips. In the case of the voice, it's the vocal cords, also known as vocal folds, that generate a vowel-related flow of extended sounds.² However, it's the mouth which is the most prominent site of the voice making the act of utterance visible, whereas the vocal cords responsible for producing vowel sounds remain invisible throughout. Turning from sheer vocality and the methodology of vocal sound production toward the field of speech and language, it can be said that the mouth presents itself as the signifying tool that, by embedding and shaping the vowels and their numerous constellations, gives direction to the vowel sounds and in so doing represents the essential part in producing the codes for linguistic meaning. The mouth is the regent in the realm of consonants and thus most responsible for verbal fencing. In the *Lexicon of the Mouth* (2014), Brandon LaBelle notes that 'voice is mostly constrained to the arena of communication, relegating the nonsensical to the periphery' (p. 61). The mouth, within the regime of language and

¹ LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth* (1999), p. 61.

² Note that it's only the vowel and the voiced consonant that can be extended in order to produce a flow of sound. The voiceless consonant, on the other hand, must be reiterated, mostly in a rapid manner, to achieve a similar effect.

its linguistic semantics, seems to be limited to assisting the voice in its entirety. The normative character of this concept, ubiquitously applied, can be observed also in the vocal arts as understood in the Western tradition when the singer interprets the music of the composer who, in most cases, sets a text – either a poem or libretto – to music. In this case, the emergence of sound is not motivated by the sound itself, but rather by the word and its linguistic meaning and thus by the regime of language. The tradition of vocal arts in Western culture and its education system still foster, in most cases, an aesthetics of the nineteenth century.

But what interests me is the question concerning the entrenchment of a practice that likes to emphasise the mouth as sound generator without involving the vocal cords at all. *It is my aim to shed light on the potential of the voice as a whole by differentiating between and acknowledging both, the vocal and the oral sphere.* It's true, of course, that they cannot be separated from each other, but they also have great potential to exist next to each other, side by side, at times, and let the mouth components, i.e. lips, tongue and palate, become the main actors in producing sounds.

The concept and practice of a *creative orality* strives to excavate a strand of vocal artistry that in conformance of common standards seems to be buried by a functionality imposed by linguistic semantics. This way, to a certain extent, the mouth as independent, sound generating part of the voice gets liberated from the bonds of language. It is my view that this approach bears the potential of completing the vocal arts as opposed to forming a separate field. Reality though shows the other side of the coin. Oral art practices are disjoined from the vocal arts in its traditional understanding from the Western culture. Actually, instead of singers, oral art performances are mostly realised by actors or artists from the visual arts who often strongly reject vocal art practices that refer to Western singing traditions.

In fact, a traditional line of *creative orality* already exists tracing back to the emergence of Dada more than 100 years ago. The protagonists of the movement protested against the war, its politics of language and the societal acceptance of mass killing of human beings. It was during this period around World War I that a novel kind of artist-performer evolved and unleashed a process of artistic thinking and established practices whose influence on contemporary performing art forms is still evident to this day. Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate* as well as Arnold Schönberg's *Sprechgesang* as introduced in *Pierrot Lunaire* were both highly influential. Later, accelerated by technological achievements during the second half of the twentieth century and since then often called *sound poetry*, the notion of the *extended voice* accompanied by unfamiliar and peculiar vocal techniques occurred, all of which called into question the aesthetics of Western singing traditions. Seminal singer Cathy Berberian who used to work with Luciano Berio as well as with John Cage also put forward this particular tradition followed by a number of great vocal performers such as Joan LaBarbara or Meredith Monk. In fact, experiments in the vocal arts as realised during the second half of the twentieth century, mainly in 1960s throughout the 90s, changed the landscape of the discipline. Brilliant vocal performers such as Trevor Wishart, Phil Minton, and David Moss contributed to this development. However, it needs to be stated that broad recognition of this vocal art form failed to materialise, especially in regards vocal education. The experimental side of vocal art performance remained (and remains) niche. At this moment, in the face of neoliberalism and populist politics, this situation is unlikely to change soon. The achievements of

extended vocal performance art forms, made over the course of 100 years, risk being wiped from history like many other “niche” art forms.

It is about time to acknowledge the practice of oral arts under the umbrella of an expanded field of vocal arts. As artist-researcher in this area, it is my aim to foster an approach to the vocal arts that takes into account both spheres, the vocal and the oral. By doing so, my hope isn't only to upheave the recognition of oral art forms, but also to shed light on the fact that, besides the use of live technology, it is precisely the practice of and with the mouth that enriches and expands the field of the vocal arts. The oral approach to the vocal arts, the practice of producing sounds by isolating the mouth components from the vocal cords, attempts to emphasise the conception of the mouth as sound generator standing on its own as opposed to its common function as transmitter as mere amplifying tube and modulator of sounds as produced by the vocal cords to transmit linguistic semantics.

It is worth noting, as briefly stated above, that the beginnings of a creative orality or, as often called, *sound poetry* have been in practice since the beginning of the twentieth century. The movement of *Dada* with its focus on nonsensical, yet political outcomes may be considered as a direct response to World War I and thus a protest against the absurdity of war logics and the mass slaughter of humans. It is in Dada poems that an oral sphere came to the fore by renegading against the bourgeois opera representing society at the time not only allowing, but pushing forward the war machinery. Eventually, with the advent of electronic amplification and the possibility of using microphones and loudspeakers to extend the voice's volume, the singing voice was no longer constrained to focus on its capabilities of being loud and penetrating enough to reach beyond the orchestra. More importantly, the softest sounds of the voice imaginable could now be projected and thus become of great importance entailing, eventually, a shift in aesthetics. Suddenly, since then, hisses and whispered sounds, just to name two, could compete with percussion instruments and provide novel soundscapes. I cannot illuminate this field in detail, since it would go way beyond the scope of this work, but it is important to mention the huge impact on the voice that the development of electronics always had and still has once the means of state-of-the-art technology were available and applied. In fact, it has almost turned into an equation that in the field of electronics each invention related to vocal sound production had a tremendous impact on how we listen to the voice's properties followed by immediate changes on the aesthetics of the voice.³ Returning to the influence of the Dada movement as starting point for an awareness of the *oral sphere*, one might ask whether or not it carries the potential to be a site for rebellion and resistance. Or, on the other hand, is this question connected to and therefore dependent on the surrounding socio-cultural frameworks? It is not my main thesis, but it is worth mentioning that it seems to be engraved in Western culture that, almost like a display of enhanced alterity, oral art practices do bear a subversive power that has the potential to undermine accepted standards of communication.

³ These considerations are addressed in Peters: *Speaking into the Air* (1999), Sterne: *The Audible Past* (2003) and Adorno, 'Opera and the Long-Playing Record' in *Octobre* (1990).

References:

- Adorno, Theodor W., 'Opera and the Long-Playing Record', in *October*, vol. 55 (winter 1990), transl. by Thomas Y. Levin, 62–66.
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