



Speaking Out: The Spoken Word In Artistic Practice

Tate Modern, London, UK

How to liberate the spoken word from its boundaries? That was the question raised at the outset of this day-long symposium by Cathy Lane of CRiSAP/London College of Communication, who organised the event in collaboration with Tate Modern as a follow-up to the book *Playing With Words*, which she edited last year.

The symposium focused on an undercurrent of thought that addressed the slippages between languages and codes. Presentations, screenings and performances ranged from Caroline Bergvall's incisive remarks about histories of linguistic conflicts and boundaries, to Tomomi Adachi's playful vocal explorations in reading Japanese concrete poetry. Construction and dispersion of sense, and translation and displacement of speech, appeared as overarching themes, in the attempt to loosen the hinges between depth and surface, meaning and musicality, cultural load and textural feel in language. Such themes emerged in Imogen Stidworthy's video *Barrabackslarrabang*, for which she interviewed people who use backslang as a form of linguistic exchange in marginalised classes. They wittily undermined the vague terrain between the written and the aural in Nye Parry's *The Two Of Us* and *My Name Is Sarah Simpson*, where overlapped snippets of recorded voices, and pre-existing audio objects and texts were introduced into the performative space. They appeared as cunning structural devices in Brandon LaBelle's *The Sound At The Back Of My Mouth, Almost*, a sequence of written sentences on a black screen around the idea of the inner voice, with few hushed sounds and moving images seeping through.

While reading those phrases in the darkness, one began to reflect upon the sound inherent in a text, and upon the degrees of obfuscation that 'speaking

out' can provoke. It could be argued that Parry's *The Two Of Us* used sound as a semi-transparent screen, superimposed on a subtle, underlying, silent written text, and that LaBelle's piece, though mostly silent, was haunted by the sound of its own making. The notion of silent sound was later picked up by David Toop, who referred to the silent monologue that occurs when we read, and to the unspoken connective tissue that exists between text as an image, a score – in this case, the scores he had used earlier on, in the live performance with the Unknown Devices laptop orchestra in the Turbine Hall – and music as an afterthought.

A rapturous flow of sounds, in Trevor Wishart's *Glossolia*, was built from a massive archive of syllables into a mutating aural palimpsest at the border of what you believe you are hearing, what you want to hear, and how you hear. What is the role of literacy in listening, and how can one find a path across the urgency of speech?

There remains an uncertain point, about the layers of meaning manifested, embedded or kept hidden in the spoken word. The Futurists' call for 'parole in libertà' (words in freedom) mentioned at the beginning of the symposium – championing the immediacy of speech as opposed to mediated written text – is not a pre-eminent issue today, when the spoken word is in fact a mediated, half-broken illusion of immediacy. Bergvall's concluding comment, to never forget the historical sense that words carry within and shift around, and Parry's argument on the necessity of reflecting upon semantics while engaging at once with the direct emotion that the sound of speech conveys, leaves many issues open with regard to the initial topic: which, and whose words are to be liberated, and from the boundaries of what linguistic, social, cultural territories? In closing the discussion with open questions and further complexity, *Speaking Out* was indeed a successful point of departure.

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