

Hello! Sound, voice, and connection

A report by Heather Nicol

A report on the cross disciplinary experiment conducted by visual artist Heather Nicol, working with a group of voice and theatre artists hosted by Nightswimming's Pure Research.

Introduction and fundamental question: My work uses materials such as sound, light and surveillance equipment in combination with tactile materials like fabric and paper. Theatrical devices have been part my vocabulary, reflecting my observations on artifice, illusion and voyeurism.

I am interested in the way sound resonates when juxtaposed with objects and materials outside of our typical repertoire for listening. Without a conventional stage or live actors, and without familiar narrative or musical structures, is there a will to listen? How can voice be employed as a vehicle for discourse on social expectations, on desire, on control, on anxiety?

My practice, like that of many visual artists, is relatively solitary. Despite a complex web of influences and resources, most experimentation, decision-making, and production occurs without the direct participation of others. I am interested in questions of process. How does an artist whose background has involved using inanimate materials, which can be stretched, layered, reformatted or discarded without any regard for their contributions or feelings translate her practice to include a "human resource"? How can this exchange expand or alter that practice, or the practices of the participants?

Specific Inquiries:

- 1) What happens to how we hear / what we hear when the source is invisible? Much of theatre involves watching the live source of sound in the form of actors and their actions. When the prime focus is other than watching the sound being made, do we hear differently?
- 2) What does connection sound like? How do we feel or identify it? What is it that we hear on recorded material that reveals interaction, actual connection, and response? What does isolation sound like in subtle terms?
- 3) How can sounds be emotionally intense and honest, without being ridiculous or cliché? Can humour fit in?
- 4) How can repetitive phrases or clips, uttered in seemingly different contexts, explore our multifaceted identities? With the constant, fast paced bombardment of sounds and images from the media, can repetition be used to slow down the process of receiving information, of listening? How do these current influences on attention span impact on work that employs repetition?

Parameters, boundaries, limitations:

Voice, by its very nature, is linked with communication, and therefore brings certain elements into play that must be addressed. The profound human desire for narrative must be considered. Without words, the mind scans sounds to detect the meaning of utterances, or to categorize what the voice may be imitating. When language is introduced, a host of issues surrounding identity must be considered. The choice of language spoken, by whose voice or voices, and who is included (excluded) are just a few of the questions with implications in racial, gender, socioeconomic and other social constructs. How will these hierarchies influence my work? Is it possible to use voice as a vehicle without these issues dominating?

Another aspect of inquiry addresses roles within the cross disciplinary exchange. As paid professionals, what were the boundaries / expectations for the actors involved? How would their attitudes, desires and contributions impact the flow of experimentation? More specifically, to what extent should the “artist” maintain control, where should collaboration take precedent, and within this flow, how is authorship / signature addressed outside of a traditional theatrical production wherein roles are defined.

Voice in isolation, voice as connector

My desired use for voice is as an element of a multimedia object or installation. Isolating voice from the body poses an altered terrain for “performance” wherein the physical manifestations of character can be discarded. I am interested in the moments of transference between various (possibly opposite) states, for instance, between falling and flying. By shedding the need for physical representation, I am interested in both the actor’s and the listener / viewer’s exploration of tensions, connection points and the fluidity that may exist in the absence of a fully (physically) realized performance.

The experiments:

Non-verbal sounds: We began each day without words, making a wide variety of sounds within a circle. This framework allowed for listening, responding, and the blending of sounds. From a perspective of beauty, this circle work was quite wondrous. My objective was to release the voice from language, musical structure, or imitating existing sounds in nature. It served to develop a group dynamic, and explore the range of sounds in the room. A huge range of subtle relationships evolved; the human tendencies to mimic, echo, override, hold back and fit were in all in play.

The flying / falling experiment: Flight has been a longstanding theme in my work, and the underbelly of that, the fall, and the notion of shifting between these states interests me at this time. Flight may bring to mind freedom, Peter Pan and the fantasy of soaring through the air, a bird’s eye view, airplanes, travel and espionage. Falling ranges from pleasure (the dive into clear water) to terror and death, or to sinking. Epilepsy was known as “falling sickness” in the 17th Century, and lack of control might be an aspect of either falling or flying. Some form of floating, or suspension, could be a transition point between these states.

My work evolves through an intense attraction toward something. Earlier on it was tactile materials, with their particular connotations or associations that I would manipulate and explore

and eventually create work with. As light and then sound have been added to my repertoire, this approach has become more complicated, but has remained intuitive and haptic at its core. This experiment was challenging to me, because I was working with groups of professional people I do not know, somewhat in the role of “director”, yet with a process located outside the discipline of theatre or performance. I did not have a specific outcome I could inspire the actors to unveil, but rather was needing the somewhat more tedious process of repetition and time to experience a new material, in this instance, specific types of voice sounds. Was it possible / (OK) to immerse myself in a somewhat inexplicable attraction, attempting to glean meaning from it, when it required the input and time of others? Had I been teaching or leading a workshop, I would certainly have diverted toward aspects that seemed more fun or interesting to the group. Part of the experiment was maintaining a self-oriented focus while working with people.

Pattern with language: This series of experiments explored repetition as a way of identifying our multifaceted lives, where different contexts for the same words revealed different aspects of self. It was also a means to look at our desire for connection and approval, and for love, and the anxiety these desires can evoke. We isolated the act of greeting as a scenario in which different cultures; genders, ages and attitudes could connect or collide. The actors wrote lines that we edited down to a select few for each session. Multiple meetings and greetings created layers, mirroring the anxiety of new situations, interviews, auditions, and dating. The desire for connection when expressed as blatantly as personals ads or speed-dating hones our practice of creating and editing our personas, hoping for acceptance while striving to assert who we are.

I was struck by both the awkwardness and unexpected poetry of these games. Resisting full-blown stories by limiting the choice of words for each invented “character” introduced a level of tension that interested me. It risked being boring at times, but by pushing through I was exploring how to underline the awkwardness and tension without the entertaining aspect of narrative drama. We explored very rapid exchanges, a variety of language crossings, poor telephone connections and/ or misunderstandings, flirtation and come-ons, and mock encounters of a wide variety. All of this provided me great food for thought as I explore ways to address themes of isolation, connection and desire.

Roles: While no specific “experiment” was created to explore this part of my inquiry, it was central in my thinking. Discussions regarding credit, authorship, “copyright”, constraints and possible final uses of recorded material were held each day. With the breakdown of traditional roles within the arts, and the merging of forms, structures for the artistic input and acknowledgement of all involved are called into question. I want to experiment with the recorded material with the same open ended process I have enjoyed with other materials, yet to recognize the artistry of the actors. Almost all of the actors agreed that they’d like credit, outside of the pay they received, but without an established playbill, film credit roll or record cover, how should a visual artist handle this, especially in a smaller, discreet sound object not seen in the context of a solo exhibition? Appropriation, sampling and outsourcing production are common, as well as a huge range of collaborations. In film and theatre, and to a large extent in music, all participants are noted, while the visual arts tend to only identify the “artist”. This may be a holdover from a clichéd vision of the lonely artist, and gallery and collecting structures for valuing art may have an indirect influence as well. How should artist’s fees or the sale of a piece be handled? Another thorny issue was the prospect of an artist using an actor’s voice juxtaposed or edited in ways the actor might dislike. These are interesting areas for further exploration.

Throughout this experiment I tried to be mindful of what I was indeed seeking, and attempted to maintain the focus on my own desires. At the same time, it felt challenging to me to assert my will when there was no specific outcome I could insist on (as in interpreting a play), but rather a process based on intuition and the repetitive manipulation of material. It brought to mind questions about authority, authorship, and from a feminist perspective, my desire to create comfort among people. Within the isolated confines of my studio, there is a luxury of privacy in which experimentation can occur without anyone there to judge or comment. When working with people, bringing that vulnerability, awkwardness, and repetition into a group was challenging and fascinating at the same time.

Further thoughts and questions:

Examining the complexity of boundaries and roles in a cross-disciplinary experiment like this is like opening a can of worms. Currently so few visual artists acknowledge the participation of others that to do so signifies an endeavor wherein the artist is assumed to have forfeited control over much, or a specified area, of the project to a collaborative authorship. Structures or norms for crediting may evolve in visual art practices with the increase of inter-disciplinary work.

Collecting a wide range of vocal material, for future listening and possible use in edited form, was also a complicated act in that some of what was given, or even all of it, may be discarded, while some small snippet may become central to a project at some future date. How am I to remember, or even recognize, whose voice becomes part of a new work? My tactile process has involved collecting a wide range of materials, which are then played with, sorted, filtered and reduced into a final work. The collecting of something as intangible as a range of voices on tape as a potential art material could become a logistical nightmare. As I delve further into this, I see that I need to find participants who recognize this, and who are comfortable crossing the boundary into the world of an object / installation maker, where their vocal contributions become a potential material in my repertoire, where no set “performance” is on the horizon, and credit will be handled dependant on the situation at hand. I have acknowledged participants in a wide range of instances, whenever reasonable, but in truth, some things simply merge and blend with a host of other materials to become a new thing, a Heather Nicol thing. The work of the fabric designer, the hand of the glass blower, creators of beads or other materials... these “voices” are also part of an assemblage of textures and meanings in my work.

Conclusions in Progress

Listening to nonverbal soundmaking in the larger groups was wonderful, with a wide range of associations woven through the soundcores without a specific theme or message dominating. It served the purpose of the group dynamic well, yet it lacked some of the more specific elements that I am seeking for the discourses of my work.

Working with the notion of transition between states (falling - flying) was challenging and fun. It was noticeable how easily the listening mind slots sounds into known categories. Finding intense non-verbal sounds without sexual or wild animal associations was challenging. It was surprising how difficult it was for both the actors as well as me, the listener, to escape the drive for narrative and familiarity. Yet at random moments, more frequent as we practiced, subtly and mystery

entered into the sound textures, intense emotion without a tale attached. My observations of non narrative (abstract) sounds are:

- 1) the mind scans sound information to categorize and process it.
- 2) the first impulses when narration is hard to locate are frustration, tension, or / or dismissal (for irrelevance). Curiosity is also an option.
- 3) that sounds generated from deeper in the belly of the actors, whether loud or soft, seem to communicate emotion best when words are absent.

Working with repetition had some of the same issues as the directed non-verbal experiments: the thwarting of our inclination to listen for narrative. The key exploration is how to bring intensity and resonance without the easy access of narrative. The juxtaposition of the limited words with the subject of greetings / introductions / come-ons felt like very ripe territory for me. The way that the voices crossed over, interrupting or stopping short, struggling for ease in unfamiliar territory, seemed to illustrate the tension between the act of listening (passive), and speaking (assertive). I was struck by the sense of effort these actors conveyed, sometime so futile, to be seen and heard. I noticed that the cross-cultural word play brought to mind the commonality of the desire for love, the awkwardness of new connections, and the ongoing and cyclical nature of our need to reach out.

The sound of connection is indeed extremely delicate and intangible. While direct language can convey it, there is distraction and seduction in the story, limiting the ability to isolate the notions of desire, acceptance, or misunderstanding. Deconstructing and isolating these issues for use in a multimedia work will continue to be my goal. Limited and repetitive language, or non-verbal expression are devices I will continue explore.

As of the date of this writing, I have not created a new work surrounding this experiment, but the experience still resonates within me. I was inspired by the range and depth in texture, emotion and intelligence that the actors brought to the process. I am grateful for their hard work, and to Nightswimming's support and engagement in my process.