
VIEWS

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THE ANATOMY OF VOICE: TWO VIEWS ON THE EXHIBITION *POST-OPERA*

(“Tent” Gallery and “V2_Lab for the Unstable Media”,
Rotterdam, April 19 – June 30 and May 3–26 2019)¹

Abstract: In this paper we discuss the exhibition *Post-Opera*, a complex and provocative curatorial project by Kris Dittel and Jelena Novak, in which the changeable relations between the voice and the (human) body are investigated from the creative and

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the theoretical perspectives, relying on juxtaposing and reflection between visual arts, technology and opera. Firstly, in the paper we examine the curatorial procedure, in its shift from the mediatory function between the work and the audience towards the practice, which intervenes in both of these domains and results in an exhibition as an autonomous art object. In the second part we interpret the politics and the effectiveness of the singing and the speaking voice in contemporary art and culture, while in the third part we write about the resemantization of the relation between the singing body and the sung voice within 'installing the operatic'.

Keywords: opera, post-opera, operatic, voice, body, singing machines

The exhibition *Post-Opera* is conceived and realized as a complex and provocative curatorial project that strived to investigate the ambiguous and changeable relationships between the voice and the (human) body, quite neglected in art theory until recently. It did so by bringing forward the juxtapositions and reflections between visual arts, technology and opera. In the process of their mutual networking the voice was posited as the exclusive signifier of the 'operaticness' of the opera itself, and the quality of voice and the body as equal in the process of the production of meaning. Having gathered both artists and art theorists, the exhibition *Post-Opera* provided the creative and the theoretical answers to the question "what is there/what remains outside of/after opera?", at the same time interrogating the discursive ramifications and the economy between these domains in contemporary culture and the art world. Since opera was set as the privileged point of departure for rethinking the voice-body relationship, it was omnipresent within this exhibition, disregarding the quality and the quantity of the traces which were left *after* it was first disassembled and taken apart and afterwards re-actualized in ways which leave the visitors all but indifferent, by means of different media and technological interventions and discursive strategies, within particular artistic poetics and theoretical platforms.

The exhibition *Post-Opera* is the result of a joint author-curator's work signed by the art historian Kris Dittel and the musicologist and the theorist of opera and media Jelena Novak. It included several segments which differed both in regard to their genre and media presentation: the staging of the exhibition in the gallery, periodical 'live activations' inside the exhibition space or in selected 'open' city locations, performances, a vocal workshop and a symposium. The main exhibition site was the "Tent" gallery – the symbol of urban Rotterdam culture, which is programmatically committed to contem-

porary art. The second exhibition site was the interdisciplinary center for art and technology “V2_Lab for the Unstable Media”.

The central and permanent part of the whole event assembled twelve works. All but one were exhibited in the “Tent” gallery. The majority consisted of sound/visual/multimedia installations commissioned specially for *Post-Opera: Scores for Rotterdam* by Mercedes Azpilicueta and John Bingham-Hall, *a love poem* by Franck Leibovici, *The Audition* by Tom Johnson performed at the *Singing Machine* (2010–2013) by Martin Riches, *Opera of Things* by Jasna Veličković, *Reading ‘Europe, Where Have You Misplaced Love?’* by Katarina Zdjelar and *Swarming Chants* by Jan Adriaans. Two works were selected from the current artistic production: the interactive sculpture *A Truly Magical Moment* (2016) by Adam Basanta and three-dimensional animation *No Man II* (2017) by Ho Tzu Nyen. The staging of the exhibition also included four drawings/illustrations/engravings dating from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth century.

The sound part of the installations was produced in three ways. For one group of works (Azpilicueta/Bingham-Hall and Veličković) it relied on the pre-ordered sequence adapted to the way the visitors walk through the gallery space. In the second group of works, the sound part was activated periodically either by the host, according to the number of visitors gathered (Riches/Johnson) or by the visitor her/himself when she/he would directly start the interactive sculpture (Basanta). In the third group of works the sound was continually broadcasted through headphones (Zdjelar, Leibovici) or loudspeakers (Nyen). Furthermore, some installations (Azpilicueta/Bingham-Hall, Riches/Johnson, Veličković, Adriaans) had their own ‘live activations’ several times during the exhibition, as it has already been said.

The exhibition *Post-Opera* also included performances, presenting *Bird-BecomeBird* by Suzanne Walsh, *How we learn the old songs* by Paul Elliman, *Solo Acoustic Performance* by Janneke van der Putten and *Empty Orchestra* by Urok Shirhan. In this segment the exhibition also incorporated the vocal workshop *Juicing Your Hole* by Geo Wyeth. The one day symposium *Installing the Voice* (May 18) provided an explicit theoretical voice to the presented artworks.² Theorists as well as some of the artists, whose works were a part of the exhibition program, took part in the symposium. By imprinting itself on the just twenty-year long history of voice studies, the symposium had the goal, as the title suggests, “to make the voice manifest, give it a place, put it into position, and set it up for analysis or experimentation”.

² The symposium was organized in collaboration with Operadagen Rotterdam.

The exhibition *Post-Opera* consisted of heterogeneous elements activated in various ways and in various contexts, but it was not conceived as an event which each visitor had to experience as a whole. The curators counted on each visitor to make her/his own choice from the displayed content. We visited the opening evening of this exhibition in the “Tent” gallery, so we had the opportunity to directly experience only one part of it. On the basis of our direct impressions, as well as of subsequently observing several video recordings of ‘live’ performances, in this text we shall present our views on three key issues set in motion by the exhibition.

The curator as an artist / the exhibition as a form of art.

The curatorial procedure of the exhibition *Post-Opera* continues the high modernist and postmodernist interpretations of the relationship between the artwork and the technical-organizational conditions of its existence in the art-world today. Contrary to the traditional understanding of the role of the curator, who manages the space around the finished artwork ‘from the outside’ and offers it, in relation with other chosen artefacts, to a certain social group as a cultural value, Dittel and Novak acted ‘from within’ and the very process of the exhibition’s birth, realization and presentation conceived in a way which enabled them to intervene in both domains. By relating the works selected from the current production and newly created commissioned works, the curators partly acted as mediators between the work and the audience in terms of the interpretation and organization of exhibiting the artwork. At the same time, by offering the platform for approaching the post-operatic art-world and culture, they also acted as conceptual catalysts of the creative process itself: having responded to the given thematic and problem coordinates of the exhibition, the artists (also) worked out the poetics of the exhibition itself as a specific artistic superstructure – the autonomous object presented to the audience.

Fully aware of the danger of an overly subjective interpretation of that object based on our own (musical) point of view, we could say that the exhibition had certain musical features as well, not only because each of its constituent parts, simply said, ‘sounded’. Its internal sound texture was polyphonic and aleatoric, because the visitor as an active participant (performer?) had the opportunity, according to the possibilities predicted by the curators, to ‘turn on’ or ‘turn off’ certain vocal parts, thereby determining the density of that texture and the duration of individual parts, all that on top of a specific six-hour long bourdon, which is the duration of the 3D animation by Ho Tzu

Nyen. For the visitor this aleatoric polyphony was aesthetical fiction, but it is by all means ingrained in the method by which the exhibition was conceived.

The performance program and 'live activations' of the exhibited works within the gallery space provided a special performative dimension to that object. They additionally problematized, in the presentation of contemporary art, the ever more present practice that galleries literally take the performing arts under their own wing although they are initially neither conceived nor organized as their primary spaces. Thereby, this exhibition also investigated the relationship between the curator as an artist, the artist as a performer and the institution which enables these roles. For all the described reasons, the curatorial procedure in the exhibition *Post-Opera* was not based on a mere gesture of equality between the act of selection and the act of creation, but on the profound self-reflection of the exhibition process as much as on the creative and the performing process itself. That procedure showed not only that the relationship between these categories is not simple and unequivocal, but that it can be raised to the level of the poetical, as well as the methodological principle of the curatorial work as an artistic work.

In conceiving the exhibition as a specific form of art, the gallery space had a very important role. It was all but neutral. The traditional 'white cube', which radically suspends the spatial-temporal references of the artwork, was replaced by individualized visual solutions which, by means of their own characteristic features, entered into a signifying game between the work and its receiver. The curators reckoned with the tripartite nature of that relationship; they reckoned with the fact that the gallery is not only the necessary physical frame within which the visitor moves, but that the interaction between the visitor and the surrounding space is constitutive in the production of meaning. For example, the installation *Scores for Rotterdam* – the gallery translation of voice experiments recorded at selected Rotterdam sites (the metro station Wilhelminapier, the Maastunnel and the concrete forest beneath the railway viaduct at Mevlanaplein) – was placed on the ground floor of the building. One of the walls of this room contained windows stretching from the floor to the ceiling (Photograph 1). Therefore, the installation was (also) visible from the outside, literally from the street of the city sites and their voices were translated to the gallery context by means of the artistic gesture. The border between these two realities, the gallery, artistic one, on the one side of the glass, and the everyday city, on the other, was especially porous. Passing through the invisible bodies 'dressed' in textile while simultaneously so clearly present, available to the sense of hearing due to the voice

they emitted, the visitor could also look outside the gallery, into the visible but inaudible bodies (also dressed in textile) only to receive the same glance back as belonging to the place it originated from. Voices without bodies and bodies without voices separated (or connected?) in the insecurity and ambivalence of their joint existence carry strong messages. Disturbing, even. They invite the visitors to reflect on the visibility and audibility of their own (in)secure and (un)equivocal existence, as well as on the voice as the privileged signifier of that existence.

Contrary to the described exposure of architecture and voices of the city, the multimedia installation *a love poem* by Franck Leibovici was set in almost complete darkness cut up by large hanging white canvases containing selected pages of the score (Photograph 2). The lighting was connected to individual music stands, which could be activated by the visitors, at will. The whole construction resembled a sound recording studio: music stands with scores on them, headphones, white gloves, small lamps and a hanging construction for the electricity supply. Here, the gallery space did not only function as the visitors' surroundings, but also as a specific defamiliarized scene. Namely, when the visitor approached the installation, turned on the lamp and put on



Photograph 1: Mercedes Azpilicueta & John Bingham-Hall, *Scores for Rotterdam* (2019), installation with sound, photo by Aad Hoogendoorn

the headphones, she/he would have in front of her/him the score created according to a highly provoking source (an amateur online porn video) and hear its performance – the vocalizations and the sounds of breathing. The contrast between the ‘cold’ technical elements, on the one hand, and the ‘hot’ textual and audio content, on the other, made the whole installation a very special experience. At the same time, the recipient would become a part of the installation: the one who is being looked at, while in the dark she/he reads and listens to *a love song*. All that, together with other visitors, who would, standing by other available music stands, join in the same game.

Here the manner of defamiliarization was conceived as a double game of reflections and their respective hierarchies: porn as the omnipresent, normalized *love* context of today with its cacophony of bodily sounds and the ‘intoning’ of lust, and the re-sounding or the distance of opera as the historical model delivered to the listener through the auditory media of the pornography. Going ‘behind the scenes’ or the disassembling of pleasure, its transformation into the musical language, also meant the employment of concrete, highly specialized techniques of scholarly and artistic work, such as the use



Photograph 2: Franck Leibovici, *a love poem* (2019), multimedia installation, photo by Aad Hoogendoorn

of classical musical notation and ethnomusicological diacritics (in order to write down specific inflections, microtones, the 'agogics' of sex) or the visual suggestion of 'following' the score (sighs, mumbling, cries, meaningful pauses) during the listening, which is a skill musicians possess – exactly the same as sex, passion and arousal become technical skills which are practiced by learning and perfecting in the cold, radiant contexts of porn productions, but also in the assembled, craving 'immediacy' of sharing the amateur recording of sex, an almost panicky 'simulation after simulation'. Leibovici's work urges us to wonder about the dominant forms of listening in the early twenty-first century where we can – without stepping from the intimacy of our own room – actually take a step in *any* soundscape, be it historical, pop, seductively exotic, ancient. It seems that a voyeur simulation of the *presence* is lurking in that kind of listening, just like in the case with the 'reality' of a mediated *sex tape*. If, in the end, the score represents the translation of something quasi-intimate and unrepeatable in the technical and the notated, the technical-repetitive aspect of the recorded sexual act is simultaneously translated into an intimate homeboundness of the 'love song' in the trained voice (in the shift from the 'amateur' actor to the 'professional' singer), so these two categories appeared, a bit ironically, but in a certain sense profoundly, as fragile, interwoven and insecure, susceptible to time and fundamentally eroded by new ontologies of the visual and the auditory. The last, theoretical intervention with regard to this relationship was performed by framing the installation within the exhibition, where the darkness and the screen intended for one's solitary act of listening and observing, additionally reinforced the tension between the festive and the ironic, the affect hidden in the body and the simulation of the affect by the skilled operatic voice, the intimacy of the act of condensed listening and the extimacy of the *seen* (heard) sex, but also: the singing, the opera, the voice itself.

The domains of voice in contemporary art and culture.

One could clearly glimpse how the concept of the exhibition intended to question the *delivery* of the singing and the speaking voice, or the politicality / agency of the voice in the contemporary society and the media culture of over-stylized, polished, heavily processed *chants* of today. How does the voice work, then, as an intervention, representation, warning, especially bearing in mind its new, almost-perfect and mediated coat of immediate presence and hyperaesthetization? The video work by Katarina Zdjelar *Reading 'Europe Where Have You Misplaced Love?'* examines the possibility that in the interstice between singing and chanting, sounding of the poetic text and vo-

cal amplification of the experience of marginalization and hard consequences of identity politics, a question regarding belonging and rejecting could be posed. This question also tackles the present crisis of the ‘fortress of Europe’ and highlights the marked position of the Other who does not stay mute, but who speaks out, criticizes, ironically questions. “Europe, every day white people spit after us on the subway. They seriously believe that the seats are their birthright. [...] Mina and Bahar have left, I don’t think they’ll come back.” An *open letter* by Swedish poet Athena Farrokhzad addressed to Europe, confronts a well-known *imago* of Europe as a noble figure at the front of the progress of humanity, with the unsettling scenes of the drowned migrants on the shores of Mediterranean, the new rise of fascism and rejection on the basis of religion, ethnicity and race, while the spectre of Rosa Luxemburg “whispers that she is freezing”. In an almost Derridean reading, Europe is presented as a mythical virgin whose body has been worn out, and whose potential for identity and political multivocality is just to be gambled away.³ This lyrical epistle by Farrokhzad is a powerful testimony of an unfulfilled promise, where the suppressed Others reveal themselves in their fullness, bitterness and rage. The relation of singing voices in the film by Zdjelar and the voices stemming from the poem’s excerpt could be labeled as intertextual and complex, as it relies on the ‘singing out’ of those various voices from the margins, on reaching towards the Other without the intention of labeling her/him in accordance to some fixed identity. Zdjelar’s work also relies on improvisation, murmuring, an instant synergy of musicians whose spontaneous ‘rehearsal’ in fact, gets to be made into an inscription, a performance interspersed by occasional scenes of children’s playing. The music defies the fixture, as it crosses from short melodic motives in the instrumental parts to the repetition of one single tone that briefly sounds like an ostinato, and then becomes like a hint or a shadow of a melodic *finalis* with an upper minor second, as a possible allusion to the musically ‘exotic’. But already in the next step, the music melts into a disturbing association on warning sirens, and then grows into a buzzing block of dissonances when the singer enters and starts to toy with the phrase “I don’t think”. Once more, it eludes the fixed reading when the melody changes into

³ “Maybe her name carries something that has no face yet? We hope, fear and tremble – what is she going to look like? [...] Is that the *person* Europe that we think we know?” (Jacques Derrida, *L’autre cap /Drugi pravac/*, transl. by Iva Nenić, Beograd, LAPIS, 1995, 10). Almost thirty years later after Derrida wrote this, Farrokhzad and Zdjelar basically repeat the same questions, only made acute by the different crises that subsequently came, without any dissolving point.

something like a song with a guitar's accompaniment that hints the major / modal scale, and then it becomes scattered again, in a form of a whisper, trying out, almost like a quiet noise of the pre-symbolic. Here it is worth noting how Lacanian philosopher Mladen Dolar explains the political and ideological dimension of the voice as the presence that evades (identity, the logic of appropriation): "It is the voice which does not say anything, and the voice which cannot be said. It is the silent voice of an appeal, a call, an appeal to respond, to assume one's stance as the subject."⁴ The layers of a singer's voice that buzzes, becomes stronger and then collapses into reciting textual fragments, singing without words, short recitatives and sighs, scattered indistinct sounds created by the creaking on the bodies of musical instruments, rhythmic 'ticking' on the cajon, together serve as a fleeting sign of the identity's evasion, of trauma and deprivation. These musical gestures approach matters of belonging not only in a political sense, but also with regard to the essential irreducibility of self and the impossibility to fully project the inner self into a firm collective identity, while simultaneously offering the occupation of a subject's position from the stance of the Other, through an injured, but own *loudness*, the substantiality of an evasive voice.

The visual part of the exhibition also suggests an interesting reading of the political dimension of the voice, by offering insights into certain historical approaches to listening and *hearing*, and on different mechanical prosthetics and machines that were meant to launch the sound from the place of its origin, in a literal and metaphorical sense. The displayed drawing by a Jesuit scholar, Athanasius Kircher, shows a device in a spiral shape (*cochleato*), a gigantic mechanical nautilus that connects the public square with the private chambers and brings the sound from the outside to a particular listener in his private space (a hall). This illustration was published in Kircher's renowned book *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians/Musurgia Universalis* (1650), a voluminous work that treats the phenomenon of sound in a post-scholastic way, typical of the 17th century, by making a detailed inventory of the anatomy, history, aesthetics and metaphysics of musical sound and the sounds of nature. This book also carries the early seeds of the scientific approach to music, and anticipates the obsession with mechanical sound machines that was about to take Europe by storm. In Kircher's drawing, the voice of the public is shown in a frozen moment of transfer between the space of *agora* and private chambers,

⁴ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge (MA) and London, The MIT Press, 124.

where the ruler has the exclusive privilege of eavesdropping on his subjects, but also of listening to the cacophony of sounds coming from outside. The 'output' that emits the gathered sound is drawn in the shape of a human statue that directly enunciates to the person of authority who has a privilege to listen. Kircher further developed the conception of this anthropomorphic automaton in his work *Phonurgia nova*, where he labeled *statua citofonica*. Placed in the current context of the omnipresence (and the illusion of 'owning') the 'world's sound' in the age of the Internet, this specific baroque linking of science and magic acquires new implications.⁵ Firstly, this faraway image of the sound automaton that transfers information (but also amuses) looks both innocent and ominous, when observed through the lenses of the technological clamour of the twenty-first century where the questions of the origin and the way of transmission of sound are habitually put aside by the mechanical act of consuming and without the possibility of verification of the sources. What does this warning consist of? Mostly, it refers to a call that the idea of the 'presence' of voice should be rethought, by raising the question of credibility of that which is heard, and whose invisible channels, twisted pathways and 'tubes' on a microscale, we habitually perceive as an authentic, accurate presence in a phenomenological, aesthetic, as well as in a political sense. Secondly, this drawing forces us to confront the uncanny sight of the disembodied voice, voice as an object, but also: to confront the impossibility of reaching the Other by a mere act of listening. Or, to again use Dolar's words: "If there is an empty space in which the voice resonates, then it is only the void of the Other, the Other as a void. The voice comes back to us through the loop of the Other, and what comes back to us from the Other is the pure alterity of what is said, that is, the voice."⁶ The curatorial intervention in the form of confronting Kircher's depiction of the automaton that 'gathers' and amplifies the outer sound with the new sound machines that emit the voice at the exhibition, has several layers. Firstly, it is a display of an excerpt that documents the centuries-long craving to disassemble the voice, to transmit it and mechanically copy it. Then, it is an inquiry regarding the status of the voice-object, as a leitmotif that the whole exhibition relies on, and that strongly supports its theoretical framework. Finally, it is a warning that we are not always prone to

⁵ Cf.: Lamberto Tronchin et al., "The marvellous sound world in the 'Phonurgia Nova' of Athanasius Kircher", *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 123(5), 2008, 4187.

⁶ Mladen Dolar, op. cit., 160.

critically approach the surveillance and manipulation (of voice) in the context of being a citizen, and that is a fact that must be taken into account in the context of the macro-infiltration of informational technology into everyday life, and especially in the light of the upcoming, even closer relations of bodies and machines that lurk on the horizon.

The audio installation and performance by Jan Adriaans deals with the affective and political qualities of the *collective* sound. If the voice was depicted as isolated and individualized in the works by Zdjelar and Kircher in regard of its emission and reception, Adriaans's installation *Swarming chants* aims to cut into the sonic pulsing of the large and spontaneous collectives and to highlight the relational nature of identity, by taking the sound of football fans' groups from various spots and then recombining that material into a sound object that gently sways without particular local, political and cultural references. In concordance with the thesis of the nature of 'multitude' in the biopolitical sense of a collective agency and subjectivity, Adriaans chooses to depict the sound of football crowds as the manifestation of a 'hive' logic, where individuality recedes, as a separate entity (a person) becomes a part of the manifold 'body without extremities'. The particularity of the individual voice dissipates, and the knowledge of the fact that the fans' repertoires are a specific bricolage of local and global fragments of pop culture, hymns, patriotic songs, children's chants, even some operatic excerpts, also starts to fade away. Instead, the gathered sound is treated as pure matter stripped of its original semantics that could be further molded and listened to in a different way. From the far standpoint of a distant observer, this chanting, humming, swaying looks like the almost rueful sounding of a massified social body that reaches us in an acousmatic manner, as a wave, the delocalized sound of a *swarm*, while the details of quarrels, political gestures and identity matters remain aside and those large structures that we either willingly or involuntarily throw ourselves into, become slowly visible. In a certain sense, a montage within Adriaans' work relates to the overall concept of the exhibition, because the use of the voice in/around/with regard to opera also can be observed from the 'top-down' position as a pattern or an interplay of several artistic outputs that are related in a (possible) configuration of the post-operatic, in a synthetic, playful and theoretically productive manner.

That today's collectives also rely on the displacement of the voice in the digital culture was the topic of a multimedia 3D installation *No man II* (2017) by Ho Tzu Nyen, with a digitally crafted choir made of almost fifty human,

humanoid and post-human beings singing together. The animation was projected onto a large mirror glass that almost drew the spectator into the artist's 'secondary world' based on hybridized patterns of mythology and popular culture. If the work that was previously discussed started from the 'dehumanizing' of a human collective, here we see virtual people, anatomical figures, cyborgs, animals and chimeras with the hints of mythical, ethnic, racial and other origin, seemingly randomly gathered from the different corners of virtual worlds. They are shown as an integral part of the everyday, as our extensions scattered through history and through world cultures that demand to be recognized as a part of the humanity. Based on the immortal words of John Donne ("No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main..."), their singing consists of a prominent female vocal part, a dialogue of a female and male singer with a hint of a tonality, and also of a dense and freely treated choral texture that is solemnly delivered in a slow tempo. The work includes the artist's own point of view since it questions the placement of his own culture (Asian, Singaporean) in the world's context, and that can be observed in certain visual remarks, as well as in textual interventions (the word 'Europe' from Donne's lyrics was replaced with the word 'Malaya', an old name for a historical federation that once included Singapore). *No man II* calls for the reconsideration of the ways that we fictionalize, create, *narrate* different collectivities – at the very closure of the performance, the listener also appears as a reflection among the artificial singers in the mirror.

The singing body / the sung voice as an exhibition object: opera is on the stage (again)!

There is also a certain longing in the way in which opera, as the starting point of the whole exhibition, reached the visitors. Its departure from the institutional borders of the opera house and its entrance into the field of visual art, a specific 'installing of the operatic',⁷ took place along with the radical fragmentation and partial liquidation of its traditional elements. By focusing on the ventriloquist gap between the singing body and the sung voice, between that which is heard and which is seen on the opera stage and stepping, in the process of rethinking that relation, into the field of the automatized and/or technologically generated post- or transhuman world, the presented works have excitingly rethought the critical point of resemantization of the relationship between these two elusive, but for opera nevertheless constitutive elements,

⁷ Novak, Jelena, *Operofilia*, Beograd, Orion Art, 2018, 75–97.

as that which “makes the opera operatic”.⁸ That disassembled machine, whose voices become independent from the original source, simultaneously looking for the sound resonance and the sympathetic vibration of other surrounding audible and inaudible bodies, as well as for a compassionate emotion of its former listener-observer, brought – in a nostalgic reflection of its own ‘grandiose’ past – several interesting reinvestigations of the co-belonging and (de) synchronization of the voice and the body.

In Janeke van der Putten’s performance one finds a triologue between the voice which has already been produced and returns to its sender with the information both about itself and about the physical aspects of the performing space, the voice which is at the given moment in the process of transition, and the resonant body of the performer as the source and the recipient of sound. She moves within the space, listens as her voice travels and tries to detect what kind of message it returns to her and improvises monophonic and two-part vocalizations that sound human at one moment and completely dehumanized at the other, liberated from every direct referentiality. To say that this performance is virtuoso would completely miss the object, but the listening experience is very intensive: the voices which multiply the life pulse of their primary source, dispersing through space and filling it with almost tangible sonorous density, like an acoustic version of an electronic looping, the voices which at the same time sound out otherwise inaudible concrete walls thereby giving life to the non-living, exist on the magical horizon of reality and magic. Like human life itself, after all.

Exploring the border between the human body and the voice belonging to it, on the one hand, and the transformation, transposition and identification of that voice with the referentiality of non-human voices – animal (bird) in Suzanne Walsh’s performance and signal sounds of emergency vehicles in Paul Elliman’s work – on the other, reflected on how that border is not only thin, susceptible to intervention from the outside. And how intensive the human sensory experience of that intervention is. In Suzanne Walsh’s performance, the rethinking of that border served to rethink the music itself. The performance includes the layering of audio materials (electronic sound, voice improvisations and musical phrases) in the unambiguously *musical* unfolding, starting from angel-like polyphonic euphony of the conjunct motion of female voices, through the gradual transformation of the human voice into bird chirruping and various *concertante* dialogues between the bird-like

⁸ Jelena Novak, “Opersko (operatic), predlog za definisanje pojma”, in: *Ibid.*, 75–78.

chamber ensemble and the human/animal voice, to the texturally saturated twittering, cackling, cries, like the decisive utterance “I am (also) music!”. In Paul Elliman’s work the musical structure is also clear. It consists of the introductory solo, duet in the outer, and ensemble with the singled out soloist in the middle segment. The complex network of meanings of this work is woven on the basis of intentional gaps between the sound, the picture and the event, on the one hand, and unexpected correspondences which emerge between them, on the other. Emancipated from all ‘standard’ techniques which bring to light the mechanism and the ‘vascularization’ of the vocal apparatus of their host, the human voices are transformed into dehumanized machines: into howling sirens in which referentiality is everything but simple. The voice of the machine comes from the human body. But that voice is heard only when it comes to rescue – the human body. What is the key for interpreting this work? Who has the power over whom: the human body over the voice of the machine or the machine over the human voice and body? These questions are additionally emphasized with the scene quality of the performance itself, as the performers are mixed with the audience and start their performance unexpectedly, intervening in a given situation not only by means of the sound they produce, but also by means of their gestures and movements.

If as the listeners of Van der Putten and Walsh’s works we could feel a certain enchanting magic of the human voice, in Elliman’s work we could rather speak about a touch of awkwardness. It also marked the installation by Martin Riches and Tom Johnson (Photograph 3). Riches’ *Singing Machine* is a synthesized voice produced by the machine supported by the operator (or: the mechanical device which produces something like the voice). During the opening night of the exhibition, when the appropriate number of listeners gathered, this singing device performed a short aria *The Audition* by Tom Johnson, conceived in such a way that it demonstrated the possibilities of the machine and, at the same time, with the necessary support of the score, that it offered a self-reflexive commentary of its kind, about the difficulties and aspirations of the (mechanical) singer who tried to ‘make his way’ to the opera scene. By producing the imitation of vocal vibrations of the human vocal apparatus, with the help of mechanical equivalents in the form of ‘lips’, ‘larynx’, ‘tongue’, this operatic Frankenstein sounded *unheimlich*. However, that sound is not mimetical and torn off the body as is the case with contemporary technologies that faithfully imitate the human voice: it is excitingly different – homologous, but dissimilar, foreign, of an openly artificial materiality. With an octave ambitus and the possibility to articulate vowels (a, e, i, o, u), the

Singing Machine is capable of performing short melodies whose textual part can be understood with the help of the score. Johnson's score contains syllabic sung verses, short *recitativo* segments that anticipate the desire of the machine to perform in the opera and cite its limitations ("I can only pronounce vowels"). This 'modesty' by the machine quickly converts into a witty statement that in the era of fast listening in which the individual does not dwell long on the music's text/score/historical surroundings which demand longer and deeper investment, 'intelligibility' often gets to be treated as collateral damage, in a literal and figurative sense ("So you have to read the text/But that is true in many operas today"). The machine demonstrates its technical and interpretive skillfulness by means of melismatic vocalizations performed in short rhythmic values to the words like 'fast' ("I can sing very fast"), or in long sustained tones (And for a long time on one breath), thereby iconically linking the verbal and the sound sign. One can observe that in this exhibition, based on the postulates of post-dramatic opera, the fragmentation and spectacularization of contemporary scenes are abolished and purposely resignified. The offering to an interested listener is not to be tricked – in the



Photograph 3: Martin Riches' *Singing Machine* (2010–2013) performing the aria *The Audition* by Tom Johnson (2019), installation with sound, photo by Aad Hoogendoorn

wrecks of the former listening and being in historical traditions of music – by the dominant, mediaized and ‘polished’ image of the operatic which often attempts only to reanimate the petrified image of the past, but, instead, to peep into side roads, to take a look at the developmental lines that freshly dive into the archive of the operatic past and thus try to grasp new and unusual alliances, such as the choir of human-machine voices.

That synthesized *operatic voice* is not, then, a homunculus hidden in the construction, but it can be a newly evoked animistic principle proclaimed by the ‘singing’ of the machine, whose voice is the completion of a distant dream, almost like the echo of Kircher’s sketches, and in its (un)intelligibility, contrary to technological synthetizations of the human voice (think of ‘speaking software’!) brought to a perfection, certainly somewhat magical.

The curators’ networking of voices and the history of the mechanical production of the singing voice resonates in a specific way with the work by Jasna Veličković, in which the sublime, post-human potentiality of singing and *voicing* of inanimate objects is also questioned. Veličković’s three-part installation *Opera of Things* originates from the concept “Internet of Things”: just like the ‘Internet of things’ suggests the widening of the possibilities to transfer data over a network of everyday objects, mechanical and digital devices, in the same way the concept of voice in this work spreads outside of the domain of living beings to the sound produced by the electromagnetic field of devices (power adapters, remote controls). Three parts of the installation include the aria “Beauty 3.2 Volts” for power adapter, duet “Diva and the Beast” for Velicon, the instrument constructed by the composer herself, and female quartet “Ophelia” for four power adapters. These ‘objects’ – only in appearance silent and cold metal or plastic system units, but actually the treasuries of the most diverse kinds of sounds, from the almost tangible robust low, to the very profound and delicate high ones – received their voice through the composer/performer’s movements. The uniqueness of these objects/instruments manifests itself in the fact that there is practically no pause in the production of musical sound: each movement of the artist generates some sound (Photograph 4). What is at stake here is radically rethinking the traditionally conceived performance: there is no expressive gesture, no affect, no emotion, no ‘surplus’ which transcends the raw mechanics of the tone production and offers itself as an aesthetic value of the performing act itself. There is the literal meaning of the roles of the bodies involved (the performer and the instruments) and their total, in a way magical, interdependence. The objectiveness,

demasking, the presentness of the performing act engages the senses in a very special way: *everything* which is heard and seen becomes a part of music and *everything* is a part of the experience. That is why during the performance of these works the listener cannot close her/his eyes – not only like in the opera, but even more than that. One additional element in the mosaic of the re-thought elements of music and/or opera is a complex polysemic relationship between the process of composing, improvisation, the composition as the finished product and performance, where the composing process is moved backwards and includes not only the decision about the choice of the object/instrument, but also their disposition, which predetermines what is possible to produce, that is, what kind of sound and structure can be achieved. Once that is set, the composition/improvisation/performance come ‘into play’, intersect with each other, get to be mutually inscribed, making these levels of mutual convergence/divergence fluid. Hence, in accordance with the fact that to a certain degree each of these domains includes the element of the new, their resultant (the composition) is always different.

The installing of the operatic is realized in these works in one more way. Namely, ‘the body’ of the opera soloist/performer/power adapter was exhib-



Photograph 4: Jasna Veličković performing *Opera of Things* (2019),
photo by Yoon Kwan Hee

ited in the same room as two anatomical drawings (1745–46) by Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, which realistically represent the anatomy of the vocal apparatus on one drawing, and the breathing apparatus on the other, with all the muscular and organic details, in the directness of the colour red. The quartet of power adapters was located in the immediate vicinity of the installation *Singing Machine/Audition* and the technical drawings for Riches' device, and the duet – in the same room as Kircher's drawing of sound automata, the reproduction of the engraving *Sirènes a voyelles et résonateurs buccaux* (1900) by Georges René Marie Marage and the interactive kinetic sculpture *A Truly Magical Moment* by Adam Basanta. In that way, three real little opera scenes emerged. Their voices/bodies had their two-dimensional silent antipodes, all that in a constellation which, in spite of all technological and media interventions, reshaping and disassemblings, powerfully pointed exactly to, as it is stated in the title of Basanta's work, true magic. For magic, according to Basanta, it takes a couple which wants to be (re)united, two iPhones, the FaceTime application, the Internet and only a minute of time: by dialing the given telephone numbers the couple starts the installation – the circular motion of mobile phones from the slow tempo to the fast and back – with a



Photograph 5: Adam Basanta, *A Truly Magical Moment* (2016), interactive kinetic sculpture, photo by Aad Hoogendoorn

succession of fragments from the *Romeo and Juliet* overture by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini and the pop hit *Reunited* by Peaches and Herb. The mobile devices, with their screens facing each other, in a touching inversion re-enact cliché-like representations of couples in love who, while the world turns around them and time passes by, stare into each other's eyes, insensible of anything else but of each other (Photograph 5). That magical transfixation to the object of desire, which we almost somatically feel as our own, but which keeps slipping away from us further and further, may be considered the poeticized essence of this whole story about the voice which fled its (operatic) body. This story, *mutatis mutandis*, transposes itself onto the gaze and the ear of the visitor who has to (and can!) find her/his pair among the exhibited creations and surrender her/himself to the magic.

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Summary

The exhibition *Post-Opera* is a complex and provocative project authored and curated by art historian Kris Dittel and the musicologist and the theorist of opera and media Jelena Novak. By bringing forward the juxtapositions and reflections between visual arts, technology and opera it strived to investigate the ambiguous and changeable relationships between the voice and the (human) body, quite neglected in art theory until recently. In the process of networking of those domains, the voice was posited as the exclusive signifier of the 'operaticness' of the opera itself, and the quality of voice and the body were put as equal in the process of the production of meaning. The exhibition included several segments which differed both in regard to their genre and media presentation: the staging of the exhibition in the gallery, periodical 'live activations' inside the exhibition space or in selected 'open' city locations, performances, vocal workshop and symposium.

Three key issues were launched by the exhibition. Firstly, the position of the curator as an artist and the exhibition as a form of art were taken into account. By making the shift from a mere gesture of equality between the act of selection and the act of crea-

tion to the profound self-reflexion of the exhibition, the creative and the performing process, the curators raised the relationship between these categories to the level of the poetical as well as the methodological principle of the curatorial work as an artistic work. Secondly, the multifariousness of the domains of voice in contemporary art and culture was discussed: the *delivery* of the singing and the speaking voice, or the politicality / agency of the voice in the contemporary society and the media culture of over-stylized, polished, heavily processed *chants* of today. The voice appeared as the signifier of marginalization and serious consequences of identity politics, of power relations inherent in its disembodied presence, the invisible channels of its transmission and the receiver, of the relational nature of collective identities constructed both in everyday and digital 'reality'. Thirdly, the exhibition addressed the ventriloquist gap between the singing body and the sung voice as that which 'makes the opera operatic'. By stepping into the field of the automatized and/or technologically generated trans- or post-human world, the presented works have inspiringly rethought the critical point of resemantization of the relationship between these two elusive, but for opera nevertheless constitutive elements.

Translated by the authors