

Intervening in the Narrative Voice

Reflections Around ›The Art of Being Many‹ and the
›Meditation Exercise‹ Genre.

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Voice is predominant in our daily errands, and it is one of the few sonic sources that can compete with the general visual network that surrounds us and shapes our day. This competence is still very limited, though, and often fails to succeed. In this sense, voice is actually one of the sources of sounds we hear more and listen to less. This induced deafness results in voice becoming a mere channel of information or directions. The other elements that configure a voice, or set of voices, remain unheard or scarcely noticed. Maybe only a musical context, and especially a contemporary-classical music concert (even more than a theater play), can achieve a degree of attention capable of putting us in touch with the voice's modulations, tonality, breath breaks, etc. Roland Barthes referred to these coordinates as *the grain of the voice* (Barthes 1977: 179-190). My interest in intervening in different formats and genres related to voice runs parallel to my desire to enhance and provide tools for active listening with respect to acoustic phenomena. I have recently encountered a group of artists and researchers who share a similar inclination towards voice phenomena. The group revolves around the *Errant Bodies* project space in Berlin, which served as a platform for launching *The Voice Observatory* at the start of 2015. It is within this systematic exploration of the voice that I understand the ›meditation exercise‹ that I brought to Kampnagel in Hamburg in the fall of 2014 for *The Art of Being Many*.

Some brief background information might be useful in order to understand the specific context of my meditation exercise. First, there is the political assembly as a collective sound experience. I was living in New York when the Occupy Wall Street movement emerged. I had participated in assemblies before, but the magnitude of what was going on in the financial area of downtown Manhattan allowed me to become a close observer of the sound and movement choreography developed by the many. Beyond innovations like the people's microphone and the actual discussions in the assembly I was mesmerized – as listener and participant – by the way in which more casual conversations were being held. Sometimes, at the margins of the main events, a radical transformation of listening and talking habits took place. Once the discussions, presentations, songs, were done, groups would get together to solve some basic issues regarding food, hygiene, transportation etc. To solve these issues people often left the camp in groups. So, the dynamics and new nature of communication would, for example, have a group of eight to ten people entering a busy subway with the common question of locating lodgings for everybody. It was this *occupation* of the daily space and routines of the city that I felt was surprising, unexpected, and, of course, highly fragile. Entries and exits from the conversation were gradual and sensitive, a wide array of silences and pauses emerged, the volume and even the tone of individual voices would change slightly from one sentence to another, and, most of all, a highly sophisticated school of listening emerged in the middle of the fast and noisy transactions of New York's MTA system. No romanticism here, it just happened, and other people – who had just entered the subway somewhere else – were included to join the small group of protesters. Probably others who have been part of Occupy movements around the world could expand on this experience. I discovered it at the margins and in the grey zones of the Occupy dynamics. The experience itself made me think of reenacting or somehow recreating that situation in its listening potential as a document for an oral history and an on-site sound-installation of the Occupy events in their original locations.

The second source of inspiration that brought me to create a meditation exercise for *The Art of Being Many* is more banal. I am a professional insomniac. And I have tried almost everything. Little romanticism here either. It is just a condition of my body, mind, and who knows what else, that I have little control over. One of the last things I tried were some of the *»meditation to fall asleep«* podcasts that you can find on the web. This was after the repeated

failure we ran into when a good friend of mine (a sharp classicist, by the way) tried to put me to sleep by creating soothing, quiet, imaginary landscapes with her mellow voice. That did not work, and neither did the podcasts. So I decided to enact the sleeping narrative myself, like a shamanic chant, and see if I could fall asleep to my own voice seducing my body, mind, and so on, into sleep. It almost, almost happened. But I am too hooked to work. So before I knew it I had already started to follow unexpected meanders and explore the meditating voice in directions that are not customary. This happened while still keeping the deep, calm, direct timbre and tone that characterizes the genre. I did not fall asleep. But I did find a way to wake up to a different body (while still lying down). After several trials and recordings (normally done around 3am), I decided to explore the ›meditation genre‹ more systematically through a series of podcasts around the theme of transformation through different itineraries. The initial title of the series was to be *Transform: Awakening Meditations*. Still, I never thought I would do this kind of exercise live. That all changed when I was invited to join the *Sound, Systems and Voices* group at *The Art of Being Many*.

The title I gave to the piece was *Meditation to Join the Body of the Many*, and it takes about 8 to 10 minutes to complete. Most of it was prepared prior to the event but the actual experience of spending some nights in the camp set up at Kampnagel in Hamburg gave me the fine-tuning and on-site twists that the piece has now. The ›assembly of assemblies‹ initially gathered about 150 individuals, who had been part of different Occupy and protest movements around the world. That is, individuals who have worked very closely and intensely to transform a given reality, with different degrees of success and failure. My interest was to cross and offer a virtual itinerary, a guided tour that could incorporate different stages. And to do it quietly (something which rarely happens), to also provide a reminder of the inner logic and landscape that inhabits the act and desire of transformation. An ontological question also cropped up: the possibility of letting go of our individual subjectivity in order to join a generic ›body of the many‹. Basically, what my voice does is to help initiate a trip out of yourself to then display a virtual (voiced) location that incorporates elements and details from different Occupy and assembly places and plazas. From there, I would then induce a descent back into each persons' individual body.

Now, the setting was not easy: some 200 people moving around, sitting, lying down, eating in the big hall-turned-assembly-space. All of them had

been wearing headphones since the first day of the event, something which became unusually normal after the first couple of hours there¹. The idea was that people could plug in or out in order to listen to different channels related to activities that were sometimes happening simultaneously. For the presentations of the Sound, Systems and Voices group, we had three channels, and my meditation ran on one of them. I was also carrying headphones and asked everyone to find a comfortable position, close their eyes and relax for the next 8 to 10 minutes before the actual meditation started. I also had my eyes closed during most of the meditation, to avoid distraction from the surrounding movement. On one of the occasions when I did open my eyes and looked around – I had just suggested that we raise our arms and reach out to a distant sound of voices in a faraway square – I was surprised to see that some 30 to 40 people in the room where actually doing exactly that. Up to that moment, I had no guarantee that anybody was actually listening to my meditation instead of the other two channels or just the ambient sound. That gave me an intense sense of responsibility and a daring to push the meditation a little further, and into a more intimate register. The meditation was repeated twice with a pause of some 10 minutes. The second time was slightly more playful and started with me sitting among the audience and staying there (for the first one I had a mic stand in the middle of the room). I did not look around to check who was listening this time, but I did feel that the idea was an extremely subtle and fragile proposal that could have easily failed. Which, obviously, was part of the experiment.

I rarely ask the reactions of the audience after a show or a reading. At this occasion, though, I was highly interested in what had happened there in the hall, for it was not really an artist/audience situation that I had to deal with here. To my surprise, people were very pleased and thankful for the meditation, which was most of all appreciated as a quiet, calm moment of breath in the frame of the otherwise rather frenetic, noisy and talkative setting of *The Art of Being Many*. So it did bring people into a different emotional

1 Professor Maria Engberg, from Malmö University, wrote an interesting reflection on the problematic nature of such a decision, which was also a point of sensitive discussion among the organizers of the event, as I later gathered. She also raises in this piece some points related to my meditation (which I would subscribe) and how it addressed some of the delicate issues present at *The Art of Being Many* (Engberg 2014).

zone, regardless of the specificity of my itinerary. This, of course, raises the question – a twisted one – of the power that a single voice can have in terms of guidance and manipulation, even if that voice (mine) has been emptied of most of its personal traits. New listening habits can be induced in this way. Also, zones of our body or mind that are normally not accessible – or even physically or emotionally painful – can be reached and relieved through these kinds of meditation exercises. In the difficult and tense context of a social or political gathering, such a meditation can also act as a training, or training zone, where we can become aware of the multiple realities of an assembly and find ways to hold this multiplicity together. For me, the key element is still the potential the genre has for displaying an experience of transformation that only needs us to close our eyes and listen.

By way of conclusion, and before offering the transcription of what I did, I want to extend my gratitude to all those ›individuals of the many‹ that made the experience possible by just listening. I am also thankful to my colleagues in the Sound, Systems and Voices group and to the organizing team of *The Art of Being Many* and Kampnagel. The opportunity to throw in such an experiment among a live crowd has provoked two direct consequences for me. First of all, the commitment to record and publicize these experimental meditation exercises; a series of podcasts is now being developed and soon will be recorded.² The second consequence is my decision to incorporate the Meditation to Join the Body of the Many into the second episode of my series *The Insider*; this episode will dive into political issues and explore the collective listening discoveries I encountered during Occupy Wall Street.

The following transcription merges the two meditations I did at *The Art of Being Many* and adds a few new elements that will be incorporated in the studio recording. Small titles appear at the start of each section only for the purpose of this specific transcription. This detail, and the transcription itself are exceptional. Only the sound clip and brief introductory texts will be accessible in the future. The score that accompanies this text was done before the event as a way of displaying graphically the process I am covering with voice and language.

2 Scheduled for February 2016 at Berlin's LowSwing Studio with the assistance of sound engineer Florian von Keyserlingk.

The Text

To be read in a low, calm, voice. Slow pace and often allowing the appearance of pauses between sentences and even words, but without losing the rhythm. Breath should not be heard.

Hello. I would like to welcome you to a ›meditation exercise‹ that will take approximately 8 to 10 minutes. We will use the form of a guided relaxation exercise. I have called this a ›meditation to join the body of the many‹ and we will try to gradually abandon our body and join the body of the many. You can of course take a break or leave this meditation anytime you want. Still, it would be nice if you stayed tuned in as we move through its different stages.

I don't know where you are. But if you can find somewhere where you can sit, or lie down, then do it. If you are sitting down, just feel comfortable, and maybe try to lean on something or lie down if you can. Whenever you want, and when you are already comfortable, I would like you to slowly close your eyes. Take some time if you need it.

›sounds of the sleep in the many‹

While lying down, or sitting, you can hear the sounds of the room around you. There are noises around you. And I do not want you to fight those noises. I want you to take them. And let them be themselves. The movement or quietness around you. These are the sounds of the assembly. Now. But also yesterday. And the day before. They also happen during the night, as we lie down to rest. And still there, some movement, close and far away. But not so much anymore. And some are already asleep. There is a cough somewhere in the room. And silence. The buzzing of electricity. The sliding sound of a sleeping bag. In the distance, you can hear a murmur. Also, somewhere in the room, the brushing, rhythmic sound of sheets, as if somebody was masturbating. And steps. Carefully. You cannot locate where sounds are coming from. Some more steps, but they are leaving. And you can take these sounds personally. Or let them go. For they are not yours.

Almost imperceptible, you can now hear a distant train. Passing, full of people going somewhere else. Taking a weight from you. And you have to let them go. The sound of the train fades out, somewhere in the distance.

›abandoning your body‹

But you still want to reach out to that sound. It is still there, almost gone, somewhere in some corner of the room. You want to get close to it.

I want you to feel how one of your hands is slowly opening. Like when a flower opens in the morning, or in the night, your fingers gradually open. It could be your right hand, or your left hand. And I want you to let your fingers bring your hand, your arm, slowly up, in the direction of that sound you heard before. It is still there, almost gone. Your fingers stretch and your arm moves. And gets away. As you are caressing that distant sound. It might come back. And you go a little further, with your fingers in the air. Your hand floats and moves. Until that moment when your hand is not yours anymore. You are touching something in the air. But your hand, your arm, is already far away.

You breathe. You breathe in. And out. And as you breathe out, every time, the air moves outside, far away from you, growing away from your body. Each time. Floating. As your breath leaves and starts undulating, in the air. And it is now somewhere in the space, where you are. Up there. Moving. Among fragments. And silence. Sound is scarce. You are now a thin layer of breath, a slow and fading constellation, almost transparent with the air. Moving up there. And you can slowly look down. Now what do you see? Maybe you are too far away to see. But that's OK.

›the square of the body of the many‹

Again, somewhere, in a different corner of the room, a murmur of voices has started to gather. It is not clear. But it is there. And you want to join in. So you move closer to it. As you approach it, you do not see much, but you can feel those voices.

Because in a way, you are part of them. In a way, it's already not yourself. And we are moving into this place. It is a square, vaguely shaped. And you

can hear a dance, too. As we cross the space slowly, we start to move, briefly taken by the dance. Somewhere, on the left side, you can hear people chanting. Sentences. Repeated. You have been here before. We are already here. We are the 99%. And you hear those voices. And somehow you want to join in. Go along. With your lips. Dive into repetition. We are here to stay. You can hear them near you. Peter is not here. Jane is not here. Brandon is not here. Hannah is almost not here. And we repeat in silence now. For this is where we are.

›stairway to the games and speeds of the heart‹

You are distracted by a new sound. Cheerful. Not that far away from you, there is a set of stairs. On the top, some kids are playing. Five, six, or more. And you are one of them, playing there, too. With stones. And with leaves. You take one stone and you throw it downstairs. Somebody else also throws a stone. And then a leaf, not too dry, not too humid. You are throwing these leaves. And you can see. The different speeds of the heart. As it opens. And wrought its dance in the air.

›mixed waters of decision‹

It is warm. You are somehow floating. The feeling of warm water has started to surround you. But there is another unknown current, touching parts of your body. Your body is not yours anymore. But it is there. Spread out. And calm. In space. This new current is cold. Fresh. Now getting slightly faster, carrying one of your legs away. As if pulling it. Even if it is not yours. You can still feel it. This cold water, moving parts of you away. Closer to another body, which you do not know. And cannot see. You breathe. And you want to reach out. Keep everything close. But finally you let go. You can still feel the cold somewhere. Not pain yet. A very slow dance has suddenly started, as you move again. And advance.

›encounter with a loved one‹

Somebody is looking at you. You can feel their presence. Behind you. Still. Somebody is passing nearby, looking. Behind your back. You turn around. It is somebody from your past. Somebody you have lost, or not seen, in a

long time. They look at you. And say: I don't know who you are. But I know I have loved you very much. The waters grow warm again. And the murmur grows. You are alone again. You can hear the movement in the square. The kids, the stones, the leaves as they fall. New sounds. And you can move through this space. Feel, hear other moves and other voices, unknown. You had not realized they were there. A sense of distance. As you look, slowly, and move, as you look.

›return to the individual body transformed‹

And now, wherever you are, you are going to come back slowly. To some part of you. You decide which part of your body will make you come back. It could be a small bone in your finger. Or the skin on your ear. From there, you will let it flow in. With all that you have gathered around. Gradually, and quietly. Until you feel your body again. There, where you had left it. Take some time to explore the temperature, the relation with the ground. Your hands, your back. And breathe. Whenever you feel like you can open your eyes. You don't need to look around. Now we are here. And I want to thank you for listening.

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