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/'(H)WETH: VOICE – BREATH – BODY – FORM/S**

Abstract: */'(h)weTH* is a collaborative work of visual and sound art produced by R. Armstrong (USA) and Lauren Redhead (UK). The work combines an installation, two video projections, four channel sound, and an optional solo performance part, in order to create an experience that is simultaneously aural and visual, in all of its elements. This article sets out to further explore the main themes of the work, by means of a dialogue between the voices of the two artists. In doing so, it also facilitates a discussion of how */'(h)weTH* might contribute to an understanding of the materiality of sound art, and the boundaries between visual art, sound art, and music.

Key words: voice, breath, body, embodiment, sound art

Photograph 1: */'(h)weTH,* two video stills. © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

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/’(h)weTH

A call and response presupposes the participation of (at least) two parties. But our breath also calls us, as do our own voices. An interrogation is a call and response, as is a published decree. Silence is also a kind of call, as well as a response. Multiple participants may answer the same question differently, our timing may slip, we may be preoccupied and answer not the question asked but some deeper query whose answer we didn’t know we sought. It might all happen at once, while someone is sleeping. A coverup is also a call and response, even if rectified later. *To voice*, as in an opinion, holds hands with *to try*, both legally and personally. Neither requires a body, but the body—body politic, embodied being—helps either endeavor. Sometimes we can throw the voice; it enters another object, an instrument or image, for a brief time before finding its way home. Sometimes we are such an instrument, entered by history’s homeless ghosts to tell a version of the story.

Photograph 2: */’(h)weTH,* two video stills. © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

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/’(h)weTH *is an experiment in form, bringing several separate practices together into a single work, incorporating conventions from sculpture, music, installation art, video, and performance into a work perhaps most easily classified as ‘sound art’; it is an immersive experience dependent on sound for its content and meaning, though it also utilizes images, space, and in some iterations a live performer. There is a profound openness to the work, not only because sound forces human permeability: even within a physically dense and overwhelming installation, one can close one’s eyes and imagine oneself elsewhere. But sound enters the body: we become a resonance chamber for other voices, even for the most intimate sounds of other bodies, such as breath. To make our own sounds, we are also a resonance chamber. Other sound, then, can be in the body the same way our own sounds can, our beings humming with a motion we can’t see. The openness of the body in this experience is mirrored in /’(h)weTH—the textual sources are opened not only by re-embodiment, but*

> *through fragmentation: in editing, and in how they work. They are de-structured, de-materialized. If language were a body, they would be disembodied: sounds divorce from linguistic meaning, phonemes become rhythm or accent or structure, without the aid of language.*

/'(h)weTH is a collaboration between artists, disciplines, and signifiers, and represents what Barbara Bolt describes as the, "dialogical relationship between making and writing."[1] In some ways, the label 'sound art' might also be applied to the images and other visual aspects of the work as a result of their relationship to joint practice. The nature and history of the work and its evolution is necessarily inscribed upon its materials, and as such */'(h)weTH* might be thought of as an expression of Paul Carter's definition of invention, which, he writes, "begins when what signifies exceeds its signification—when what means one thing, or conventionally functions in one role, discloses other possibilities."[2] The work also, necessarily, represents what Robyn Stewart describes as "autobiographical method" with respect to reflecting the artists in the notion of the work. Thus, the creation of */'(h)weTH* can be seen as, "a way to explore the practitioner and their concepts involving the self, identity, history, time, narrative, interpretation, experience, and knowledge."[3]

Photograph 3: */'(h)weTH,* two video stills. © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

Voice: Text, Speech, And Object Voice

> *What we hear is always an other, though it moves into our bodies without resistance, without our being able to shut the door. The other moves across space, time, consciousness, to enter us. Who or what creates the other? How do we experience it?*

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[1] Barbara Bolt, "The Magic is in Handling", in Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, eds., *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, London, I. B. Taurus, 2010, 27–34; 31.

[2] Paul Carter, "Interest: The Ethics of Invention", in Barrett and Bolt, 2010, 15–26; 15.

[3] Robyn Stewart, "Creating New Stories for Praxis: Navigations, Narrations, Neonarratives", in Barrett and Bolt, 2010, 123–134; 129.

> *When sound is part of a work, is the body of the work, how do we experience this otherness? A voice implies a body that is not there. There is an issue of words and how they mean, words carried by a voice. Text carries voices through history, enabling us to re-embody them. We speak old words and waken ghosts. They put on our voices like new dresses. Sometimes they fit ill, though the dead are always glad to be clothed. Sound keeps making itself through time. It never silences, only becomes too distant to hear. We create echoes by our re-embodiment, making the same sound again. Perhaps in another language (not the same sound) perhaps in another gender (not the same sound) certainly in another voice (not the same sound). What is sound's relationship to meaning? The most 'abstract' of the arts leaves the space open between a work and its antecedent, a work and its meanings. Form is an escape from articulable theses, a swerve into feeling. In sound work, the issue of embodiment is paramount, particularly when sound means voice. The other is absent, the absence is present.*

Lacan describes the alterity of voice: the experience of voice is always the experience of the other. This is supported by thinking about the use of voice on recordings, for example Simon Frith writes that, "we assign [recorded voices] bodies, we imagine their physical production,"[4] and Freya Jarman notes that, "the key feature of the voice […] is that its production fundamentally disrupts the borders of inside and outside."[5] However, the difference between voice and speech and/or text is crucial to understanding the role of voice in */'(h)weTH*, and in art more generally. In this respect, the notion of object voice is crucial. Dolar writes that this, "is not a function of the signifier [….It is] precisely a non-signifying remainder."[6] The alterity of the voice is thus defined as something which is simultaneously embodied and not embodied, and whilst speech can be *owned* by the speaker, voice cannot necessarily be.

The voices heard in */'(h)weTH* are disembodied as a result of the performance circumstances of the work. When voice is subject to what Simon Emmerson calls, "acousmatic dislocation,"[7] as in this work, what is encountered is wholly Other, the object voice, which plays no part in signification and subjectivity. Thus, a distinction is made between speech and text: the piece moves from voice (which is heard) to text (which is also heard, although not always intelligible) without allowing for speech (which is embodied or owned by the

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[4] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, 196.

[5] Freya Jarman-Ivens, "I feel a song coming on: Vocal Identification and Modern Subjectivity", *Anglistica*, 3.2, 2009, 45–57; 46.

[6] Mladen Dolar, "The Object Voice", in Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, London and Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1996, 10.

[7] Simon Emmerson, *Living Electronic Music*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, 91.

speaker), and thus without allowing for a prominence of linguistic signification and meaning. But the texts which are used in the work *do* have (received) meanings, both in their linguistic content and their cultural context (although the latter requires the listener to recognize them as a quotation). This, then, presents the possibility that text has meaning outside of speech; not as a function of linguistic meaning that is inexorably attached to words, but as a performative function of discourse.

Breath

> *Breath is our own body, then there is its sound from outside, both the self and the other disembodied and displaced.*

Photograph 4: */'(h)weTH,* two video stills. © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

Breath is often an after-effect of conventional acoustic music, and seen to be a necessary part of producing instrumental sound. However, in */'(h)weTH,* breath is foregrounded in the work in the audio and in the visual material, since breath is implied in the images of smoke and in the construction of the video itself. Perhaps like voice, the experience of breath is thought to be universal, and yet is distinctly personal. My breath only has an effect on my body; I understand that you breathe, and that you must be breathing, and what the consequences are if you stop, but I do not experience the physicality and causality of your breath in the way that I do mine. My understanding of breath *as* physical and causal is the result of my embodied experience of my own breathing, and by definition cannot be anything else. Therefore, whilst the experience of voice is one of alterity, the experience of breath in art is the experience of displaced subjectivity—the perception of the other in the experience of oneself. So, breath and voice—and thus, the materials of */'(h)weTH*—are also kinds of embodied knowledge, even though in sound experience they become disembodied, since these can only be learned about and experienced in a physical way.

Body: Disembodied Form—Potentialities of Sound-as-Body

Sound offers the opportunity for non-physical form. It creates absent-presence, an invisible being-ness that implies other: other space, other time, other body. When voice, other-body becomes form. When sound is used as a vehicle for text, it creates an interesting and rich territory of between-body: the text, an abstract form, is embodied (enters a body, is in a body), but the body remains absent. The original body (from which the text came) and the future-body (the body that speaks the text) are joined in sound; in the presence of their conduit, their link, the third body, the present, fully embodied body, the viewer. Voice and body are two primary concerns in conversations about gender. Voice, because that is what is taken from a disenfranchised people. Body, because that is what is used. To have a voice without a body then flips the power structure. There is no body which can be targeted with violence or used for the fulfillment of the desires of others, be they sexual or capitalist/material (sex or work, the two uses for the bodies of the oppressed). Instead, there is a speaking being, a voice that cannot be tortured or constrained, and can therefore speak freely.

But we are out of practice, we don't speak the same language, we are used to bodies and cannot know how to act without them. This is not like Echo, who out of love for that which did not love her lost her body and her voice, and could make herself present only through the presence of others. Echo's voice is subjected to the same violences that her female body would be; she exists only through, and is entirely claimed by, the desires of others. Her voice (as her body would have been) is not her own. She is relegated to the purposes of others; she is used. Not so with the self directed voice, absent body. If the voice maintains agency and the body is absent, there is nothing that can be appropriated or manipulated; the being becomes, literally, untouchable. Interestingly, the disembodied voice can also 'touch' bodies; soundwaves must be felt to be heard, though we often don't perceive this touch as anything but sound. Sound enters us, our bodies, inescapably. Without physically moving away, we cannot escape sound.

These realities create particular opportunities for working with ideas about gender, body, and power. To be an unseen source is the opposite of being an object. A woman's voice, especially speaking, is the opposite of a nude. It begins the reversal of the history of women in art. It de-objectifies by removing the possibilities of an object altogether. The history of feminism as an art movement is full of women using our own bodies in ways that try to reclaim them, or overtly point out the ways that dominant culture uses them.[8] These 'uses' of the body in art met, not unexpectedly, with the critique that the artists (to greater and lesser extents) were merely using their bodies in the same way as the culture they critiqued. We come from within our cultures, and are shaped by them, so any revolution is prone to this. However, it is

[8] For example, the works of Carolee Schneeman, Hanna Wilke, Cindy Sherman, and Lynda Benglis.

Photograph 5: */'(h)weTH*, installation. © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

interesting to consider new (and relatively unexplored in the art context) potentialities of body. The gaze and all its weight is removed entirely when the work is sound; the gaze is no longer the primary audience. Issues of control and desire cannot run in the familiar channels.

A new form subverts the possibility of body-as-object by replacing the object-body with body-as-source. The conduit of meaning is no longer the body itself or its representations, that which apprehends the material is no longer the gaze. The body is missing (as object) but present as source, as that which leaves the body as meaning: sound. The body becomes source rather than object.

Recently someone who visited my studio asked if I am making 'feminist' work. I answered that I am interested in the materiality of bodies, and nowhere is this more evident than in the way perceptions of gender and gendered difference inhabit contemporary, and historical, bodies. The realities of binary gendered conceptions of 'body' (-as-identity, body(read as gender)-as-self) today require that any interest in bodies be an interest in a gendered body—gendered difference is constructed through beliefs about gendered bodies, the most primary of which is that they are 'different' from one another. And the experience of body in a gender-centric society is necessar-

Photograph 6: */'(h)weTH*, installation detail with 'cellist Joyce Kuipers.
© R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

ily gendered. In such a society, one cannot talk about bodies without choosing which gender bodies to talk about. To make a work that addresses issues of embodiment, especially issues about being and the performance of gender, requires a new form.

Bourdieu describes things (such as breath and voice as presented in */'(h)weTH*) that are "learned by the body" to be "something that one is".[9] Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty conceives of the body as an "expressive space" which can itself be involved in an "imposition of meaning".[10] Bodies are present in the work in a number of ways: the performing 'cellist, when present, is a physical body who exists in the space. Her elevation on the scaffold, part of the installation, which both sets her apart from the audience, and draws attention to the physicality of her performance (since it disrupts the usual sonic relationship that the audience would have with her instrument, as well as the visual one). This, and the sound art or gallery context of the work, situates the musician (and not the instrument) as a body in the space rather than the operator of the 'cello understood as the facilitator of transcendence. Similarly, the stage or scaffold itself

[9] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, R. Nice, trans., Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 1990, 73.

[10] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, C. Smith, trans., London: Routledge, 2005, 169–170.

Photograph 7: */'(h)weTH*, installation, sculpture (detail). © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

takes on the role of a body which imposes itself into the space. In order for it to perform its role as a stage the 'cellist must climb onto it and leave it at the end of the performance, an act which accentuates the height and role of the object. Two further objects were installed in the space: both reminiscent of burial pyres. These objects also had voices: hidden within them were small speakers which played individual tracks containing sounds drawn from glitches, beating, and Maria Callas's performance of Gluck. Finally, the two video projections contain images of bodies, or parts of them. The burnt chair in some ways functions as a body who is burned at the stake; hands, fingers and hair all appear.

All of these physical presences invite the comparison of the observer between these bodies and theirs. As a result the presence of body in the work has not just to do with its material, or the performer, or even the bodies of the artists, but the active exchange between the perceiver-as-body and the work-as-experience. Breath, voice, and body are not separate elements in the work, therefore, but are present together in all of the objects and sonic and visual interventions into the space.

Photograph 8: */'(h)weTH*, installation, sculpture (detail). © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

Form/s

An experiment between a 'visual' artist and musician, if it succeeds as a true collaboration, out of necessity invents a new form. Unless one practice is used merely to complement the other, the knowledge and references of two different trainings and lineages have to find the territory in which they can meet—and if such a territory does not exist, is perhaps represented by a dragon on the edge of the map, we must invent it. As the first collaboration between two practitioners (who were both already quite friendly with said dragon), /'(h)weTH *combines and juxtaposes several (usually independent) forms to create an immersive experience. The piece includes video, but is not video work. It includes 'music' (as source material) but is not music. There is a performer, but the piece has been shown without this element, and is not a performance. It is certainly an installation, but to use only that (often static) term denies the real essence of the piece. The element that links all the others together is sound; perhaps the best name for the work's medium is 'sound installation,' though even this does not adequately represent the interaction of forms that the piece unites to create*

Photograph 9: */'(h)weTH,* two video stills. © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

a single whole. What happens when these specific forms come together, yet in some ways maintain the forms of their previously autonomous structures?

Many of the themes, images, and sounds in the work pertain to women. The closeness of the imagery relating to women and the imagery of torture in the work is not unintended. However, the intention is not to present a simplistic reading of women's oppression in society and history but to invite an appreciation of the discursive (ideology, power) relationships, in which women do and do not take part, that signify oppression. The relationship of female oppression with linguistic meaning is indeed a powerful one, and this is why the leap from voice to text, bypassing these meanings (and described earlier) is an important one for the work. The other side of this equation is the link between recorded voices, distortion and violence which has been notably discussed by Sumanth Gopinath.[11] However, within */'(h)weTH* the symbolic violence done to the voices on tape is also reclaimed as an act of self-violence in this work: the voices belong to the artists[12] and, as a result, it can be argued that the violence done in the recording is not to the speaker (as in Reich's *Come Out*) but to *speech*: Gopinath makes a link between the identity of the young man in Reich's work and the linguistic content of his speech; after the distortion precisely what is left is the tension between the object voice and the tape, the non-signifying remainder which is also representative of the violence done in the linguistic separation from the Real. In contrast, the distortion of speech and alienation of speech in favour of object voice in this work does violence to the alienating aspects of speech for women. Arguably the only real "speech" left intact is that within the answers which are read out by one of the voices, which is itself presented as alienated and disembodied within the account to which it belongs.

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[11] Sumanth Gopinath, "The Problem of the Political in Reich's *Come Out*", in Robert Adlington, ed., *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde music and the Sixties*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, 121–144.

[12] Although it is not assumed the listener will be aware of this, or even necessary for them to be so.

Photograph 10: */'(h)weTH,* two video stills. © R. Armstrong and Lauren Redhead, 2012.

This, then was a two-stage process to reclaim the object voice from speech: first one of dissociating text from speech, and second one of associating violence with linguistic meaning rather than its absence. Hal Foster describes this process as one of reclaiming cultural spaces: "it is a labor of *dis*articulation: to redefine cultural terms and recapture political positions. […] On the other hand, it is a labor of articulation: to meditate content and form, specific signifiers and institutional frames."[13] Precisely why this is possible is because a poststructuralist definition of the unstable relationship between signifiers must be true. The assessment of the piece is dependent not only on its vocal content but on the holistic interpretation of all of its signifiers, since all the material contains elements of voice, breath, and body.

Sound/Art

This focus of this discussion has highlighted how the issues of the work */'(h)weTH* are not separate from its materiality. In this way, the sound sources of the work (voices, breath, human and instrumental bodies), and the visual materials (smoke, fire, wood, hair, bodies) can be considered not dissimilar to these issues: what is created is a kind of *sounding semiotics*, a situation in which the sources cannot be heard for their signification, the sounding materials selected not for their sound alone but for their implications. The collaborative nature of the creation of the work further distorts the picture of what is sounding and of which artist causes it to sound. Tara Rogers observes of female sound artists that, "[they] cannot be easily categorized by their methods, as many of them move between roles."[14] This movement between roles is true for */'(h)weTH*'s

[13] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1996, xvii.

[14] Tara Rogers, *Pink Noises: women on electronic music and sound*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, 4.

materials as well as its creators: the aural/visual divide is not clear in the separation and understanding of material, or in the practices and approaches used to manipulate the materials themselves.

It is certain that the work cannot be fully described within the terms of "music" or "visual art" alone. Yet, the concern with articulating new forms extends further than simply situating this work within "sound art". Discourse in sound art is often linked to the use of or interaction with technology, and while technology is present in */'(h)weTH* in a facilitating role, it does not enable a greater understanding of the work or its materials. Rogers describes how her interviews revealed that, "standards of male-defined technological innovation do not apply equally to women,"[15] and it is true that the male-dominated nature of discourse in technology and techonology-dominated narratives around sound art hold lesser meaning for women (not that women do not interact with technology, but that their interaction is considered and valued differently, by themselves and others). But the feminist nature of this work lies in the fact that it is made from, as well as by, women. And this is best articulated by the opposition of its materials to dominant narratives even within a genre like sound art which appears to stand outside of the dominant discourse. This is probably stated best by Susan McClary who writes of music, "the structures graphed by the theorists, and the beauty celebrated by aestheticians are often stained with such things as violence, misogyny and racism. And perhaps more disturbing still, to those who would present music as automous and invulnerable [these] also frequently betray fear—fear of women, fear of the body."[16]*/'(h)weTH* refuses the request that sound be neutral, and interacted with on its own terms, by causing it to sound; women, bodies, voices and breath, all sound in a space which might have been filled with "neutral" sounds: silence, music, visual art, technology.

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[15] ibid., 7.

[16] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings:Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 4.