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Poetry, Sound and the Designing of “Phantom Objectivity”

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Abstract
Gertrude Stein recognised what Benjamin called the now most unfashionable “universal equality of things” at the level of the word. For Stein, the literary work was based on surface relations rather than psychological depth or submission to a transcendental signified. Similarly, it is this surface relation which informs the audio-tactile model of the poem as performance piece. This paper explores the paradoxical nexus between surface relations and psychological depth with reference to a collaborative project between a poet and a sound artist curated by a visual artist at a series of venues from August 2008 to June 2009. As a model of interactions of aesthetic modes, the project uncovered a discursive struggle that highlighted the dominance of the scopic field over the aural field. This paper seeks to explain the reasons for this “phantom objectivity”.

Keywords
Performance poetry, poetics, psychoanalysis, collaboration, voice, gaze.

Introduction
Ears Have Walls: process, resistance, sounding
In May 2008 I was approached by a visual artist planning to curate an event for a one-year touring exhibition whose opening was to be at Federation Square for the inauguration of The Melbourne Writers Festival (September 22). The project focused on the theme of drought and involved cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaborations between artists. I agreed to write a sequence of poems and to seek a collaborator.

As I wrote the poem, it became clear to me that my collaborator needed to be a
sound artist, and not a visual artist, as I had anticipated. Indeed, as I wrote one of Catherine Clover’s recordings of a cicada I had recently heard kept worming its way into my inner ear. I rang Catherine and we discussed our possible collaboration.

The conjunction of images and themes was too good to be true, for I had become increasingly conscious of the fact that what I’d been writing was a particular kind of elegy, namely an elegy “in which it is neither possible nor desirable for the elegist’s desire to be deflected, renounced or spent” (Kennedy, 2009, p. 581). The particular cicada Catherine had used for her field recording was the greengrocer [cyclochila australasiae], a cicada known to be singing at the end of the hot season, and also at the end of its adult life. This is quite apparent in the audible struggle that the cicada is having while trying to sing its last few songs of life, its last calls for a mate. Moreover, for the Chinese the cicada is symbolic of the afterlife - rebirth and immortality.

For me the drought was first and foremost an event of the body, and more particularly a body struggling in space and time. The process of writing was predicated upon presuppositions, intuition and control – presuppositions are unavoidable since the theme of drought has particular resonances in the Australian context and since we inhabit that historical form of life called “modernity”, or “post modernity”. In other words though I was addressing a specifically localised premise, I was also aware that there are enduring paradigms which began four millennia ago in that these form the presuppositions and values of late capitalist multinational corporate globalised culture. Intuition. This was and always is because there is a certain continuity to life and work. There is a context, for I exist as an “other” within Australian culture. When I write I look for challenges within this context and I try to meet these challenges with the tools at hand. The context is physical, linguistic, emotional, cultural and spiritual.

The tools are the senses, language(s), memory, space, sound, colour, time. Thus “Thirst” began with an image experienced in the mouth of the speaker struggling game I used to play under fiercely hot Spanish skies and from a story by Albert Camus. Rhythm took over. In a sense the whole poem enacts a process of translation from images to words enhanced by the pulse of the cicada singing. Catherine’s sound scape consists of her recording of my reading of the poem lined with the cicada’s song.

The work achieved the status of “autonomous artefact” I had sought in an attempt to promote a poetics of defamiliarisation and ambivalence centred on sound rather than meaning while opposing the ontology of the art object as a silent, timeless, autonomous thing. The collaborative work reflected, complicated, and enhanced this rejection of a purely textual object divorced from time and process.

Here was delivered a kind of elegiac summation of a decade of poetic concerns: desire, working across languages, the pathos and solipsistic doubt about human communication, memory, and dislocation. In short, because “Thirst” addressed the theme of drought from physical, emotional, linguistic, spiritual and global perspectives, the medium needed to serve the concept we wanted manifest and the ethical concerns raised by the drought.

The curator of the exhibition, however, displayed increasing unease as September crept closer. She was unsure that the galleries that would host our exhibit would supply the Hi Fi equipment we required and she was concerned about the “manning” of the exhibit. She also kept asking for an artist’s book to accompany the poem.

Suffice it to say, on September 22, I read “Thirst” at Federation Square and Catherine gave a talk about the making of her sound scape. It was also broadcast between events at the BMW Edge. The technician who was manning our sonorous exhibit so capably expressed his amusement at the reactions of surprise he witnessed on the part of patrons. Unfortunately, he fell ill on the third day of the festival. Thus “Thirst” was quenched. When in November I was invited to showcase our collaborative work at the Northern Notes Festival the curator provided her own CD player. Regrettably, it only worked in mono, not stereo. Finally, when last June I turned up to the Post-Office Gallery for the opening of the exhibition in Ballarat, the sound equipment was adorned with a mounted poster of the cover to our “Thirst” CD. As guests filled the space the sound was gradually turned down. Then off.

This prompted a set of related questions. Why such unease on the curator’s part due to the absence of visual cues? What was the reason for her bungled action at Darebin? Why this urge to punctuate the last event of the touring exhibition with a visual stamp? Why such uneasiness, disgust, anxiety on the part of some Melbourne Festival patrons? Why this resistance to the aural drive, this privileging of the scopic drive? Why this phantom objectivity and objectification? Why this thwarting of artistic freedom and desire? What had indeed been my desire when I decided to highlight the discrepancy between the aural and scopic drives in the form of an “autonomous” sound scape? Had I perhaps wanted to release a mechanism of affective and perceptual participation in the listener by rendering ordinary words strange?

Seeing Words: poetry, language, image in the age of software

The relation of poetry and lived experience derives from their subjection to language, hence desire. The relation of language and desire derives from their virtuality. When
desire inhabits and activates the symbolic system of language, sovereign states of meaning come into existence, each with a scintillating harbour, green garden, a citizenry, and a tyrant. Virtuality has always been with us in the form of myth and fiction, for writing offers both representative experiences and words as experience. The real includes the virtual. Under the modern, post-modern or hyper-modern aegis, reality is shifting and multiple in perspective. Yet poetry by its nature is intimacy at a distance. Walter Benjamin writes of art: "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity…. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and of course, not only technical—reproducibility" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 220). Thus when art meets with mechanical reproduction, which began with Gutenberg, or Antiquity’s scribes (as you will), the “aura” of the work of art “withers”. Benjamin sees the work of art as inhabiting a “shell”, from which it might be pried open, thus destroying its aura. As things lose their aura, all objects are equal. I must confess that as a poet I am in horror of this perceived loss of aura, which seems to prize the contingent as arbitrary. Worse, I can see where it leads me to the simulacra. Why is this? John Ashbery has a way of answering the question: “… I cannot escape the picture / Of my small self in that bank of flowers: / My head among the blazing phlox / Seemed a pale gigantic fungus (Ashbery, 1970, p. 28). In Ashbery as in most avant-garde poetry, traditional values such as lyricism often lie in hiding, to be unveiled by further reading or changes in literary fashion, for as Charles Simic puts it, “poems… depend so much on whatever contemporary notion of the “poetic” was fashionable at the time… (Simic, 2006, pp. 106-07). These conceptual beliefs and paradoxes originally informed the philosophy and form of “Thirst”, the poem, with its “exploded”, almost affectless, prologue meant to draw attention to the phonemic and sensual properties of language across tongues.

Gertrude Stein once said: “After all, to me one human being is as important as another human being, and you might say that the landscape has the same values, a blade of grass has the same value as a tree. Because of the realism of the people who did realism before was a realism of trying to make people real. I was not interested in making the people real but in the essence or, as a painter would call it, value” (Haas, 1976, p. 16). Stein recognised what Benjamin calls now most unfashionably “the universal equality of things” at the level of the word. As the material fact of language, words are given to artistic use. Of her method, she said: “I began to play with words then. I was a little obsessed by words of equal value…. You had to recognize words had lost their value in the Nineteenth Century, they had lost much of their variety, and I felt I could not go on, that I had to recapture the value of the individual word, what it meant and act within it” (Haas, 1976, p. 17). This re-creation of the word Stein intimates, further explains, and indeed, advocates, was a radical move creating a new realiz(sm) based on the material fact of word (their weight and volume and proximity to each other) rather than rhetorical unities. For Stein, then, the writerly work is based on surface relation rather than psychological depth or subjection to a transcendental signifier. And it is this which informs the auditive-tactile model of the poem as performance piece. From here onwards true collaboration begins.

We live in an age of software, not hardware, process rather than product. Channel surfing and web crawling are process metaphors that also describe our current concept of the mind in action. In collaboration, the medium is the product, so let us see where this leads us with regard to the questions raised by our process, encountered resistance, and questions, for as one critic puts it in a debate about Modernism and theory:

“ways of rendering” aren’t just about figural devices; they are also about the vehicles of communication themselves, in all their practical, social forms. In the arts, the impact of technologies is particularly vivid: cinema and photography in particular, had a decisive role.”

(Highmore, 2009, p. 82).

Was this the lesson I had learned from collaborating with a sound artist and a curator? That though you may be looking for one thing, you might end up finding another?

"Nothing follows nothing except change", writes McLuhan in a seminal work titled Understanding Media. “So the greatest of all reversals occurred with electricity, that ended sequence by making things instant. With instant speed the causes of things began to emerge to awareness again, as they had not done with things in sequence and in concatenation accordingly” (McLuhan, 1962, p. 12). Even as a post-modern citizen my identity is threatened with dissolution because I also belong to the old lineal reality while Catherine Clover is clearly a post-modern citizen of a new virtual culture for whom change, multiplicity, and simultaneity are facts of life and lived experience of art-forms. Though it may be true that “with the end of lineal specialisms and fixed points of view, compartmentalized knowledge became as unacceptable as it had always been irrelevant (McLuhan, 1962, p. 253), the massive invasion of electronic media also means a shift from local loyalties such as one’s
own community, region, and nation to consumer loyalties: I buy, therefore I am: I buy Gucci or Nike, therefore I transcend. When even your gran wears Armani and says "just do it" with libidinous glee, the rule of desire is totalised, yet emptied out.

It is exactly the ruthlessness of commodity rule that makes a theme such as drought so dramatic and challenging, for we may be reminded how protected from necessity we are by the comforts of culture and late capitalism. Despite the exigencies of the market (Davis, 2007; 2008), new reality means a new poetry. Since consciousness is strongly influenced by the communication models of electronic media, it would be reasonable to examine poetry for its connection with new technologies. However, this pseudo scientific relation between poetry and new media is not what prompted artistic collaboration in the first place. The relation was less conceptual than intimate, by which I mean driven by an intuitive and retroactive response to Catherine Clover’s work on my part.

The introduction of electronic media in all its diverse aspects has brought a return to acoustic space and the privileging of the spoken word (Gordon, 1997) as is evidenced in the popularity of performance poetry. It has also sparked a sustained interest in processural methods of composition such as the language poetry project, for instance. However the spoken word is far from reproducing the potential of electronic technology, nor is the computer the extension of the nervous system. In performance as in experimentation the computer might offer the possibility of extending consciousness without verbalisation, i.e., enhancing the "dream-work" inherent in composition.

Nearly half a century ago, Mc Luhan identified the audile-tactile model of performance poetry in writers as diverse as Gerard Manley Hopkins, James Joyce (especially Finnegans Wake), and Gertrude Stein. "It is strange," he writes in his seminal work Understanding Media, “that modern readers have been so slow to recognize that the prose of Gertrude Stein with its lack of punctuation and other visual aids, is a carefully devised strategy to get the passive visual reader into participant, oral action” (McLuhan 1964, p. 83). With writers like Gertrude stein, and the language poets, therefore we see literariness joined with the performance participant, oral action” (McLuhan 1964, p. 83). With writers like Gertrude Stein, and the language poets, therefore we see literariness joined with the performance project, more profound issues arise from the sheer question of voice. Barthes’ focus on the “pulsional incidents” inherent in vocal performance is congruent with the more general “definitive discontinuity of the text” that he promotes in The Pleasure of the Text whereby writing becomes “writing aloud” or vocal writing”, a form of writing that is opposed to linguistic closure and to the cultural and political subordinations for which it stands (Barthes, 1975 [1973], pp. 66-67). Thus it could be argued that what we call “voice” is a distributive, rather than univocal, dimension of the signifying chain according to which the subject of the signer is assigned a place in the Symbolic. This claim, just as the impetus of Barthes’s theory is, of course, predicated upon the experience of the unconscious.

For Lacan, the subject experiences the unconscious as “the discourse of the Other”, (Lacan, 1977, p. 193) and it is this alterity that is also to be found, I would argue, in the polyvalent play of images in poetic discourse. Lacan outlines this in his schema L, where he has traced the interaction between the “wall of language” of the Imaginary, and the modes of communication between the subject and the discourse of the other. Dylan Evans explains the point of schema L as demonstrating that

"the Symbolic relation (between the other and the subject) is always blocked to a certain extent, by the imaginary axis (between the ego and the specular image). Because it has to pass through the imaginary ‘wall of language’, the discourse of the other reaches the subject in an interrupted and inverted form.” (Evans, 1996, p. 169)

Hence the imaginary identification between self and image forms a barrier to any real communication between self and other. Any messages which disrupt the specular dyad are filtered out of the communicative pathway, or if not, they are so distorted as to give rise to aggressive responses.
Far from seeing language as transparent in terms of subjectivity, Lacan inverts the Saussurean diagrammatic representation of the concept [signified]/sound pattern [signifier] relationship, putting the signifier on top, with the signified under the bar, S/s. He argues that signifiers are combined in a signifying chain; meaning does not arise in the individual signifier, but in the connection between signifiers. Saussure had admitted that there can occur a shift or sliding in the relationship between signifier and signified. Lacan argues that not only are the two realms never united, but that there is an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier. In order to emphasise this separateness, Lacan introduced a cut into the Saussurean sign, with a new emphasis on the bar as a formula of separateness.

In a complex series of theorisations, to which this conspectus can do scant justice, Lacan sees the self as an interlocking and dynamic constellation, differentiating between the ego and the subject, the subject of speech and the subject of being, with the former being a fictive creation of the imaginary order, brought into being by the misrecognition of the self in the Mirror Stage, while the latter is part of the symbolic order (Lacan, 1977 [1949], p. 128). He sees both of these facets of the self operating within three orders: the Imaginary order of the mirror stage, the Symbolic order of language and law, and the Real order of drives, the somatic and instincts. These three orders are interconnected, and operate at an intersubjective level, providing different perspectives on events in the life of the self: “it is in relation to the same actions, the same behaviour, that we can distinguish precisely the functions of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real” (Lacan, 1988 [1953-54], p.113). The Real at stake here is very different from Stein’s real. It is indeed that which is beyond symbolisation, and therefore beyond words.

In Seminar XI Lacan refers to a famous episode from Sartre’s Being and Nothingness (1956 [1943]) to illustrate the split between the look and the gaze. The episode is articulated in two steps. First, “I am looking through a keyhole.” Second, “I hear the sound of footsteps in the hallway, I am being looked at”. Thus whereas he is there, “looking through the keyhole,” he is “a pure spectator subject, absorbed by the spectacle, unaware of himself.” He is not “conscious of himself in a positional mode,” as he puts it, and strictly speaking, “in this ‘looking through the keyhole,’ I am nothing.” He attempts to describe for us a “conscious of himself in a positional mode,” as he puts it, and strictly speaking, “in this ‘looking through the keyhole,’ I am nothing.” He attempts to describe for us a pure spectator subject, absorbed by the spectacle, unaware of himself. However, this Other is not the Other of language and the law. It is the voice of the primary Other, namely the m’ Other. And the grain of this voice is the thingness of das Ding. We are in uncanny territory—that which arouses anxiety because it “goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud, 2003 [1919], p. 124). It is that which in turn veils our “obscure object of desire”, namely the maternal, incestuous, and therefore forbidden, one. The uncanny, in fact, represents our terror at the possibility of non-being and non-signification.

So what is the voice that we hear when it is not sounding? It is the voice of the Other. However, this Other is not the Other of language and the law. It is the voice of the primary Other, namely the m’ Other. And the grain of this voice is the thingness of das Ding. We are in uncanny territory—that which arouses anxiety because it “goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud, 2003 [1919], p. 124). It is that which in turn veils our “obscure object of desire”, namely the maternal, incestuous, and therefore forbidden, one. The uncanny, in fact, represents our terror at the possibility of non-being and non-signification.

By way of conclusion: the object and its phantoms

At a time when there had been so much talk of the domination of the image, when discussions of intermediality tended to be linked to film and visuality rather than sound I attempted to promote instead a poetics of defamiliarisation and ambivalence centred on the audio-tactile dimension of poetry. In the light of collaboration and audience response, this approach turned out to foreground a poetics of non-identity and perverse validation of sound and material medium against meaning whereby the intended self-reference, indeterminacy and autonomy of the work was meant to dispute the postmodern fallacy that “anything goes.” Autonomy, however proved to be a cage of meaning, a prison house of sound where the object cause of desire was calling for ownership by the law of (visual) language, the “phantom objectivity” of the scopic field. This may explain the anxiety experienced by the curator and some patrons. They instinctively recoiled from the spectre of das Ding at the heart of the “real” while yearning for the reassuring symbolic support of the scopic field.
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