A Sensible Voice

The Aphonic, Polyphonic and Omniphonic registers

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Abstract

This thesis provides an introduction to a ‘language of the voice’ that my works locate in the relationships we make between provisional subjects of the self and language.

The practical works function like a set of sensible registers for the voice which help me to explain a presence that cannot be represented.

At times a correspondence occurs between the works themselves and those of others who have made their practice in the 20th and 21st centuries.

One of the aims of my research is to reveal a voice that talks about art in a way that exists as if a-part from the confines of historical categories.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the preface,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is 12,018 words as approved by the RHD Committee.

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(Mark Hoffman)

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................. I
List of Images .................................................................................................... IV
Foreword ............................................................................................................ 1
Introduction ......................................................................................................... 3
Section 1 - The Aphonic Register ................................................................. 5
Section 2 - The Polyphonic Register ........................................................... 14
Section 3 - The Omniphonic Register ......................................................... 28
Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 41
Bibliography ..................................................................................................... 44
Appendix .............................................................................................................. 47
List of Images

          
          
          
          
Image 5  Mark Hoffman, *Sound Drawing (Maribyrnong Creek)*, 2015.  
          
          
          
          
          
          
          

Foreword

When we see the word “light” we take it that the presence of light has enabled us to see the word in the first instance. Likewise when we hear the word “air” we take it the presence of air has enabled us to hear, and when we feel the word “touch” we take it some movement across a surface has enabled us to feel the presence of something.

When we say the word voice, however, when we give voice to the voice, so to speak, it is immediately clear that we are talking about a different type of presence completely.

It is a common conceit of language or of this foreword at least, that we might find a way to discuss this difference if we look to what is already written. What we do most as human beings living on the surface of this earth is take things. Our senses take light, air and feelings from our worldly surrounds, and we use them to supplant our bodily needs.

This is why the voice itself is fundamentally different; the primary function of the voice is giving.

The voice is what enables us to give a kind of something of ourselves back to the world. One of the things the voice enables us to give is Harmony. It also lets us give Dissent. But there is another difference in the voice that we might help to distinguish if we listen to some everyday figures of speech.

We quite commonly speak of the voice as something that lets us see, but the voice itself contains no light so how can this possibly be? Similarly if the voice itself contains no air how is it that we are able to hear it speak? Again, most would agree we cannot possibly touch our voice, but who would deny a voice has the capacity to move us? how is it the voice produces feelings?

We must first admit that we are talking about more than one type of voice here; more than one voice is always involved in speaking.
In the opening paragraphs, for example we are clearly speaking in a public voice, but our questions point to the existence of another voice, inside our heads, where there is no light, or air; a place we cannot ever possibly hope to touch, it’s a private voice that we can only ever speak about paradoxically.

We might choose to see this paradox as a lack of imagination, or a failure in the textual capacity of our language. We might likewise refer to this absence of words as the simple reflection of a void, and gesture toward the impossibly vast and other nature of our public experience.

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than can be dreamt of in your philosophy,” as William Shakespeare poetically said.

We might also choose to think of this latter supposition as the silent bribe of Hamlet.¹

¹ (Shakespeare and Hibbard 2008) 1.5.167-8
Introduction

The call for a way to talk in simpler terms about the voice and its relationship to art requires a certain kind of response, and there is nothing to say this kind of response need be anything other than entirely logical, sparse and pragmatic.

Any mention of the voice, of course, invites all manner of responses; we might simply grunt dismissively at the subject, inadvertently sneeze or shout, we could sit here quietly muttering to ourselves, we might even be inclined to tear our hair out.

None of these replies will bring us noticeably closer to explicating our notion of a sensible voice however, quite the contrary. For they are simply outward expressions of a body that seems to want speak in its own tongue at times but in so doing can only manage to produce an inexplicable cacophony.

My practical works resists the urge to try to represent the voice as a singular subject of the self therefore, they know that any attempts to do so are futile and will only ever bring forth grief. They do not respond to the question of what a voice might essentially be; as such, another approach is necessary.

The works suggest we should in the first place ask: “What does this voice we want to speak of sound like?” To be more precise, we should ask: “What kind of register is the voice we want to speak of in?” If we take this alternate tack the works appear to open up their mouths and provide us with a set of definitions to begin with.

To name the registers that will constitute the beginnings of our ‘language of the voice’, we must first define the kind of subject under discussion. We must also have an understanding of its corresponding language.

Developing this knowledge is more than a matter of chance. Knowingness may be derived from a type of nothingness, or so it seems; but it requires in the
first place spending an extended amount of time in the company of the works doing little more than listening.

The first of my works speaks about the metaphysical subject and its relationship to a language ‘before the light’; this marks a language I sense in some of the darker tracts of philosophy.

When I ask this first work: “What does the relationship between the metaphysical subject and a language before the light sound like?” It responds with the register explored in section one; the name of this register is *Aphonic*.

My work that I will refer to in section two wants to speak about the social subject and its relationship to a language that is ‘in the air’. This second work explores a voice that tries to remain at all times apolitical; it exists in a register that we will refer to as *Polyphonic*.

In the third section of this thesis I will discuss the desiring subject and its relationship to a language that is ‘after objects’. The third set of works wants to talk about an immersive kind of voice that we can find in a register which we will come to know of as *Omniphonic*.

It is not enough for me to say: ’Here these are my works’ and these are the kinds of voices they produce and you as a reader might simply like it or lump it, so to speak.

In each section of this thesis I open up a dialogue between my works and the works of other artists, creative practitioners and critical theorists that produce and/or refer to a voice which seems to find its place in a similar register.

Providing my works as a point of entry to the discourse of others shows that my research is distinctly practice-led. I am never entirely certain about the academic efficacy of any outcomes that result from taking this approach, but it does produce some ‘sensible’ understandings nonetheless.
Section 1 - The Aphonic Register

*Aphonic* - mouthed but not spoken; noiseless; silent

If there is anything more silent than an empty page then I for one am inclined to say I do not know what it is. Sitting here at this very moment, with nothing but the blankness of a screen before me, I can almost feel its virtual emptiness engulf me.

I don’t mind saying the presence of this nothingness brings a kind of apprehension to my mind, and with it an even more disquieting reminder of being; That the time we spend here on this bright blue planet may be largely insignificant at the end of the day. It may be that nothing we do here really matters at all, not in the universal scheme of things.

But is there anything more pointless than a body that simply acquiesces to its fate? I think not, so what then are the alternatives? Perhaps we should “Rage, rage against the dying of the light,” as Dylan Thomas romantically suggested.²

The first of my works is one of a series of drawings I made, which respond to the provocation of an empty page, but in a way that is more workman-like than romantic. It is enough to say this work began as if by chance for me one day, when I happened to be looking for a new way forward with my practice.

I had cleared a lot of debris that always accumulates in my studio and unrolled a large section of unused paper across a panel laid directly on the floor. And so it began, another one of those periods of creative standoff that seem to punctuate my artistic life, where it could be said that absolutely nothing was definitively happening.

Very often I walk away from the work at times like these, step outside to stretch my legs, feel the sky on my face and take the air. On this occasion I happened to find a number of small plastic domes (the kind people might use

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² (Thomas 1971)
to mark out boundaries on a sporting field for example) in an industrial skip at the bottom of the external stairs.

It’s hard for me to say what prompted the decision I eventually made, which was to use these discarded forms as a means of making drawings. (Image 1) It could be said that I possess a natural affinity for the unwanted, an empathy for things that have been cast aside, a compulsion to reveal what the world might have overlooked and give it a new kind of utility.

It is probably all these things, and more, not the least of which is an inherent dislike for that feeling of inertia that doing nothing brings. And there was, of course, that gleaming white expanse of nothingness on the floor, calling out its challenge; do something, just do it, do anything!

I commenced the series of drawings I am referring to by placing two of the domes onto the empty page and pouring powdered graphite through a hole in the top of each. Then I hooked my thumbs through these self-same holes, spread my fingers down the sides of the forms and began to work the material across the surface, slowly at first, lightly smearing.

I have neglected to mention that I was also filming this work. I often do this; I find it gives another dimension to my process. When you draw the way I do, well let’s just say a lot of the more beautiful moments can get lost along the way. Often the original work is also discarded, as is the case with this particular piece.

In the following days I took the space of nothingness to task. Graphite can be used as an industrial lubricating agent and it allowed the forms to flow with little or no impedance. I abandoned my prescriptive thoughts to the sounds of the movements I was making, to the rhythms of my body, to the sheer pleasure of releasing physical energy, to the simple joy of making art in the absence of any conscious reason.

I decided this work was finished when I reached the limits of my materials; that is to say, when the page refused to take more graphite to its dark and
burnished field. That night I uploaded the video I had made to my personal computer, and when I played it back I discovered something startling.

Before the raw white noise that ebbs and flows though space, within the dark and polished void, I noticed the reflection of two disembodied arms, spiralling back from beyond the nothingness, towards a surface beyond their reach.

I say that I was startled by this discovery, because as far as I can recall I was entirely oblivious to this image until I saw it in the video; until the physical act of making the work was complete.

This video exists now as an archival record that speaks about the presence of a metaphysical subject, marked by a language before light, and if I listen I can hear a voice somewhere deep within.

The work becomes something of a sensible register for this voice, it is a silent voice, an *aphonic voice*, I want to say it passes through my work, but I have no evidence to support this statement, it is really just a feeling.
There is a small scrap of paper. Its image floats in time and space. This scrap of paper contains some hastily scrawled text. The text reads *Sons durant et partant de different points et formant une sculpture sonore qui sure*. The words are written in Duchamp’s own hand.

Translated in English this text reads “Musical Sculpture. Sounds lasting and leaving from different places and forming a sounding sculpture that lasts.” This work, *Sculpture Musicale*, thought to have been composed in 1913, is one of three known pieces that comprise the entire musical oeuvre of Marcel Duchamp.

If we were to take the video of my drawing in the context of this fragment we might say a kind of blurring occurs in my work, between drawing, sculpture, video and sound; but this is not my actual intent.

I only cite this note here as a way of moving through to the work of another well known 20th century artist more directly concerned with the notion of silence.

Sometime in the late 1960s Duchamp gifted the score for *Sculpture Musicale* to that icon of the sonic inventory, John Cage. Sometime between then and a performance in Tokyo in 1986, Cage rewrote the score through a concrete compositional process that he came to call mesostic.

In Cage’s own words:

(A mesostic) is a string which spells a word or name not necessarily connected with what is being written though it may be. This vertical rule is lettristic and in my practice the letters are capitalised. Between two capitals in a perfect or 100% mesostic neither letter may appear in lower case. In an imperfect or 50% mesostic the first letter may reappear but the second is not permitted until its appearance on the second line as a capital in the string.³

What I find more interesting than the stylistic conventions Cage uses to construct these pieces is that the works are created for performance by two instruments; The spoken voice and language.

³ (Ma 2008) 133
When I listen to a recording of this work⁴, to the lilting tones of the now deceased Cage wafting lightly across the incidental sounds of a nighttime cityscape, I fancy I can also detect another presence.

I recognise the pull of its noiseless kind of nothingness, talking about a language before the light, drawing me towards a place of boundless openness that is at the same time irretrievably deep. This silent voice, this *Aphonic* voice, reveals to me one of the clearest conditions of our metaphysical subject; it exists beyond the limits of my thinking.

This voice seems to say that I might devote a hundred pages to an exploration of its presence and not come any closer to an understanding of its being. The simple fact remains; I have chosen to try to speak about it here because I noticed it in both my own and Cage's work; so how might we proceed?

John Cage is perhaps most famous for his tactical assertion that there is no such thing as silence, which he attempts to demonstrate in his most notorious work composed in 1952. Commonly referred to as the ‘Silent Piece’ this score requires a performer to sit at a piano and mark off a series of three movements in time, without making a sound. The duration of this performance and hence its title is 4'33".

In Cage's own words:

> The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance. At Woodstock, N.Y., August 29 the title was 4'33" and the three parts were 33", 2'40" and 1'20". It was performed by David Tudor, Pianist, who indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, the key board lid. However, the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.⁵

In the absence of any sound produced by the onstage performer, the audience is compelled to listen to the incidental noise of their immediate surroundings. To the sounds of shifting feet, to an inadvertent cough, to the occasional

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⁴ (Cage 2010) 2

⁵ (Daniels, Arns, and Cage 2012) 131
nervous laugh, to raindrops on the roof, to the sounds of traffic filtering in from a busy street.

We might say that Cage displaces the presence of silence by revealing the non-intentional noises of our physical surroundings within this work; that he locates the audience in a sounding field and invites us all to open up our ears, to experience a more attentive mode of listening.

But might not we, as attentive listeners, also surmise from this performance that a silence does indeed exist, albeit in a place where we cannot hear it?

Cage’s 4’33” does not reveal the end of silence as such, it is instead a listening event which locates the beginning of silence beyond the limits of audibility.

It is “reminiscent of Heidegger’s circumscription of the boundary as ‘not that at which something stops’, but ‘from which something begins its essential unfolding’, less ‘place’ than operation, an endless doubling and dividing, a perpetual renegotiation impervious to permanence and finitude.”

This movement away from a founding source is of course always a movement towards ‘something’. Towards the voice, towards language, towards the compulsion to speak… so might we think of the silent voice as a kind of transitory essence that always leaves us when we say something?

This idea that a silence always leaves us when we speak implies a silence that stops, it implies a silence is always broken in the bringing of our being to voice, a silence that is lost at the moment of vocal sounding.

This would trouble our underlying premise that a silent voice somehow persists within the listening world but for the fact that, for Heidegger, silence can never be lost at the moment of speech, because silence was never soundless to begin with.

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6 (Melia 2011) 487
David Nowell Smith says Heidegger “argues that silence, Stille (also translated as “stillness”), is by no means the ‘sound-less’ (Lautlos), that is, the absence of sound, but lies anterior to any sound-soundless opposition.” 7

He goes on to say “Indeed, the German Stille incorporates both silence and stillness, allowing Heidegger to depict the “sounding” of language as a form of movement into appearance. The “Saying” which effects such motion would be silent/still both by virtue of lying anterior to verbal language and by virtue of its excess over verbal language.” 8

This conception of silence, as something anterior to and in excess of verbal language makes a lot of sense to me. I will return to the notion of excess at a later point in this thesis. In the context of this section though this inevitable movement - the stillness of this impetus towards the noisy light of appearance - is a little problematic.

I have chosen to characterise the aphonous voice as referring to a language before the light, and while its true enough to say that I have noticed it in passing through my work that is not the same thing as saying it has come any closer to making an appearance.

The other difficulty I have is that my definition of the aphonous voice is an ‘unspoken voice’ and this depiction of silence as a ‘dynamic kind of stillness’ exists within the act of actually saying something.

The darkness descends upon me yet again. I am as if doubly perplexed. For the third time I feel as if I have pushed this discussion beyond the limits of what makes sense, even to someone so clearly out there as I seem to be.

By all accounts there is nothing really clear that I can say about the presence I seem to have encountered in my practice and the very act of trying to do so is contradictory.

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7 (Smith 2013) 24
8 (Smith 2013) 25
As if falling with a thought, the aphonic voice eats language, I find my mind returning to one of the questions I posed in the foreword; If the voice itself contains no light how does it enable us to see?

I am inclined to think now that what the voice enables us to see is nothing more than the silent chimera of our own seeing through-ings.

The Aphonic voice belongs to a site that cannot be spoken of because, as we have seen, the site of an aphonic voice itself can never really be said. It resides, then, in a place that is before what can be thought, heard, seen or spoken of directly in the light of the world, it is in a site-less place, yet I am still inclined to believe it exists here nonetheless.

I will draw this opening exploration to a close now by referring to one of Martin Heideggers' early poems Wir Lesen (The Readers), as related to by Martin Travers in the following,

Wir lesen is a poem of delicate intimacy; not on account of any private disclosures but because it centres on an experience that is bonding two people. The title of the poem invites us to imagine these individuals absorbed, quite independently of one another, in the process of reading. They are turned inwards against the harsh conditions without, the snow falling. The couple are together yet apart, and the poem attempts to capture the mystery of a communion that is achieved without words (the ‘ungesagtes Zugetrautes’ of line 7). It is this state of achieved harmony and serenity that is the ‘Vermo ¯gen’ enjoyed by the subjects of the poem.\(^9\)

I provide this reading here as a brief repose and because it reveals to me what I would like to finally suggest; That if, as it has been elsewhere stated, there is an aphonic voice at the heart of western metaphysics, then maybe it dwells there in the presence of a breath.\(^{10}\)

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\(^9\) (Travers 2012) 95

\(^{10}\) For more on metaphysical notions of the dwelling see - (Heidegger 1971)
Section 2 - The Polyphonic Register

*Polyphonic - producing or involving many sounds or voices*

When sound leaves the breath we hear it as a voice, but is this the case in every instance? If I were to pass my breath through the body of an instrument, does it produce a voice? Or does it remain a sound? Is there any difference?

I am inclined to think the sounds produced by a recorder, for example, always retain, or in some way never cease to stop becoming, a vestige of the breath. Perhaps this is what gives them a haunting, emotive - yes lets just say it - poetic quality.

This leads me to suggest that a ‘voice’ people talk about when they refer to these sounds is really just a way to talk about another more private, rather uncanny sense that something unsayable is also happening.

It seems reasonable then to say that the ‘voice’ of an instrument is a voice which never really leaves the aphonic vocal register.

That whilst an instrument can produce many different types of sounds, we might knock a recorder against the leg of a chair for instance, these sounds are always bound to a kind of silent vocal register.

If we were to look for a difference between the sound of our voice and the sound of an instrument we might find it in the variety of sounds they make and their capacity to speak of other subjective registries.

We might place the two in a position of diametric opposition and more clearly say the following.

An instrument can be polyphonic on its own, in a musical sense, but only spoken of as being present in a single vocal register; but the inverse is true for the human voice; it can never be polyphonic on its own because it can only produce a single kind of sound, albeit one that can be spoken of as a multiplicity of vocal registers.
Contentious as these statements might seem, they help with what I am really wanting to propose, which, is that it would be a mistake to start talk about the polyphonic register as if it originated in the breath of a single individual.

That is to say that any discussion about a polyphonic register must always begin by referring to the presence of multiple bodies, which quickly leads me to the social space, but I never know quite how to put that properly.

According to Hannah Arendt,

> The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state.  

She goes on to say this social space is governed by an invisible ruling hand which seeks to exclude moments of private intimacy and public excellence. This sounds like a hand that tries to standardise social behaviour, a hand that seeks to silence the power of dissenting voices by absolving them of their difference?

We need look no further than a recent ruling by our current government for evidence of this ruling hand, which is far from invisible these days, so we can be sure of its political persistence. I am referring to a statement made in relation to a decision to cease funding to the remotest of our aboriginal communities, on the basis that living there is a lifestyle choice; really?

The second of my works resists the urge to stage an overt demonstration against the perception of specific social injustices on the basis that this kind

11 Far be it from me to presume to speak on behalf of the indigenous peoples of our country but It seems clear, that even from an outsiders perspective, a statement like this is meant to grossly misconstrue the nature of aboriginal relationships to land. In my understanding an aboriginal community does not choose the lands from which they come, it is more like the land which chooses them.
of response will inevitably fall upon deaf ears. It chooses instead to adopt an apolitical approach; we can find the origin of this work in other objectives.

The first objective was to, as far as possible, remove the presence of my hand from the making process; the second was to open up a series of public sites where we might simply listen. I also had in mind the idea that a polyphonic register must somehow belong to a *place-less site*, I can’t say why exactly, it was just one of those thoughts that seems to glisten.

When I say this phrase again to myself, *place-less site*, I am reminded of the *site-less place*, where we found our aphonic voice in the previous section of this thesis. The two phrases put quite simply sound a lot alike, we might even say they share a kind of belonging to somewhere, despite an obvious difference in the physicality of their referents.

The idea of a *place-less site* allows for a kind of likening to occur between the polyphonic and aphonic registers in our writing, thoughts and acts. The *place-less site* is essentially porous therefore in nature, and it does not privilege the presence of sounding voices over those that we might perceive to be silent for various reasons.\(^{13}\)

In the context of this thesis we might say the idea of a *place-less site* enables us to co-locate our provisional subjects of the self, as if they were all in an auditory envelope of sorts; which enables a sensible correspondence.

If we were to stop here for a moment, as if to catch our breath, and reconsider what has been written in the introduction to this section, if we were to reflect on what has been said thus far, what might we see?

I propose that what we might see here are some of the conditions of a social subject, which wants to speak about a polyphonic voice, in a language of air, and to say these conditions are that it must be open, it must be current and it must be corresponding.

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\(^{13}\) It is not so much the silence voice of theoretical metaphysics that the Sensible voice wants to retain as the site-less places of Poetry, the Breath and Instrumental Music.
I made a work that wants to speak about the aural immensity of this premise by placing a four track digital sound recorder onto a rudimentary platform and casting it across four distinctly separate bodies of water located around the Melbourne metro area and CBD. (Images 2,3,4,5)

I employed a video documentary maker to film these public occasions and also constructed four kinetic sculptures to accompany these public works in the privacy of my own studio so to speak.

The recording platform itself consists of a small inflatable inner tube that I bought at Bunnings Warehouse; the circular top of a plywood stool purchased from Ikea, and a round alloy bracket from the underside of a drummers seat.

I repurposed this bracket to hold the digital sound recorder; I found the drummer’s seat lying on the street.

It took very little effort on my part to assemble these items in a manner that made the platform fit for purpose. To be perfectly honest it was almost like the assemblage was fated to be.

The inner tube from Bunnings was an inch or so greater in diameter than the seat top from Ikea and the alloy bracket from the drummers seated bolted directly up to four tapered holes that had been predrilled into its underside, the original purpose of these holes was to hold the Ikea seat top legs.

All that was needed of me was to make an outer set of leg holes slightly larger, just enough to pass a few cable ties through, which I used to attach the seat top mounted bracket to the inner tube. As an apparatus it was all but complete.

The only other intervention required was when I discovered the handle of the sound recorder was slightly smaller than the bracket meant to hold it, so I placed a square of rubberised material across the opening of the bracket and pushed the handle through. This held the recorder snugly.

The potential for disaster in casting electronic recording equipment across a body of water is vast, so I tested the buoyancy of this device before venturing
further afield. It’s fair enough to say the platform performed well enough in that it floated effortlessly across the surface of a moat located just outside the National Gallery of Victoria.

As I mentioned before the public recordings I made are meant to be accompanied by a set of four kinetic sculptures which I constructed in my studio, I want to turn to describe these now, and try to keep it brief. I have always been drawn to the potential of using magnets in my practice, and the premise of this work provided me with a practical opportunity.

The sculptures consist of four triangular frames, dimensions variable. Just as an aside, I made one of these triangles with each of its sides being 433 mm. To the flat outer surface of each of these relatively narrow steel constructions I attached a square block of rare earth magnet; each magnet attracts a weight of up to 80 kg, so again a great deal of care was needed.

The sculptures also consist of four sets of 20 smaller circular magnets, threaded onto thin wire cables; these cables are normally used to hang a lighting track from the ceiling of a gallery.

I attached these cables to the wall of my studio and drew the triangles near, close enough to hold the cables up in midair, using only the force between the magnets, but not so close that the two parts of the sculpture were actually touching.

We might say these works make an interruption in the relationship between a fixing point and the ground beneath; they resonate with an untouched sound\(^{14}\), the way they perform themselves then is entirely context dependant.

If we consider them here in the context of the other two works, the polyphonic voice becomes more evident.

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\(^{14}\) For more on the idea of an untouched sound see - (Dr Toby Juliff 2008)
The sculptures allow for an open moment in time and space, which the videos refer to as a field of incidental traces; a dialogue occurs between the two, and reveals the *place-less site*, it becomes in a certain sense unconcealed.¹⁵

The mixed-down sound recordings occupy this *place-less site*, as well as any noises that are made by the presence of the audience themselves; the installation registers the presence of the polyphonic social voice, speaking in a language of the air, it becomes an auditory envelope of sorts; it is always open, always current and corresponding.

The first aspiration of this polyphonic work is to provide a *place-less site* where an audience might encounter the presence of an auditory envelope, to allow them to bare witness at the limits of a sounding field.

The second is to make the gallery walls appear to fall away; this aspiration might be better served if the images of sites and sounds were coming through in real time, it’s just a question of technology at the end of the day.

The third is to properly admit the audience to the presence of the work itself, to make any sounds they make whilst in the space a-part of what the work is actually doing.

The fourth is that the audience may gain a physical sense of the polyphonic social voice here and hear it in all its aural responding.

¹⁵ For more on the art of unconcealment see - (Bolt 2011)


John Cage is quoted as saying it was an experience of the ‘White Paintings’ of Robert Rauschenberg which gave him the courage to compose his notorious silent piece “4’ 33”.

Actually what pushed me into it was not guts but the example of Robert Rauschenberg. His white paintings. When I saw those, I said, ‘Oh yes, I must; otherwise I’m lagging, otherwise music is lagging.’

Whilst this is the oft-stated case, it is clear from Cage’s own admissions that the idea for a silent work had been with him at least since the composition of a lecture that he delivered at a National Inter-Collegiate Arts Conference held at Vassar four years previously.

I’d thought of it (4’ 33”) already in 1948 and gave a lecture which is not published, and which won’t be, called ‘A Composer’s Confessions.’

We can read two things in these quotes from Cage, the first is his notion of a conversation taking place between music and visual arts of the day and his desire to see music maintain an equal footing. The second is his desire that the origin of his silent piece should remain to a certain extent private, his own personal disclosures notwithstanding.

The white paintings of Rauschenberg were, by contrast, largely devoid of any reference to the private space, they were - quite simply put - empty canvasses. Devoid of the expressive outpourings characteristic of the time, they allowed for the complex and changing play of light and shadow and the presence of dust, they are in a monochromatic conversation with public settings.

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16 (Kahn 1997) 562
17 (Kahn 1997) 563
18* In “Confessions of a Composer” Cage writes of his desire to “compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzac Co. It will be 3 or 4 1/2 minutes long - those being the standard lengths of “canned” music - and its title will be Silent Prayer. It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the colour and shape and fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility.”
It makes sense then for us to say that a conversation between music and visual art of the day was one which was preoccupied with the relationship between notions of private and public experience.

That an incidental likeness in ideas which underpin the work of both Rauschenberg and Cage opened up a field of play in which to consider a new form of art, one that went beyond the traditional definitions of aesthetics.

This field has long been referred to as the founding ground of contemporary performance art; it allowed for artists like Allan Kaprow to conceive of and perform his open minded happenings. Other groups like Fluxus and the Situationists quickly followed; drawn by the promise of a limitless arena in which to explore the social politics of the body.

If there is anything that characterises Nauman’s art - from his first forays into objects, performances and films during his student days at Davis in the 1960’s, to his aurally massive sound pieces in the first decade of the 21st century - its a deep, persuasive and sometimes militant matter of factness.19

Most of artist Bruce Nauman’s work returns to the self-same question, almost ad infinitum:

What is a person, designated a priori as an artist, supposed to do that will result in something called art? 20

But more than this, his work also asks about what is being done to the artist?

Somewhere in there he began thinking of his own body’s vertical centreline as the axis of his evolving and revolving universe of ideas.21

We might say that Nauman’s body becomes interred as an irretrievable object in the making of his work, his actions often refer to the practice of art itself as something of a folly. He makes an instrument of himself as the subject of his process; what is being done to the artist?

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19 (Plagens 2014) 26

20 (Plagens 2014) 563

21 (Plagens 2014) 26
We might be inclined to think his voice at least is somehow made *Aphonic*.

Bruce Nauman was selected to be the sole representing American artist at the 2009 Venice Biennale. One of the works he made for this mini retrospective came out of a time spent in his studio when he happened to find himself productively dumbfounded.

I sat here in the studio, day after day, depressed, trying to come up with something. Susan would come in occasionally and ask me if I even knew what day it was. Then it occurred to me to do something with the days of the week which kept going by while I was trying to think of what to do.22

We might imagine that what actually occurs for Nauman here is something like a moment of sensible transcendence.23

The reason we are able to suppose this event takes place is due to the fact that if not for the first time, then uncharacteristically for this artist at least, Nauman forgets himself for a moment and manages to find some inspiration in a source of ideas that are always taking place as if beyond him.

I am not going to presume to know the nature of Nauman's thoughts at this particular moment in time, but what I will do is turn to the work he makes in order to make a proposition; that what I think the final work shows is something rather like a return to the moments of a conversation taking place between Rauschenberg and Cage, the one that we mentioned previously.

Here is a physical description of the work *Days/Giorni* that Nauman made in response to the call for a site specific installation in Venice:

The English and Italian versions of the piece are physically identical save for the dimensions of the installation dictated by their venues. Down both sides of the installation’s room were seven speakers made of a new audio material that can be cut to size (in this case about 60cm/2 feet a side), like Foamcore board, positioned at about 3-4 metre intervals at roughly head height, held taut by small-gauge cables extending to the floor and the ceiling. The soundtrack is simply - or rather not so simply - voices

22 (Plagens 2014) 26

23 For more on moments of sensible transcendence see - (Irigaray 1999)
reciting the names of the days of the week. The English version is spoken by professional actors, the Italian version by students and faculty at the Venetian university. Each speaker recites, however, only six of the seven days, each successive speaker leaving out, respectively, the first then the second, then the third (and so on) day. The effect - as you traverse the length of the room between the speakers - is as though you are walking through a gentle sonic waterfall. The names of the days begin as a trickle, rise to a steady drenching and proceed to a momentary cascade. The piece goes silent for a few a few seconds but then begins again almost immediately.24

We can read the plain white Foamcore speaker panels as a direct and unmistakable reference to Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* and hear the silent presence of Cage in the almost incidental recitations of the names of the days of the week.

What Nauman does is in effect fold key notions which underpin the aesthetics of the original works together to produce an audio visual installation that is neither public nor private strictly speaking.

It seems reasonable enough to say then, that the voice of this work is properly a social voice, but what does it sound like? What register do we hear it in?

We have previously made the case that a polyphonic register belongs to a place-less site, which is essentially porous in nature, and can we not properly hear the presence of Nauman’s trademark Aphonic voice25 in the silent interruptions of the vocal soundings?

Even with this being the case, some questions still remain: Does this work go all the way? Does it satisfy our own aspirational definitions of a polyphonic work that we have opined upon previously?

I am particularly concerned about the question of whether or not the rhythms of this piece properly admit the viewer to the presence of the work? The

24 (Plagens 2014) 252

25 There is a handwritten note listed as ‘Schedule for “6 Day Week, 6 Sound Problems” at Dusseldorf Konrad Fischer, Dusseldorf, 1968’ The note contains a schedule of everyday tasks to be completed on 6 of 7 days of the week. The installation also includes a magnetic tape recorder with its tape looped around the backrest of a corner placed chair. When the tape recorder is on, it drags the chair near.
question I really want to ask is: When you walk through a waterfall do you actually become it, even if its sonic?

If we are to stretch the boundaries of what makes sense for a moment we might say that Nauman’s *Days/Giorni* can only ever really be occupied by the presence of angels, that what he does with this work is invite us all to open our ears and listen to them speak.

Whilst this may seem like a pretty apt premise for a site-specific installation, particularly here in Venice, try as I might I cannot hear a polyphony of angels’ voices coming from this work, what I hear is something more like the silent beating of their wings.

The curatorial conceit – but not necessarily the artists – is that *Days/Giorno* is a metaphor for both Nauman’s work reaching out from the Pavilion into the city, and for the city itself, with its constant rondes, fugues, and symphonies of voice heard as you walk... ²⁶

So might we say the work that Nauman actually does here at the Venice Bienale is something which cannot be contained by the places of the installations sites themselves, in fact is not the real work of these works to allow these voices to spill out to the streets?

If this is the case then what Nauman does is cast a vast, yes lets just say it, he makes an auditory envelope of the city streets of Venice, these streets become then something like the *place-less site* that we have been referring to herein.

It is entirely plausible therefore to suggest that it sounds like there might be a likeness going on between the work Nauman made for the Venice Bienale and the polyphonic work I made. We might even go so far as to say that in a broader sense what Nauman’s work in Venice does can be compared to the structural operations of this thesis.

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²⁶ (Plagens 2014) 252
The real difference, of course, is that you must leave Nauman's installation to properly hear the polyphonic voice of the social subject at work, and in my work you need to be there to hear it speak.
Section 3 - The Omniphonic Register

Omniphonic - Pertaining to multi-directional sound. 360 degrees on both the horizontal & vertical planes

It seems pretty clear, to me at least, that we must immerse ourselves in the body of this text to hear the Omniphonic voice of a desiring subject speak.

It also seems clear that our object of desire is to provide a clearer understanding of what might constitute a language of the voice referred to in the abstract statement of this thesis.

What is less clear is how we are to find this language here, in what we are trying to think about as a language after objects.

What I hear here in this text is a voice that wants to speak about a language of the voice that is not silent within itself, but neither does it want to speak about itself as something which is purely sounding; it is nothing quite so obvious.

The text tries to speak about a language we might hear if we immersed ourselves in a field of site-less places, and provides for us to think about this field as a place-less site to begin with.

It draws our attention to the presence of an auditory envelope and quietly suggests we might listen to a correspondence between the silent and sounding voices here; also to the presence of a liminal space between the two which is not so sensibly responding.

The text insists there is a likeness to be found between the sounding and silent voices, but there is also an irresolvable difference.

The inexplicable nature of this relationship is used loosely to sign the presence of site-less places within the work; they are site-less because they are something other to what can be thought, heard, seen or spoken of directly, in the light of the world, but they evidently exist here none the less.
The silent voices of these site-less places belong to a verbal paradox of poetry mentioned in the foreword; the passing presence of a breath in section one; and to the notion of an instrumental thought that seems to glisten in the section preceding this one.

What emerges from the text is that our notion of a silent voice cannot be confined to the metaphysical subject as was first supposed in the introduction to this thesis. Rather than lament my lack of foresight I am inclined to take the liberated presence of these voices here as an opportunity to propose an initial hypothesis:

Firstly, that our language of the voice consists of Aphonic, Polyphonic and Omniphonic registers.

Secondly, our Aphonic register consists of three silent voices and the Polyphonic register sounds like a multiplicity of one.

Thirdly, the voices of these sounding and silent registers can never be synthesised within a singular act of speech.

Fourthly, the Omniphonic register exists between the silent and sounding voices; it also has a voice that we can speak of as being syncretic.

The installation of mine I want to refer to next is an immersive work which consists of at least three Aphonic sculptures and a Polyphonic sound and video piece.

The first of the Aphonic sculptures has its origins in an idea first mentioned in the foreword of this text; that a silent voice exists and might be sensed within a verbal paradox of poetry. (Image 6)

If I return to a moment before the writing of this text I can clearly recall that I began this research project by asking myself “do words have shadows?” - I can also recall that, for a significant amount time, I found myself confounded by the absurdity of this question.
What I eventually came to understand was that an answer to the question lies beyond its initial proposition, that is to say that it exists in the presence of a sensible excess.\textsuperscript{27}

What each of the \textit{Aphonic} sculptures in the installation tries to realise is another proposition which lies beyond an answer to the question: \textit{It’s possible to hear an excess in the presentness of silence which allows for silence to be presented to the world as something other than an absence.}

The first of the sculptures which occupy this work is made of echo board; a product that is commonly used to soundproof rooms. It comes in tough, light sheets of a recycled fibrous composite, easily cut to any desired shape. The panels I came across by chance are grey in colour and have a deep, dense sensuous feel about about them.

As a material it possesses a shadow-like quality which lends itself visually to the notion of a \textit{site-less place} and its physical properties allow me to explore the idea practically. I begin to make this work by cutting a small, often house like shape from a sheet of the material and casting its shadow out across another piece.

Next I cut along the edges of the shadow and score two deep lines back from the outer most corners to the points I made on the leading edge, where the base of the shape and shadow first meet. I proceed by folding the edges of the shadow piece back down along the score lines, until it wants to spring back flat.

To stop this happening I insert small wedges at various points to hold the score lines open, this allows the shadow I made of the original shape to exist as a \textit{site-less place}. The original shape is attached by way of something like a dovetail joint to the back edge of the space the shadow makes, allowing the work to speak.

\textsuperscript{27} For more on notions of the voice and excess see - (Dolar 2006)

The house-like shape itself is flat and yet its shadow has three dimensions; what each piece of this work does is find a silent voice in the form of an impossible proposition.

We can hear a likeness in the conditions of this work’s voice and the voice referred to in the foreword of the text; it is a likeness which can never be represented. This voice reminds us of the object of our desire here, for a language of the voice, which allows us to talk about art in a way that exists as if a-part from the confines of historical categories.

These first Aphonic sculptures give us a way to begin this conversation I think. What they really want to say is that a silent voice of Poetry exists in any work of art that takes a material paradox as the subject of its being.
Claire Bishop argues that to be truly considered an immersive work of art an installation must presuppose ‘a viewing subject who physically enters into the work to experience it’.\textsuperscript{28} She talks about this experience as one which activates the viewer and also implies that this ‘activated spectatorship\textsuperscript{29}’ can only come about as the result of an embodied and ‘transitive relationship’.\textsuperscript{30}

What this definition does is call for a reconsideration of the work we discussed in section one; and what I find is that I cannot include it as the second \textit{Aphonic} work as was originally planned, because quite simply put, the video of the drawing I made does not satisfy these conditions.

The second \textit{Aphonic} sculpture that I subsequently chose for this installation began before I made the noisy drawings referred to in section one. It has always been with me within my practice, we might say that it has been a silent presence dwelling behind the scenes. (Image 8)

It existed before we found our notion of a silent voice in the passing presence of a breath within this thesis, but it allows me to talk about that voice more sensibly than the drawings.

This work consists of white perforated panels, the kind that are commonly used to display tools in a workshop facility. These panels are held together along one edge by white plastic cable ties and at other points by bamboo food skewers which are passed through the perforations to form a structured seam.

The physical construction of the work requires no particular skill, technology or peoples to occur; this obvious lack of practical constraints allows for a making process that is both participatory and open ended.

\textsuperscript{28} (Bishop 2005) 6

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. 6

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid. 6

* Bishop also says that the western history of installation art begins with El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp, goes on to discuss Environments and Happenings of the late 1950s, nods in deference to Minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, rises to its proper form in the 1970s and 1980s and becomes the institutionally approved artform par excellence in the 1990s. It’s worthwhile noting the development of my research displays a similar historical trajectory.
It would be wrong of me to try to define any final form this work might take, given the collaborative approach, but I think that it’s ok for me to suggest a few possibilities.

It might be set up as a square that opens out from each of its sides, or unfolded like a line that concertinas through time, or it could be hung from a wall or ceiling and allowed to spill onto the ground that lay beneath. What interests me more than the way this work can be made to open and close in a given space is a kind of site-less place that the work reveals in the infinitely variable nature of the seam.

What I noticed about these seams when I was conducting studio experiments, is their ability to produce a visual effect.

If you focus intently on the seams, they appear to give a distinct impression of movement; for the briefest of moments they appear to vibrate of their own accord, in utter silence. What the work does is pass this sensation to the viewer like a breath.

This second set of Aphonic sculptures helps articulate another point of departure for further discussion about the voice and its relationship to works of art by disclosing what I might suggest: any work of art that asks viewers to listen with their eyes holds a silent voice, like the passing presence of a breath.
Image 8  

Image 9  
The third set of *Aphonic* sculptures which appears within the work remains essentially unchanged from the description in the *Polyphonic* section of this thesis. With this in mind I will keep brief my explanation of the way in which it allows us to discuss the silent voice and its relationship to works of art.

The sculptures themselves consist of four flat steel triangular frames to which I attach a block of rare earth magnet and four sets of 20 circular magnets threaded onto thin wire cables. These cables are the kind normally used to hang a lighting track from the ceiling of a gallery. (Image 10)

The cables are attached to a practical point within the installation site before the frames are moved to a position on the ground which is just beyond their reach. The attracting force that exists between the two sets of magnets is then used to suspend the cables in open air and hold them there invisibly.

Because the two parts of this work never actually touch, as such, they act to interrupt the relationship between the vertical and horizontal planes of whatever is used to install them in situ, so to speak. In so doing they produce an open moment in time and space; I like to think of this moment as a *site-less place* because what it refers to is an essentially fugitive presence.

The purpose of these instruments is to notice this presence and lend it a musical quality. The cables vibrate, they resonate freely in time and space, but any sound belonging to the *site-less place* itself, between the two sets of magnets, can only exist as if beyond our audible comprehension.

What these pieces do then is reveal a silent voice that denies all physical apprehension. I am inclined to say this voice may be found in any work of art that tests the aural limits of a social premise.

The *Polyphonic* work that occupies the installation space is also largely unchanged from the laborious description I made in one part of the previous section.

It consists of the video images and ambient sounds collected when I cast a digital sound recorder across four distinctly separate bodies of water located around the Melbourne CBD.

In this iteration of the work, the video footage has been edited to present a non-linear sequence of events and the ambient sounds are mixed down to a single track. I have deliberately chosen to loop the video and sound recordings, which are of different lengths, through separate playback machines.

What this work does is provide each member of the audience with an opportunity to engage with art as an essentially asynchronous and unrepeatable lived experience.

Presented with this unfixed and non-representational state, the viewer is invited to find another sense of themselves, by making a correspondence between the presence of the sculptures that exist within the space and the audio visual piece.

In doing this they will be attempting to make a sensible relationship between a set of silent *site-less places* that the sculptures reveal and the sounding *place-less site* that the audio visual piece presents.

Immersed, then, between notions of the Private and the Public, between physical Embodiment and the Disembodied, between the Interiority and Exteriority of social spaces, in moments of activated spectatorship, the works reveal a voice that is poetic, breathy and musical in a transitive sense.

This is the *Omniphonic* voice of the desiring subject which wants to speak about a language after objects. The installation acts to register this voice
through the presence of the viewer; the condition of this voice is both fluid and dynamic.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{31} For more on the way that the meaning of an artwork enters reality see - (Hantelmann 2010)
Conclusion

What might we say, if we were to find a voice here in an ever-expanding field of play? What conclusions have we more or less sensibly come to with this thesis?

To begin with, our language of the voice consists of Aphonic, Polyphonic and Omniphonic registers; also that our Aphonic register can be said to consist of three silent voices whilst the Polyphonic register has a sounding voice that exists as if a multiplicity of one.

Further to this, an irresolvable difference persists between the sounding and silent voices, I am still inclined to think, as I did at the beginning, that without this difference we would find ourselves in a condition of utter voicelessness.

In writerly terms, trying to speak this condition would be akin to opening a vein onto the page, as if to allow the voice to flow forth like a stream. Beautiful maybe, but sensible? well not so much; I do believe this singular selfish act would only lead us back to a state of indecipherable cacophony.

The silent voices are referred to herein as something other to what can be thought, seen, heard or spoken of directly in the light of the world. With the help of my works I have been able to locate these voices in the site-less places of Poetry, the Breath and Instrumental music.

What my Aphonic sculptures do is work to reveal the presence of these silent voices in the world as something other than what’s missing.

I have said in the abstract and at various times throughout this text that one of the things a language of the voice might give us is a way to talk about art that exists as if a-part of the confines of historical categories.

What I have tried to suggest then, when talking about the Aphonic works in particular, is the possibility for an ahistorical relationship to works of art, but one that does not also deprive them of a context.
If we were to cast about for works of art that ‘take a material paradox as the subject of their being’ for example, as the first work does, could we not find such works occurring at various points in time across all cultures and artistic disciplines?

What I really want to ask is whether or not we might loose a sense of silence within the works themselves, to free them from their moorings so to speak? Might we perceive in these works a Poetic voice that is in some sense always open to the present?

Similarly if we were to consider works of art that ask us to ‘listen with our eyes’ as the second work requests, might we sense an aspiration that is shared by all these works? Is there something universal in their presence?

Might we hear in these works a currency of voice that passes through our bodies like a breath?

If we could orchestrate a gathering of works that ‘test the aural limits of a social premise’ as the third work suggest, now, would that be really something? Would we be able to sustain a sense of animas about ourselves?

Might we know of these works the presence of an interdisciplinary voice that corresponds with our lived surroundings?

But I digress.\textsuperscript{32}

The sounding voices are spoken of herein as having an atmospheric sense of presence. With the help of my works I have been able to locate these voices in a \textit{place-less site} that moves about the social field like an incidental rhythm.

The \textit{Polyphonic} work I made tries to realise the transient condition of these sounding voices in the world; what they want to do is present the audience with a distinctly unique and unrepeateable experience. They provide for a

\textsuperscript{32} For more on the way that what is past might be brought together with the now to manifest in the present see (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999)
manifold of individual moments here in time, that are always open, always current and corresponding.

Time and again my research has noticed a likeness that exists between the sounding and silent voices of works of art; I am inclined to think it is this impossible sense of a likeness that enables us to hear their difference.

Between what can and cannot be said about our encounters with the voices of art in the light of an ever-changing world I have also suggested the presence of an *Omniphonic* voice. This is a fluid and dynamic voice, that is to say it is never sounding nor silent, strictly speaking.
Bibliography


44


Appendix

Appendix A - Exhibited Works (on DVD)

Mark Hoffman, *A Sensible Voice* (VCA Install MASTER - H264 w/sound), 2015. DVD.

This DVD contains video documentation of the final installation of works listed as Images 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10 & 12 within the thesis.


The public installation of these works took place as part of the examination process for the degree of Master of Fine Art in the sculpture shed on campus at the Victorian College of the Arts between the 3rd and 9th of December 2015.

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Author/s:
Hoffman, Mark Lawrence

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