The Singing Body—Music and Musicality in the Work of Katarina Zdjelar

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"What is music," German House producer Justus Köhncke asked—without a question mark. That was in 2002, on an album of the same name. On the title track—a curious hybrid of pop song and house track—Köhncke sings that songs can be bridges between people, that if you lose yourself in music you are not alone but together with others, and that there is no longer a beginning and an end. It is a great fantasy of relinquishing and communitarization, an elegiac evocation of the social potential of music. "You are the vibration and the frequency, / You are the trace of an existence," Köhncke says of music itself. "In the presence of music, there is no turning back," he sings in the last line. After that comes a loop playing the same line over and over: What is music?

Katarina Zdjelar's works often deal with music and sound. Her videos—like Köhncke's song—focus on the social connotations of songs and sounds. It's just that at first glance, her conclusion seems much less positive than Köhncke's. Very often, she focuses on precisely the exclusionary potential of sound, language and how we speak (with a certain accent, for example); very often, her work deals with the mechanisms of social and economic exclusion that music and its mastery imply.

Yet there is something to be gained from Köhncke's album when it comes to examining the role of music and sound in Zdjelar's work. *Was ist Musik* is, after all, not without its contradictions. Or as the critic Aram Lintzel in a review written at the time of the album's release commented: "The prelinguistic immediacy of the sonic experience has to [...] remain fiction; it is unattainable."[1] Köhncke makes an album that on the one hand serves as a house record, hearkening to a music that starts by foregoing "language" in the strictest sense of the word—and then sings about his

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Aram Lintzel, "Der Dandy, aus der Disco kam: Justus Köhncke wird wesentlich," in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5/13/2002, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/tontraeger-der-dandy-der-aus-disco-kam-justus-koehncke-wird-wesentlich-163271.html [12.08.2014].

experiences with it. Here, the song really is a bridge, not only between you and me, but first and foremost between music and text. Immediacy meets reflection, "unfiltered" expression meets the thought-out, preconceived variety.

Köhncke's music is a listener's music, even if it appears otherwise at first. It circles its subject and knows what's what: there is no "pure music" in the sense of pure sound, beyond the actual moment in which it is taking place. Music has always been hopelessly mired in history, in systems, is always a language that one can learn based on codes and conventions that have to be mastered in order to be "read." It is only from there that a supposedly pure tone constructs itself as something that came before all else, and only appears to be "immediate." This circular argument supplies this supposedly "prelingual" characteristic of language with a contrasting foil against which it can position itself in relation to the thought-out and non-primal: an abstruse system of the inside-being-outside, and vice versa.

At their core, Zdjelar's videos are about reception. Her works present themselves in a very similar way, as an inextricable tangle of constant reading, speaking, singing, access to the lyrics accompanying sound, the unruliness of raw sound as opposed to lyrics: the seeming "naturalness" of an ineluctable physical voice meets a socially established system that is structured as language. Her works skillfully blend sound and image into a composite of audio-video objects, or highly artificial studio products—entirely counter to the documentary character they seem to have at first sight. At times we see images that should be accompanied by sound, but we don't hear it; other times, we hear the sound but see no image to go with it. Sometimes the sound is audibly post-recorded, sometimes it clearly sounds spatial and, one can assume, part of a visible tableau. Just as sound and image dovetail into a composite whole at the technical level, the bodies of Zdjelar's protagonists (as an imagined site of raw expression) are inextricably tied to the social.

My lifetime (Malaika) from 2012 shows the National Symphony Orchestra of Ghana rehearsing the well-known Swahili song 'Malaika'. From the start, even before the sound begins, we see an old, scratched bass followed by equally old, bony hands. At some point the music begins, slowly, and not without dissonance. We see rusty music stands, the apathy of some orchestral musicians, sweat on necks and foreheads; spent faces and strained eyes that struggle, at times, to follow the conductor's lead. The video ends as it began: with pictures of instruments and musicians—but without

music. The trombonist can hardly keep his eyes open; in close-up we see his head drop to his chest beside his scarred instrument.

The orchestra and its performance reveal the traces of colonial history. They demonstrate the precarious financial situation of the orchestra, while the players' tired eyes show that many of its members have to hold down other jobs to earn their livelihood. The eye "reads" (with the appropriate background knowledge) the images to find reasons for the slightly off-key performance on the soundtrack. This orchestra is a far cry from the apparent effortlessness and virtuosity typical of Western symphony orchestras (the very idea of the symphony orchestra itself is a legacy of colonial history). Music is hard work here, and is not worth it. It is the mark of both postcolonial hierarchies and economic grievances.

You can be as musical as you want if the appropriate funding is not available, when there is no money for training, but there will be little progress. Musicianship is most often and abundantly characterized as a diffuse kind of "talent for music." But soon, this ahistorical view of the term reveals a set of conventional techniques that can be learned through practice and difficult training. You can train both, your ear and your voice. You learn to master both, as you would instruments. Musicality is, if you will, what Pierre Bourdieu might call a kind of "habitual disposition": a skill that we must be able to do—to such an extent that one must be given the opportunity (access to economic, discursive, knowledge-based resources) to acquire a certain "know-how" or master a skill that, once acquired, appears completely natural and naturalized.

Zdjelar's body of work contains two videos that emphasize the aspect of learning and practice, particularly with regard to physicality of the voice (in the sense of its supposed pre-linguality)—and emphasize the artificiality of even the body's most seemingly natural sounds. Both deal with language learning and conditioning. *The Perfect Sound* (2009) is devoted to the training of the perfect British accent (the so-called "Queen's English"). Set against a neutral background, we watch a teacher and student pitch various individual notes again and again, how the one uses exaggerated, grimace-like facial expressions and hand movements in an attempt to show the other where the sound is located and demonstrate its correct pronunciation in the body. Again and again, the two hum in unison an essentially meaningless sound—a tone that, because it is called "right," is loaded with social and political connotations. Language trims and

cultivates the voice, while correct pronunciation promises access and belonging.

In *Stimme* from 2013 we see a vocal coach and her student performing very similar exercises. But unlike *The Perfect Sound*, where the teacher focuses on the mouth, hands play the more prominent role. We see the teacher place her hands on the protégée's stomach, hear the regular, meditative breathing indicating that "someone can feel themselves here." The coach goes on to name specific body parts: "the lower abdomen, upper abdomen, diaphragm." The voice and its sound are directly and precisely located in the body. They become a very specific voice and a very specific sound—the sound and voice of this particular body. The fact that the teacher repeatedly reminds her student that she is not quite "in her voice" underscores this individualization even further.

Thus the student herself becomes located in concrete terms; she is assigned a voice, namely *her* voice. She is given a sound as one would be given an identification card—a body becomes a subject. Once deep within, it is outside again, subjected to a system that relies on self-constructed individuality and concreteness, and on the particular sound of a particular body. In this video, too, we see again and again how the student imitates something her teacher is doing; we watch as she does warm-up exercises, repeats sounds, trills her tongue and, more than once, almost begins to sing, sometimes in harmony with the person showing her how to have her own voice. The body learns to be a subject harmonizing with itself—and it is precisely by finding its "own voice" that it becomes "attuned" to society.

Here, too, the recording involves an act of reception: someone watches what someone else is doing, takes it in, imitates it—and in so doing assimilates it. In another series of works, Zdjelar deals less with fitting into a certain order (as we see in the voice training videos) and instead focuses on moments in which individuals struggle to achieve a degree of autonomy—because the moments in which a language appropriates a voice—and within which it must first construct the voice as something "prelingual" so that it can give it a form—are moments that are potentially receptive. The process involves the possibility that the converse can happen—a voice can appropriate a language and turn it into its means of expression.

A fine example of this is Zdjelar's short video *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular* (2007). Even the title implies openness, stressing that it doesn't have

to be about anyone or anything special, that it can just be about one or two songs—yet this openness, as implied by *in Particular*, is in fact something very concrete, and bound to the moment. The video shows a young girl, steeped in concentration and oblivious to her surroundings, as she practices the electric guitar. We watch as she slowly learns the right fingering, hesitantly at first, then with growing confidence; as she begins to hum along, even without proper words, but soon with a recognizable melody. We cannot be sure if she is trying to learn an existing song or making up an original song as she goes along, but that is not so important. What is important is how a voice is taking shape here, a voice that makes use of a simple language, picks up an electric guitar—and just starts strumming. Her contented, beautiful face, and the expression of intense concentration of someone fully immersed in sound, makes something of this sublime feeling of self-empowerment palpable.

Another example which varies, and thus complicates, this rather direct form of appropriation in *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular* is the video *Shoum* (2009). In the approximately seven-minute-long video, we first hear the opening of the 1984 song 'Shout' by the British pop band Tears for Fears. Only afterwards do we see the images: an iPod, a piece of paper, but especially hands, wrinkly hands with dirty, uncut fingernails, the rough hands of a builder or labourer holding a pen. The pen starts to make its way across the paper. In the course of the video, we watch as two men (the press release informs us that they are from Belgrade) try to decode the lyrics from 'Shout' as though the lyrics contained an important secret, encoded message—which in fact they do given that these two do not speak English. They write and sing in a strange, third language that lies somewhere between phonetic transcription, Serbian and English. Meanwhile, Tears for Fears sings "Shout, Shout, let it all out" on the soundtrack. Every now and then you can hear the two men discussing what they can hear; you can see how they skip back to an earlier point in the song, strike out lines of text and start over. At the end, they belt out a heartfelt, off-tune rendition of their own version of 'Shout'. It has become their song.

These few minutes of *Shoum* reveal a great deal: these two men, who are visibly and audibly disconnected from the global lingua franca that is English (the language of pop) try, quite literally, to make sense of what they are listening to. One is quick to detect the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion intrinsic to a pop song and the language in which

it is written: given the background knowledge, we can draw any number of conclusions about the history of the country in which these two men were raised and, as part of the Eastern bloc states, were separated from the language of Western pop. One can speculate about the economic and social situation of these two, which has prevented them from learning English until now. But you can also just observe how two people assemble their own language in the margins between what they have and have not learned—and what role music plays in all of this. They can sing the song in their version without knowing what they are singing. Sounds and notes take precedence over whatever significance they carry. They allow these two people to take something and make it into something new.

On this double level of reception (as in reading and feeling—in the video and, as a spectator, in front of the video) it would make sense to explore Zdjelar's work within the twin concepts of studium and punctum as Roland Barthes understood them with regard to photographs—but also how they apply, in a more general way, to all other forms of technically recorded media. The studium would be the moments of reading a text with a background knowledge of certain codes. In Zdjelar's case, this means reading with a knowledge of pop songs, with an understanding of English as the lingua franca, understanding that the Ghanaian Symphony Orchestra is imbued with a colonial legacy. In short, "studying" Zdjelar's work results in a focus on the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, the need to adjust to and comply with various social connotations.

But what about the punctum? For Barthes, the punctum lies in the realm of the indexical, in the chance events recorded via technical media. And it is that which breaks through when we listen and look, that which—as a moment of reality—thwarts the order established by the studium. Punctum in Zdjelar's works would be the rough hands of the Serbian men scrawling on the paper or the scratched bass in *My lifetime (Malaika)*; it would be the inward grin of the girl in *One or Two Songs, on Someone or Something, in Particular*, the grimaces of the voice coach in *The Perfect Sound*, or the delightful Austrian accent in *Stimme*. All are artefacts of singularity with the potential to strike the viewer of Zdjelar's work (I at least am struck by them). They bring back "feeling" for the viewer (as opposed to "knowing")—and set this particular feeling against systems of generalization. Without such moments there would be little more than the merciless functioning of compliance and subjectification. But these artefacts open a space in which something else becomes visible: moments of freedom in which the body regains and reclaims the subject it had to become. And while doing so, these bodies make noise. They sing, sometimes out of tune, but with their own voice.