



Portrait Practice
On the motif of rehearsal in Katarina Zdjelar's work
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If I see Katarina Zdjelar's works at Bielefelder Kunstverein as allegorical portrait studies, then it is because they can be read both as an example of the personification of (trans-)cultural articulations and as a performative investigation into the condition of representation. The artist films individuals of different origins, genders, ages and backgrounds, but instead of simply "staging" them, she questions the rules that make it possible to allegorize the social as symbolic roles in the first place. Yet what marks these instances of voice and speech coaching, foreign language acquisition, singing along to well-known songs, etc. as an artistic experiment is not the alleged "socially authentic" aspect, but the "making of" representative cultural techniques (Kulturtechnik) that the artist puts into representation-critical perspective. In *The Perfect Sound* (2009), when we watch what appears to be a migrant language student allow an anglophone coach to mitigate his "foreign" accent, then it is not a commentary on the general situation of immigrants in England; instead we learn that—and in what manner—normative cultural techniques are executed through the medium of language. Or, as Mladen Dolar put it, *The Perfect Sound* and other works dealing with the phenomenon of the voice have to do with "a staging (of) the contradictory field of forces which sustain the voice and its social underpinnings, the voice and the social mold."¹

1. Mladen Dolar, "Which Voice? Reflections Around Katarina Zdjelar's Work," in *Parapoetics*, ed. Mariette Dölle and Katarina Zdjelar (Rotterdam: TENT, 2009), 8.

One can, in my view, speak of an allegorical portrait study insofar as the unequal dialogue here can on the one hand be read in terms of hierarchical student-teacher relationships and dominant-societal conditions of inclusion and exclusion. But *The Perfect Sound* is not a mirror image. Insofar as we, the viewers, are alerted to the fact that this is a coaching session, its status appears ambivalent: it could also be—in a self-reflexive sense—an abstraction of the oscillating

interface between language practice and performative work. Without further information, it seems impossible to tell by looking whether the video is documenting a “fact” or testing its “portrayal” because both cases have to do with an act of mimesis: first, the mimesis of assimilating the fictitious ideal of accent-free speech, and second, the mutual translation of linguistic and visual articulation. In this context, we notice the special importance of mimicry and gesture within this transfer, since they all but dash the idea that it is possible to copy the teacher’s demonstrated exercises perfectly. Instead, mimicry and gesture speak their own language and in doing so, reveal room for deviation within the individual and/or collective exercise of normative cultural techniques.

Walter Benjamin also refers to this quality in his 1933 essay *On the Mimetic Faculty* in which he describes the act of imitation as a necessary technique used by children at play as they adapt to the world. Thus mimesis simultaneously attests to the possibility of coming to terms with reality through another, exclusively representative identification, and consequently manifests a kind of unity between the child and the object of appropriation—even if the unity is only illusory. According to Benjamin, this is especially true of language, which is deformed precisely through the attempt of the written word to imitate spoken syllables: “Every word—and the whole of language—is onomatopoeic.”²

This is exactly what we observe in both *The Perfect Sound and Shoum*, another video by Zdjelar. Two men, neither of whom seems to understand English, appear briefly on screen and attempt to “translate” the international smash hit ‘Shout’ (1984) by the British band Tears for Fears as they listen to it on an iPod. Again, it is the act of mimetic imitation that creates a unique poetics that distorts the original. For most of the seven-minute video, we see the hands of the two men as they write down what they hear on a piece of paper that almost fills the entire screen; in this respect, the act of (re-)presentation seems broken by the visible materiality of its constitutive media. At the same time, it is precisely here—in the dysfunctional autopoiesis (Zdjelar speaks of “parapoetics”) of Benjaminian mimesis that the possibility of its allegorical reading is found: the phonetic transcription of the song creates something like a unique, incommensurable code that is not immediately decipherable by viewers. As such, it represents much more than a mixture of English and the mens’ native Serbian (which is also Katarina Zdjelar’s mother tongue); it has a tense relationship with the international lingua franca of English, which forms the grammar

2. Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933), in: *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life*, ed. Margaret M. Lock and Judith Farquhar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 131.

3. For more on this point, see Thomas Thiel’s informative text “Katarina Zdjelar: Towards a Further Word,” exhibition brochure (Bielefeld: Bielefelder Kunstverein, 2014), 4–13.

4. See Anna Artaker and Meike Schmidt Gleim, “Atlas von Arkadien,” <http://anthropologicalmaterialism.hypotheses.org/1501> [12.08.2014].

5. Tanja Widmann: *Making oneself similar in this sense*, exhibition at Kunstraum Lakeside/ Klagenfurt, 12/04/2008—02/15/2009

6. See Benjamin, l.c. (Thanks to the project by Artaker and Schmidt-Gleim for drawing attention to this aspect).

7. See Vito Pinto, *Stimmen auf der Spur: Zur technischen Realisierung der Stimme in Theater, Hörspiel und Film* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 12.

8. Wikipedia contributors, “Kulturtechnik,” Wikipedia, *The Free Encyclopedia*. <http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kulturtechnik&oldid=132548834> [22.07.2014].

9. Translator’s Note: The term Kulturtechnik, a compound of the word Kultur (culture) and Technik (meaning both “technique” and “technology”) was introduced to German media theory by Friedrich Kittler

of “global art” and echoes Great Britain’s far-reaching history as a former colonial power.³

In referencing the autopoetic-transformational potential of Benjamin’s mimesis concept, I refer to the research and exhibition projects by artists and theorists such as Anna Artaker, Meike Schmidt-Gleim⁴ and Tanja Widmann.⁵ Insofar as these projects employ mimesis to evoke the possibility of a symmetrical appropriation and benefit from the combined use of heterogenous materials, they reveal an aspect that arguably applies to Zdjelar’s works as well: namely the horizontal integration of visual, verbal and sonic forms of articulation in the visual arts. To the same extent that Benjamin’s arrangement of “words meaning the same thing in different languages”⁶ slides, in this case, into a seemingly Dadaist mimesis, Zdjelar’s works raise questions about the conditions of this kind of equality principle beyond normative—i.e. socially forced—assimilation. The idea that different forms of articulation can mean the same thing would call for a re-evaluation or retesting of the rules and standards by which (aesthetic) representation of social and/or cultural differences is measured.

Consequently, it is not represented subjects in the teacher-student relationship that we see on screen, but the “speaker-body”⁷ susceptible to a reciprocal relationship between imitation and distortion. Given the ambivalence of coaching and practice, the “making of” of (linguistic) identity is revealed as a structurally incomplete and interminable “in the making” of language, which simultaneously appears as a source code for normative cultural techniques.

The German-language Wikipedia entry for Kulturtechnik (cultural techniques) defines the term as “cultural and technical concepts to address problems in different life situations,” and lists “reading, writing and arithmetic” as prerequisites along with “the ability to represent something visually, the use of cultural-historical knowledge or the networking of various methods.”⁸ When we also learn that the “development of cultural techniques [depends] not on the performance of individual persons, but on group performance [situations] that arise in a socio-cultural context... and that for this reason, all of the aforementioned requirements always necessarily involve social interaction and social participation,” it ironically reads like a handbook on art as a social practice.⁹

It is, in other words, the basic formulas of the culture that Zdjelar’s portrait studies are literally putting to the test; yet they also comply with the rules of an artistic practice

and the Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik (HZK) in Berlin, and was widely discussed in the early 2000s. For a detailed, English-language overview of the word Kulturtechnik as it is used in this discussion, see Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, "After Kittler: On the Cultural Techniques of Recent German Media Theory," in *Theory, Culture & Society*, November 2013; Vol. 30, 6: 66–82. http://monoskop.org/images/7/75/Geoghegan_Bernard_Dionysius_2013_After_Kittler_On_the_Cultural_Techniques_of_Recent_German_Media_Theory.pdf and Göran Bolin (ed.): *Cultural Technologies: The Shaping of Culture in Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

aimed at facilitating knowledge, research, communication, interaction, participation etc. Against this background, the formats of coaching, practice and rehearsal—variations of which appear again and again in Zdjelar's work—seem like a possibility to reflect institutionalized forms of articulation back at the inherent conditions of exclusion and inclusion. In so far that stand-in protagonists or performers are shown trying to learn (or unlearn) a certain elocution in order to become subjects capable of interaction and participation, one gradually becomes aware of the reinforcing techniques behind the dialectic of assigned and appropriated social identity. Yet the oscillation between voluntary integration and forced assimilation—something one observes in other works by Zdjelar as well—also reflects ambivalences inherent in the perception of cultural difference as a hurdle, the mimetic core of which can only be seen in the mode of practice, training, rehearsal etc. It is significant, in other words, that the artist prefers the structurally open process of something "in the making" to the outcome-focused format of the "making of." Identity thus appears less a fact to be understood intellectually or deconstructed than a physically internalized process of mimesis, something that—through the form of its reproduction—can take off in unanticipated directions. This ambivalence manifests itself in Zdjelar's camera and editing techniques as well. By allowing rehearsal, performance and recording time to merge, they make the distinction between representation and the represented seem obsolete. As if she were trying to find a common denominator, the artist explains that for her, it is about wresting an (individual) reality from the symbolic, "by cutting through the reality that unfolds in front of the camera, and by localizing the field of vision and sonic experience."¹⁰ Referring to her 2013 work *Stimme*, in which a "patient" literally finds her own voice with the help of a therapist, the artist noted her interest in "visualizing the crafting of voice, thus mainly committing to the hand the work of the coach who manipulates the body of her client as if it were a musical instrument. I use filming and editing as a writing device and not as a representation."¹¹

The parallelization of physical and media-driven techniques and technologies (Technik) seen here shows, once again, that the mimetic is first and foremost a sensual-visceral process rather than a cognitive-cerebral one. Realized as a media-aesthetic phenomenon, *Stimme* defies naturalizing notions of male or female identity. Here, too, Zdjelar focuses on a significant interface between Kulturtechnik and media practice: Aristotle suggests that, insofar as the voice does not

10. Virginie Bobin, "In the Fabric of the Voice: A Polyphonic Conversation. Interview with Bouchra Ouizguen, Blanca Calvo and Ion Munduate, Katarina Zdjelar, and Lawrence Abu Hamdan," in *Manifesta Journal*, #17 (2014), 17–27, here: 21.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Ronald Polansky, "Hearing, Sound and Voice" in *Aristotle's De Anima: A Critical Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 285–302.

13. Emmanuel Alloa: *Metataxy oder: warum es keine immateriellen Medien gibt*, in *Imaginäre Medialität / Immaterielle Medien*, ed. Gertrud Koch, Kirsten Maar and Fiona McGovern (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), 13–24, here: 9.

14. Pinto, l.c., 9.

appear to be something that already exists, but as a faculty that can only be activated through physical contact (i.e. air striking the windpipes) and that in turn strikes an external, receptive object (i.e. the ear)¹² it fulfills the material requirements of a medium.¹³

In other words, the "body of the speaker" is portrayed as the "body of the voice,"¹⁴ putting the thinking in identities back up for discussion: after all, whose voice is made to speak here? Where does it start, where does it end? So the supposedly most innate, unique and personal technique of articulation becomes a possibility as well. But this also applies to Zdjelar herself: If this is true, who or what writes her "scripts"—because what we see is written only during the process of shooting. In this sense, the "visual scripting" seems structurally analogous to the mimetic (re-)production of the same cultural techniques upon which the speech and voice coaching sessions are based.

This aspect takes us to another video, developed one year later. According to the project description, *My lifetime* (Malaika) shows Ghana's National Symphony Orchestra at the National Theatre of Ghana, which is located in the country's capital city, Accra. They are rehearsing 'Malaika', a post-colonial composition interpreted by a number of musicians—including Miriam Makeba, Harry Belafonte and Boney M.—and which documents the social and cultural optimism following independence from Great Britain in the late 1950s under the President Kwame Nkrumah. As in other works, image and sound are not always in sync, only here the situation is reversed: while the beginning and end of *Shoum* have sound without images, the fragmentary portraits of the orchestra members in *My lifetime* (Malaika) are mute in some places. The dissociation between images and sound has several functions: first, viewers are always simultaneously addressed as listeners, creating a state of tension between closeness and distance. In contrast to the fixed image in film, sound permits a more spatial distribution. Second, the filmic medium appears to be conceived as a work "in the making," and thus straddles the line between production and representation; in this way, the tolerant, cautiously probing camera matches the perception of the scene as a rhythmic composition, meant to make the "group portrait" visible as the result of multi-perspective montages. Once again, an analogy is found between the rehearsal situation and the artistic process, in so far that both approaches have to do with moving closer to an existing (pre-)image, its (re-) production out of a continuous

process of imitation and appropriation, interpretation and (re-)construction, routine and deviation.

As in Shoum, *Stimme and The Perfect Sound*, what we find here is also an image “in actu,” revealed as a connection between control and contingency, convention and spontaneity, concept and improvisation, system and inconclusiveness. Lucy Cotter’s description of *My lifetime* (Malaika) can also be understood in these terms:

“The discipline normally associated with an orchestra rehearsal is interrupted by the coming and going of musicians. One latecomer is applying resin to his cello bow while the music is already in full sway. Another is thumbing through sheet music to find the right page to join in. She wipes sweat from her brow and flicks it to the floor. We are conscious of the musicians as people, of the orchestra as a gathering of bodies too conscious to give due attention to their music.”¹⁵

As it shows a rehearsal by an orchestra that was once considered a national flagship project, *My lifetime* (Malaika) is simultaneously perceived as a historical and a contemporary document. The musicians’ worn-out instruments lead us to suspect that the orchestra has lost its prestigious status. For what audience, one wonders, are the musicians rehearsing the repertoire piece? Is this a routine practice session or for a performative event that—at least in the context of Western European art institutions—evokes a colonialist-encoded condition of perception? Once again, Zdjelar’s documentation of a rehearsal can be seen as an allegorical portrait study in the sense that cultural techniques presuppose not only the ability to create images, but the reading of cultural and historical knowledge. In contrast to exoticizing representations of “other cultures,” *My lifetime* (Malaika) recalls more a mimetic viewer who recognizes his/her own involvement in the mutual appropriation of African and European traditions. The topos of the theater stage paradigmatically manifests precisely this overlap between positions of production and reception: given that the Ghana National Theatre was built in a way that separated the performers from the viewers (hence deviating from local performance practice in which there was no division between audience and performer), a colonial “cultural technique” was integrated into the (self-)representation of a post-colonial state.¹⁶ As shown in Cotter’s reference to Homi Bhabha’s mimicry concept, it is once again the process of mimesis that can be understood as a fundamental principle steeped in hierarchic representational relationships:

15. Lucy Cotter, “Close Listening: Katarina Zdjelar’s *My lifetime* (Malaika),” in: Katarina Zdjelar. *Of more Than One Voice*, ed. Artium (Berlin: Revolver, 2015), 63.

16. See the description of *My lifetime* (Malaika).

17. Cotter, l.c., 65.

18. Pinto, l.c., 25.

19. Following Jürgen Habermas’ speech on modernity as an “unfinished project.”

“Homi Bhabha associates with colonial mimicry an inculcation of colonial culture that extends into postcolonial time, into the present. His mimicry reveals the trick that colonial discourse plays: the promise that the colonised can be like the coloniser, while always assuming that they cannot, the colonised remaining caught in this gap between seeming and being. Bhabha highlights that colonial mimesis had to be flawed, in order for the colonised other to never quite ascend to the status of the superior coloniser.”¹⁷

Close shots of the musicians and their instruments interrupt the “acoustic close-up”¹⁸ of the orchestra, undermining the audience’s otherwise structured gaze: the separation of stage and exhibition space appears suspended for the (fictional) duration of the song rehearsal. At the same time, the extreme close-up shifts the viewer’s focus to the physical toll the rehearsal takes on the musicians. Like the hands marked by hard, physical work in *Shoum*, the players’ droplets of sweat and visible signs of exhaustion and tiredness point to the precarious (re-)production conditions of cultural representation. Rehearsing together proves to be a fragile ritual that musicians take on in addition to their daily work, and becomes a means of community building. Thus the rehearsal appears both as an allegory of the possibility of not allowing the better (i.e. free and self-determining) society of the past to be forgotten. Inasmuch as the act of rehearsing adjusts a cultural (pre-)text to a future event—the performance—Zdjelar’s documentation of a rehearsal also reads as an allegory of the same “unfinished project”¹⁹ shown in the era of decolonization referenced here. Seen as a multi-layered cultural technique mediated between the past, present and future, the filmed rehearsal connects the repetitive act of mimetic (re-)production with the process of historical transformation. And so it is precisely the temporality and spatiality created by rhythmic sound-image montages that allow viewers to recognize the act of representation as a boundary between the orchestra and the audience—a line of separation that, if only for the duration of the rehearsal, appears to have disappeared.

Something similar can be said about *The Perfect Sound*, inasmuch as the repetitive method of practicing and rehearsal can be read as an allegory of those same, irresolvable interactions between original and copy, norm and deviation, inclusion and exclusion that—in the mimetic character of language—are set out as one of the fundamental “cultural techniques.”

Thus the manner in which the young man mimics the syllables sung by an older language therapist for the purpose

of attaining accent-free speech creates a dichotomy reminiscent of Shoum: because to the same extent that the scenes illuminate the dia- or polylogical character of language acquisition as a pedagogical-educative dispositif, they also reveal the inherent power relationship in them, responsible for either giving voice to difference or silencing it altogether. As we learn from the description of the work, the scene was recorded in a language school in Birmingham, a city that is known for its strong, working-class accent. The possibility of social advancement is thus based on the appropriation of what seems a virtual (language) standard, and its fulfillment requires a mimetic faculty reminiscent of theatrical acting.

This ironic dialectic can, however, be experienced as an informal act of fellowship or community building—something we find in Everything Is Gonna Be (2008), a video work showing an amateur choir on the Norwegian archipelago of Lofoten singing the Beatles song ‘Revolution’. But as in My lifetime (Malaika), this scene also points to the lost and ritually reproduced anthems of a generation that the aging choir members might have listened to in the past. But what, one might ask, connects the pop-culture-domesticated projections of the ‘68 generation to the Maoist Cultural Revolution with the (self-)representation of a contemporary, Western European, middle-class milieu? In so far that Everything Is Gonna Be is an almost literal example of mimetic cultural techniques, which elevates the community sing-a-long to an allegory of the emptied signifier of political radicalism, it is once again the fundamental conditions of the artistic medium that are put to the test in the genre of the group portrait: the montage of body and technology, image and sound, performance and perception needs rules and standards subject to constant updating, to realize mimetic faculty as an (auto-)poetic process that in some points eludes the dominant production norms. Seen in this way, the moment in which one musician in My lifetime (Malaika) nods off during the rehearsal can be regarded not only as an indication of the ensemble’s precarious working conditions, but also as an (un-)conscious moment of “deactivating”²⁰ representation: the decision to focus on the rehearsal process rather than the performance means including the possibility of unpredictable disruption— quite intentionally, it would seem. To the same extent that Shoum, The Perfect Sound and Stimme can be read as allegorical portrait studies of simultaneously mimetic and (auto-)poetic “bodies of the speaker,” “bodies of the voice,” and “writing bodies,” the tension between individual and collective as embodied in the choir and orchestra

creates a sensory space suited to giving previously unheard (because unrehearsed) articulations the same stage that Katarina Zdjelar’s work allows us, the viewers, to enter for the duration of the shared experiment.

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Based on the conference Ausstellen. Figuren der Deaktivierung in den Künsten [Exhibiting: Figures of Deactivation in the Arts], conceived by Kathrin Busch and Felix Laubscher, a cooperation between the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) and the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), Berlin University of the Arts, 23–24 May 2014.

