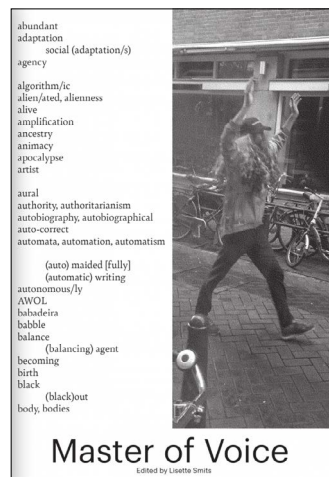


# REVIEW: THE VOICE BECOMES A FIELD OF STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

“Master of Voice” is a temporary program of Sandberg Instituut (Amsterdam) that united artists of different backgrounds who shared voice-based practices. Often considered as a medium in art history, the (non)human voice has been identified as a discipline in its own right. The book *Master of Voice* (Smits, 2020) presents the artworks and reflections arisen during a two-year-long period of research based on collective learning and experimentation. The human voice is mainly approached through gender and technology, gushing from a multiplicity of bodies, freed from Western social norms. Editor Lisette Smits shares a vivid reflection about the role of contemporary artists and the range of their voices in our post-industrial society. The book emphasizes the agency of the voice and accordingly, its potential as a political and social tool.

Keywords: Voice; Sound; Art; Speech; Gender; Technology

“Master of Voice” is a two-year-long program (2016-2018) of Sandberg Instituut that took place in Amsterdam with two study trips to Sofia and Athens. It hosted eleven students from Greece, Japan, Brazil, France, United Kingdom, South Korea, Italy, Czech Republic, and Portugal, who had different backgrounds in performance, design, activism, and visual anthropology. They all shared a longtime interest in (non)human voice and its philosophical, political, social, and sexual ramifications. The book (Smits, 2020) unites the theoretical reflections and artworks of students and tutors, in the form of essays, theatre, drawings, conversations, which arose during the program. These outputs constitute the nineteen chapters of the book, documented by photographs of worksites and work processing. Following, there is a detailed program overview, a glossary, and summaries of each of the twenty participants’ work and formation.

The program was born out of the observation that the (non)human voice is more and more present in current artistic practices. Accordingly, it is an attempt to understand the reasons for this focus and its scope. The voice has always been a part of modern art, notably within performance, sound, and conceptual art. However, with the “Master of Voice”, there is both an acknowledgment and a demonstration that voice is, more than a medium or a mean, a discipline in its own right. Why is the voice so attractive for artists? Editor Lisette Smits suggests that the singularity of voice, being impossible to appropriate and domesticate, makes it the hardest to transform into a commodity, and thus gives the artists the freedom they need to create.

In the book, the question of the human voice is mainly approached through gender and technology. It emphasizes the importance of the body, freed from western codes and injunctions, the plurality of bodies in relation to the multiplicity of the voices. *In relation to* is precisely at the core of the method of the program which values all the outputs born from collective thinking and making to remind that, just as the voice is an emitter and a receiver, the individual exists, and can experience transformation, only as a part of a group.

An auto-critique of the editor lies in the title itself, as “Master” carries a strong bias of a male, supremacist power, that does not apply nor to the versatility and transversality of the voice nor to the methodological approach of the program. The latter rather claims a critical position towards any imposed norm, including those of the host institution itself. Lisette Smits leaves it to the reader to rename the book “The mistress of voice”, which sounds as subversive and engaged as the participants of the program.

The role and responsibility of the artists, metaphorically through their voices, in postindustrial society are questioned in the last part of the book. “The Voice of the Artist” was the ending public symposium, which aimed to share with the audience a manifest for speaking the truth to power, encouraging one’s own voice, as well as restoring the engagement with the social, through the political agency of the voice.

Three notions keep being debated by practitioners in the book. First, the importance of the body, part or whole, when we speak of the

human voice: the forms and functions of the tongue (Danae Io), the disembodied virtual voice (Bin Koh), the embodiment of a narrative (Last Yearz Interesting Negro/Jamila Johnson-Small) or of abstraction of narrative (Geo Wyeth). The artists also explored the training body as our inner voice (Eva Šusová) and the silent body as an act of resistance (Amelia Groom). They searched for freedom through an immersed Virago (Angelo Custódio) and a voice left without a body (Tyler Coburn), as well as shared the life process of a transitioning voice in a transitioning body (Mavi Veloso).

The second redundant notion is the fundamental relational dimension of the human voice, which as such is the guarantor of our humanness. Paul Elliman describes the philosophical approach of an all-connected world : “Everything speaks” (Serres, 2012, as cited in Elliman, 2020, p. 45). Smits and Mihaylova (2020) analyze the damage made by capitalism by promoting the self. Bin Koh starts her essay with the catchphrase of the holographic purchasable companion of the Wallace Corporation in the film *Blade Runner 2049* (2017): “Everything you want to hear” (Bin Koh, 2020, p.149). Maria Montesi, examining the place of the voice-over in Marguerite Duras’ film *India Song* (1975) writes: “(...) speaking to one is letting the communication arise from the relation between subjects” (Montesi, 2020, p.196).

The third notion is about voice speaking the truth, to oneself and power as Smits and Mihaylova call for, in a paragraph titled “Parræsia, or: The Voice of the Artist” (Smits & Mihaylova, 2020, p. 108), or transformed into a perverted tool for imposing power as Amelia Groom (2020) points out, whereas Wyeth and Slater build upon “the ability of language to seemingly communicate one thing and then be communicating something else” (Wyeth & Slater, 2020, p.79). The embodiment, the relational fate, and the search of truth thus appear to be crucial features of the human voice which surprisingly have been to date omitted or underestimated by scholars.

“The history of the voice’s relegation to insignificance is long and complex,” writes Adriana Cavarero (2012, p. 526). According to her, the supremacy of logocentrism which focused exclusively on speech for millennia, adding the intertwined relation of voice and speech, led to the oblivion of voice, considered a remainder of the speech, because it does not add meaning. In a very recent article, J.A. Gomes explains the negligence towards the sound as being a “universe contained in itself”, by “the sound characteristics of being permanent and omnipresent, adding the passive, automatic and unconscious relationship” (Gomes, 2021, p. 12). As an element of the sonic world, being equally simultaneously everywhere and unnoticed, (non)human voice is probably taking the same path concerning the recognition of its self-autonomy.

For Mladen Dolar, the voice has been caught in the net of linguistics and later phonology, which, by reducing it to the substance of language, stabbed “its lively presence, its flesh, and blood” (Dolar, 2012, p. 544). In the chapter “A phenomenology of the voice” of his seminal book about the voice, Don Ihde (2007) talks about the “voices of language”, which is the

place from where humans experience the world. For him, the voices of language are “rich, multi dimensioned with as yet unexplored possibilities” (Ihde, 2007, p. 194). A. Cavarero claims the primacy of voice with respect to speech because the oral sphere exceeds pure meaning, as well as the necessity to listen to the multiplicity of voices and their uniqueness, and from there, moves “from ontology to politics” (Cavarero, 2012, p. 531).

That is where *Master of Voice* (Smits, 2020) is located, with a deep and documented exploration of (non)human voice through its social, cultural, political, and technological agency. A large part of the program is underpinned by a reflection about the responsibility of the contemporary artist, as a producer of discourse in a context of global globalization and digitization which seem to erase any possibility of critical distance. What substance can the voice of the artist endorse then? Despite the inescapable technological process, the “deception” of the promises of modernity which mingled individuality and personhood, the damages made to art in regard to its emancipatory potential, Smits and Mihaylova call artists to “give voice”, with and as a technology, and, doing this, to engage with social reality and politics. The human voice gushes as an undefeatable currency, embodied, relational, and truth-teller, an agency to produce “relationships with the world (...)” quoting Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2002, p. 107) definition of art. For Smits and Mihaylova, the voice of the artists, despite being limited, “preserves the beauty of a commonplace that will always remind us that our own truth or right resides in the dignity of the others” (Smits & Mihaylova, 2020. p. 112).

With the publication of *Master of Voice*, the (non)human voice becomes a discipline with an expansive territory, which constitutes a major step in the establishment process. The next question is to what academic field does it connect to? Sound studies? There remain tasks ahead to do away with the semantic barrier of (non)human voice, for it to be incorporated in the sound field. The Sound and Music Computing Network, an international peer-reviewed conference created in 2007, to date, assumes to omit speech from its yet wide prospective exploration of sound challenges and strategies (De Poli et al, 2007, p. 152).

And what about listening? When G. C. Fiumara (1990, p. 240) bemoans that a whole part of the understanding of the Greek verb *legein* has been omitted while building our talking civilization, he refers to the one who listens. According to the first echoes of the recently published *Sound Arts Now* (Lane & Carlyle, 2021), a new anthology in form of twenty interviews of sound practitioners, contemporary listening practices go beyond the usual listening theories (Chion, 2012, pp. 48–53). The newly established multiplicity of (non)human voices may thus open an equally rich and complex panel of listening possibilities. While the process of listening has been widely studied in the realm of music and language, what happens when we listen to a human voice – beautifully defined by Maria Montesi after Marguerite Duras’ words, as both a “fluid entity” like water and “an uncountable multiplicity” like birds (Montesi, 2020, p.198)?

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