

Judith Barry *Voice Off* 1999

If the question proposed by the title is whether the voice can be represented visually, the two parts of the installation *Voice Off* concern themselves with the reception and the source of the voice. In two adjacent “black box” spaces there are projections which fall on two sides of a single wall. In one we see the a room with a table on which there is a computer, a chair, a cheap stretched-fabric arm chair, and a bookcase. A rather long haired, shabbily dressed man is typing at the computer – he looks like a graduate student, junior academic, or struggling writer. Sounds from the street can be heard. Suddenly we become aware of a woman’s voice singing. Clearly the man is aware of it too, interrupted in his writing, as he goes to the door to look into the hallway, but returns, evidently having found nothing. Still tormented by strange voices and singing that seems to come through the wall rather than from outdoors, he starts to remove books from the bookcase, eventually pulling it down, and picking up a golf club, smashes a hole in the wall and steps through.

If we could be on both sides we would see that the two sequences briefly match, but of course we cannot. Passing into the other space, of the same dimensions, the viewer is confronted with a projection of what appears to be a stage performance, in an indeterminate setting pervaded by stage-smoke produced by dry ice, so that the characters appear to on clouds, contrasting with the realist, box-like space of the room on the other side. Clouds in art have been used to mediate between perspectival earthly space and divine space¹ – here they also suggest modernist abstract theatrical staging: we are presented with fragments of performance in different languages, some spoken and others sung. Various manifestations of voice – dialogue, monologue, song – are shown as staged, combined with erotic scenarios that contribute to a phantasmatic atmosphere. These voices culminate in the famous aria “Vissi d’arte, vissi d’amore [I lived for art, I lived for love]” from Puccini’s *Tosca*, which the heroine sings in response to the police chief Baron Scarpia’s offer to not execute her lover if she gives herself to him, and is one of the best known examples of the soaring, ecstatic woman’s voice in opera.

The viewer cannot see both projections at the same time: these two “worlds” exclude each other. The installation thus mimics the experience of desire. We may believe, on passing from the space with the projection of the room to the other one, that we have found the origin of the voice, but what we in fact confront is a performance, a contrivance, with its own specific historical determinants, which far from being “it” only covers up its absence. In passing through the wall – which for us is a screen – the man leaves a hole, which is then “filled” by what is found on the other side, another projection. The voice that comes to dominate is that of a woman: it is this voice that unsettles the man and provokes his desire to find – to see – it’s source. The voice could be said to function as a fetish, an object which simultaneously acknowledges and disavows a lack. The man uses a golf club to bash the hole through the wall, the absurdity of this tool making it

plausible to see this as an act of penetration by means of a phallic substitute. The man's action draws attention to the surface of the wall as a screen, thus implicating the impression of reality upon which mainstream cinema relies in this covering over of a lack. That the man in his room is shown writing, and this writing is interrupted by the materiality of the voice, suggests that the voice embodies that which is excluded or repressed by writing, and which returns to disrupt it. The citation of the aria then associates this "excluded" with "woman". It is as if the man is drawn to search out and rejoin the lost object. That this object is constituted *as lost* is what is discovered on the other side, where what is found is not consummation – possession of the origin of the voice – but rather another conventional substitute for it, another "screen".

The female voice here, in drawing the man from his chair, may be understood metaphorically as the Sirens' song. Homer's Odysseus has himself tied to the mast and has his crew plug their ears, so that he can hear the song without succumbing to the doom that it harbors. While for Homer the Sirens represent the seductive power of song that the poet has to mediate to make it bearable to mankind, in later interpretations their song has come to be associated with the pre- or a-symbolic, material dimension, and indeed with the archaic memory of the voice of the mother. The attraction of this voice would be tinged with Oedipal transgression (which is one reason why it is also associated with death, whether in love or punishment). As sound the voice collapses distance and the distinction between inside and outside: it is both impossible to represent – because it is that for which there is no substitute and which has been forbidden – and must be represented, in order to sustain the separation that makes possible the subject's own interiority and desire.

The sounds can be in both spaces at once, but the viewer cannot. The desire of the man obsessed by the voice to pass through the wall reflects back to the viewer how his or her own desire is instigated in the experience of the installation itself. The work enacts a double failure of mastery: the man is possessed by the voice but cannot possess it; and the viewer cannot see both projections at the same time, so is made aware of being in a position that is limited, lacking both control and self-possession.

Barry's installation makes use of the difference between moving image installation and traditional cinema and theatre: in the latter the audience are fixed to their seats, whereas in installation the visitor is able to move around, and in this case move from one space to the other. On the one hand, the viewer – who is also a listener – becomes active and may be encouraged to reflect on his or her own situation; on the other, the viewer becomes a part of the work, drawn into its endless cycle of repetition, trapped in the circuit of desire, illusion, and unfulfillment. A spiraling movement takes place from consciousness of the work to a consciousness of the relation of the subject to what haunts and possesses him or her, yet cannot be represented in itself, and only appears in the visual as a

disturbance and disruption of space, or as attributed to bodies and scenes without limiting itself to them.

Michael Newman

ⁱ See Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2002)