

“Magnetic Voice”: Resonance and the Politics of Art*¹

“Mıknatıs Ses”: Rezonans ve Sanatın Politikası

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Abstract

The article investigates what I conceptualize as the “magnetic voice” in reference to *Voice of My Father* (2012) by Zeynel Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy as well as the audio-visual artworks by Sarkis, Kutluğ Ataman and Dilek Winchester. The “magnetic voice” is considered as an excess, as a “surplus sign” in the horizon of the visible and at the edge of the audible. Concerned with the aesthetic, performative, and political significance of the voice as sound-beyond-language, the discussion is centered on the agency of the silenced voice as an attempt to pin down the disciplined/disciplining voice and to hear repressed and silenced voices.

Keywords: Audio-Visual Artwork, Cultural Translation, Performative, Silence, Sound, Voice.

Öz

Makale, önerdiğim “mıknatıs ses” kavramıyla Zeynel Doğan ve Orhan Eskiköy’ün *Babamın Sesi* (2012) filmi ile Sarkis, Kutluğ Ataman ve Dilek Winchester’in görsel-ışitsel sanat çalışmalarını incelemektedir. “Mıknatıs ses” kavramı yoluyla ses görünür olanın ufkunda, işitilebilir olanın sınırında beliren bir fazlalık olarak, bir “artık bir gösterge” olarak ele alınır. İnsan sesinin dilin ötesinde bir ses olarak estetik, “performatif ve politik gücüne odaklanıldığı tartışmada temel izlek terbiye eden/terbiye edilmiş sesi saptamak ve bastırılmış, sessizleştirilmiş sesleri dinlemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Görsel-İşitsel Sanat Çalışması, Kültürel Çeviri, İnsan Sesi, Performatif, Ses; Sessizlik.

“... it is the ear of the other that signs” (Derrida, 1988: 51).

Power is a collection of correlations wherein practices, knowledge, institutions and technologies intersect. It operates as a gigantic magnet for centralization, regulation and control by giving shapes to our lives, our languages and bodies. If power operates through its magnetic push and pull, then the task for critics is to map or, even better, to ignite other forces operating within dominant forces that generate social pressures in the form of a network of divisions, hierarchies, regulations and obligations.

Today an artistic practice does not only involve the artist/producer and audience/participant, but also context and culture. In the 70s, Conceptual Art had extended the perception and

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practice of art by redefining it as a vehicle for ideas. By challenging traditional notions of art's objecthood through its new uses of language, philosophical ideas, actions, processes and existing cultural forms, especially from the mass media, Conceptual Art opened up the artistic field to the social, the political as well as the cultural. As a critique of traditional media and aesthetics, Conceptual Art re-located artistic practices within social topography. The legacy of Conceptual Art continues to exert its influence across the spectrum of contemporary art. This means that the artistic domain as well as the art criticism have become the very location of politics. By the location of politics, I mean the "criticality" which Irit Rogoff sees as foundational for Visual Culture, a trans-disciplinary, post-academic field (Rogoff, 2007: 58) that has emerged as the result of the rapid expansion of cultural and media studies over the past two decades and that has been characterized by the term "cultural turn." The term "criticality" does not only refer to the re-examination of the elements of culture and art in a wider context, but also indicates the erasure of the old boundaries between making and theorizing, historicizing and displaying:

"Artistic practice is being acknowledged as the production of knowledge and theoretical and curatorial endeavours have taken on a far more experimental and inventive dimension. The former pragmatic links in which one area 'serviced' another have given way to an understanding that we face cultural issues in common and produce insights in common. Instead of 'criticism' being an act of judgement addressed to a clear cut object of criticism, we now recognize not just our own imbrication in the object or the cultural movement but also the performative nature of any action or stance we might be taking in relation to it." (Rogoff, 2007: 57)

From this perspective, I will engage with the "magnetic voice", that is, the voice as an exception to what is there, as an addition to what is available in reference to a series of paintings by Sarkis (2011); *Voice of My Father* (2012), a film directed by Zeynel Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy; *Testimony* (2006), a video-work by Kutluğ Ataman; the installations *On Reading and Writing* (2007) *Untitled* (2012) by Dilek Winchester. Intricate in themselves, all these works share one single attitude: all underscore the historical complicity of late Ottoman Empire and Republic of Turkey with the traumatic violence and erasure.

Fundamentally, the "magnetic voice" is the voice of "the other". In his important book, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, Don Ihde has written: "The presence of the other embodied auditorily in the 'excess' of the aura which not only 'exceeds' the presence of the outline-body, but 'fills' the space between us is yet another instance of the experience of the *invisible*. It is in the voice that the 'excess' is *heard*, and a full sense of the presence of things and of others is one which calls for such listening" (Ihde, 2007: 80). Through the notion of the "magnetic voice," I attempt to interrogate the surplus sign that provides a counter-magnetism in the social body of language for conjuring up memories. An inquiry into the auditory is also an inquiry into the invisible. Being neither mute nor bodiless, the "magnetic voice" resonates by appearing in the horizon of sight and on the edge of auditory field. Concerned with the aesthetic, performative, and political significance of the voice, this article is centred on the agency of the voice as an attempt to pin down the disciplined/disciplining voice and the repressed voice.

There is no doubt that listening is a political act of a different kind. It does not only make the invisible "present" in a way similar to the presence of the mute in vision, it also turns silence into voice and/or noise. We have known since John Cage that there is no ultimate escape from noise in the anechoic chamber. About noise, John Cage writes: "Wherever we are what we hear is mostly



noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating” (quoted by Hendy, 2014: viii). If we open our ears to sounds that are usually dismissed as unmusical or unpleasant, or simply ignored as merely everyday and banal, Cage implies, we start reconnecting with a whole range of human experience that previously passed us by (ix). So, both the definition and the understanding of noise and silence should be stretched as far they will go. In the article, I will try to argue that there is no absolute silence, even in the quietness of the countryside, of the desert or anywhere we can think of. Only death can take one’s breath away. Only death is mute and silent. In all the forms of life, there is always a sound, always a voice with language or with non-language which is also a language in itself, as in *Voice*, David Appelbaum has written: “The first breath (an expiration) of the infant commemorates the pressure from the birth canal as it squeezes the thorax. The first breath necessitates the first voice, ‘the natural cry,’ nonphonic and inarticulate, an inspiration in recoil of the compressed thorax. Thus breath retention (in childbearing) has a genesis that cancels, negates, and refills itself in order to give rise to the arche-act of voicing” (Appelbaum, 1990: 36). In other words, what is voice, what is sound and what is noise has to be reconsidered within and beyond language. Or to put it differently, voice is firmly attached to sound and noise.

Some voices might be considered “noisy.” But who gets to make a noise and who does not, who gets their voice heard and who does not, who gets to listen and who does not, is of crucial importance. This article will suggest that just like noise, silence can be dreamlike and liberating, or it can be oppressive.

Creative Ontology

I argue that the audible is magnetic in itself because of the logic of the resonance it firmly depends on: sound vibrates from the come-and-go between the source and the ear. It leaves its traces in resonance and produces effects on bodies and spaces. Voice is intrinsically and unavoidably relational: “it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges; harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating” (LaBelle, 2010: ix). In other words, just like the operational logic of a magnet, voice pulls bodies and languages towards itself or pushes them away from each other thereby blurring inside and outside, here and there, self and “the other”. A magnet does not only attract iron rings but transmits the power to attract other rings to them. In the same way that each ring leans towards the other by the force of an irresistible attraction in the chain, voice is the “thing”, a “sound-object” that attracts and links through inward and outward movements. Yet voice like that of a magnet does not only attract and link. Magnetism is a condition of enthusiasm that is transmitted from one ring to another. From this perspective, the “magnetic voice” corresponds to a certain relationality between absence and presence, between speech and body, between language and culture.

In the context of the artistic production of criticality, the “magnetic voice” corresponds to the relating to, or is produced by the artwork’s particular magnetism that makes the highly specific form of encounter, participation, perception, sensation and experience possible beyond the visible and the audible, whether the artwork is a sound work, audio-visual installation or an image without sound. Art has the potentiality for producing new aspects, new figures, and new worlds using language, words, colors and sounds, which pull together into communities and push them towards new events. Magnetic remanences give rise to events, “the distribution of notable points”, to put it in Foucault’s words, where “there is no centre, but always decenterings, series that register the halting passage from presence to absence, from excess to deficiency” (Foucault, 1977:



165). Voice does not only search for its body, but it also connects to other bodies. Distancing itself from the massed bodies of individuals and languages, the “magnetic voice” I am speaking of facilitates magnetic, mobilized bodies opening up a resonant topography generated by relations and multiple effects.

In his book *Logics of Worlds*, Alain Badiou names the structure of our extended world as “democratic materialism”. In the world of “democratic materialism”, the philosopher states, “there are only bodies and languages” (Badiou, 2009: 1). In other words, we can argue that language regulates all other languages and governs all bodies. There is no place for life and experience as the human soul and body is reduced to the production and reproduction of the bodies and languages at the service of the operational logic of the world system. According to Badiou, artistic production hasn’t succeeded in developing a necessary critical counter-response. He writes:

“... the most inventive artists – choreographers, painters, video-makers – track the manifest-ness of bodies, of their desiring and machinic life, their intimacy and their nudity, their embraces and their ordeals. They all adjust the fettered, quartered and soiled body to the fantasy and the dream. They all impose upon the visible the dissection of bodies bombarded by the tumult of the universe. Aesthetic theory simply tags along.” (2009: 1-2)

We understand from Badiou’s words that art and criticism should look and see beyond the visible in order to restore our relationship with the given world, instead of putting all the efforts into making things visible by simply representing or reflecting upon that world. An artwork can offer an understanding of looking and listening as central to the process of an inventive and creative interpretation of the world. In my conceptualisation, the elements of sound and voice in the field of art allow us to move beyond the visible, yet generate a different kind of visibility through the logic of resonance and vibration, as the magnetic field is a topography that is invisible, but responsible for the most notable property of a magnet. I believe that magnetic remanences, that is, magnetism remaining after the magnetizing field has been removed, can be one of the most appropriate ways in which one can investigate the materiality of voice and sound.

In *Logics of Worlds*, to counter the dualistic axiomatic nature of democratic materialism (bodies and languages), Badiou makes another statement that marks what he calls “dialectic materialism”: “There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths” (Badiou 2009: 4). There are also truths that are neither bodies nor languages, and according to Badiou: “These truths are incorporeal bodies, languages devoid of meaning, generic infinities, unconditioned supplements. They become and remain suspended, like the poet’s conscience, ‘between the void and the pure event’” (4). Truth therefore exists as an addition to bodies and languages; as an exception to what there is and to what is available. Badiou writes: “We admit ... that ‘what there is’ – that which makes up the structure of worlds- is well and truly a mixture of bodies and languages. But there isn’t only what there is. And ‘truths’ is the (philosophical) name of what interpolates itself into the continuity of the ‘there is’” (4-5).

Following the path of Badiou, we can argue that artistic production cannot simply be the activity of the ontology of production. It should rather be an activity of creative ontology or rather of a resonant topography. Inspired by Badiou’s understanding of “the truth” that is beyond what there is, I wonder whether an artwork has potentiality for unleashing a surplus of productivity beyond bodies and languages. I wonder whether the artist can be figured as the inventor of meanings beyond languages and the choreographer of gestures beyond bodies. I will argue that the aural re-forms or de-forms objects and spaces. But there is more to it than this: it also enables



singularities to temporarily come into being, giving their surroundings an amplitude, a density, and a vibration. From this perspective, I will speak of the magnetized and the magnetizable voices that await a place to attach, a body to attract to, while acting and producing events by itself for the production of ontological depth in the field of the visible and audible.



Figure 1: Sarkis, *Cri Pink*, oil on Arches satine paper, 2011.

In his series of painting inspired by Munch's *The Scream* (1893), Sarkis explores the scream as the sound of the voice in its most extreme form, as a mute scream stuck in the throat that demands recognition and articulation. We come across a creative ontology as the paintings push us to see what we cannot hear. In each painting from the series, Sarkis uses one color tone such as pink, red, blue, or green to create the image of the screaming face on paper. The small, stained-like screaming face was performed by the artist through his strokes by directly using oil paint on a large sheet of white paper. These paintings depict the scream as the trace of 'the other' in the regime of the visible that cannot be fixed into the massed bodies of individuals and their unified languages. What Slavoj Žižek remarks on the famous painting by Munch is also relevant for the work by Sarkis: "in front of this painting, we hear (the scream) *with our eyes*" (Žižek 1996: 93-94). We see things because we cannot hear

everything. It is as if this painted scream resonates by spreading on to the space we are in. We endow the silent voice, with sense and emotion. Gilles Deleuze has discussed the art of painting, especially in reference to Francis Bacon, according to its production of sensation. He writes what the painting does to him:

"... at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation. As a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of sensing and the sensed." (Deleuze, 2003: 35)

In his paintings, Francis Bacon depicts violence not as an abstract entity. In a depicted scene, violence becomes bodily, it is flesh and blood. The subject is dressed up or enveloped by the violence of that scene: spectacles of horror, crucifixions, prostheses, and monsters. This is the violence that is involved only with colors, lines and forms. In the paintings, there are bodies, heads, faces, and screams. Deleuze departs from there, that is, the violence of a sensation, not of a representation, a violence of reaction and expression. Thus these paintings relate not to form and matter, but to forces. Sensible form has nothing to do with representation. This form has neither physical nor mental existence. The painted scream serves as, to put it in Mladen Dolar's words, "a source of voice to which no voice can be assigned, but which for that very reason rep-

resents the voice all the more” (Dolar, 2006: 69). In a sense, the image of the scream is a “surplus sign” that actively opens up the question of the politics of the voice.

Sarkis holds a pioneering and central role in the history of contemporary art of Turkey. Since the late 60s, the artist has created his own visual and auditory lexicon through the use of objects, images, lights and sound. He has always been interested in remembrance and forgetting, history and memory. As an attempt to pin down the disciplined and/or disciplining body and the muted voice, in *Scream*, Sarkis interrogates the agency of the voice without any sound, through silence. Here we should note the fact that silence is inherent to many of his works, especially his installations where he intervenes into existing spaces or constructs places (museum, architecture, home) in order to re-write history through social memory. This interpretation gets even more accurate when we think of the fact that the recurrence of the reference to Munch in the work of Sarkis traces out his parent’s memories of the violent events that occurred on 6th and 7th September 1955, Istanbul, as mentioned in the biographical text written by Elvan Zabunyan, the artist’s daughter (Zabunyan, 2010: 39). “My parents kept themselves to themselves, they didn’t involve us in their decisions nor in their conversation,” Sarkis tells Zabunyan. “For me silence really has a weight,” says Sarkis and adds “in the house we always spoke Armenian in a low voice and generally, we didn’t talk about anything, and we didn’t speak to each other” (41-43). The mute scream is a call which one cannot escape; this is a silence which one cannot silence. As a “surplus sign”, it performatively reveals the fact that there is more to see and hear. Through the depiction of a loss of voice through the representation of the scream and thus regaining of this voice, the artist’s strategy is to “make the silence speak” at the frontiers of the necessity of speech and to evoke the presence of the unseen.

Voice holds together bodies and languages. However, the “magnetic voice” does not belong to the homologizing language or the unified body whether it is a state or a community. On the contrary, the “magnetic voice” exceeds signification that can be retained or preserved. Moreover, it acts beyond the production of subjectivities. In the context of aesthetics and politics, the “magnetic voice” corresponds to an expression of excess that cannot be re/absorbed into the mechanism of power, language, and meaning. It is what exceeds languages and meanings and what activates acts and movements beyond the choreography and the cartography of (re)produced bodies.

The Memory of the “magnetic voice”

Through the act of listening as well as looking, an artwork, whether with or without sound, can take shape or function as inclined-toward-affect and not just towards perceived meaning, content, logos or truth. It can offer an aesthetic experience that facilitates a form of consciousness, an intensity of feeling, or the energy for action. Voice can produce an aesthetic effect that stands apart from the referential or informational function of language. Voice is there for expression, as Dolar points out:

“Expression versus meaning, expression beyond meaning, expression which is more than meaning, yet expression which functions only in tension with meaning- it needs a signifier as the limit to transcend and to reveal its beyond. The voice appears as the surplus-meaning.” (2006: 30)

Dolar is not concerned with the voice as the vehicle of meaning or the source of aesthetic admiration. Based upon Jacques Lacan’s *objet petit a*, he interrogates voice as an object:



“An object voice which does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, does not solidify in an object of fetish reverence, but as an object which functions as a blind spot in the call and a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation.” (Dolar, 2006: 4)

Dolar’s conceptualizing of the voice is important for my investigation, as I am concerned with a certain materiality of the voice: the voice as excess, the voice as reverberation. Speaking in visual terms, the recognition of forms is precise: a form is located in the space, it has a size, a geometry and a measure, it has a color, a figure and a shape. However, sounds complicate vision. Not being subordinated itself to vision, voice becomes another object in the installation; another element in the video. Dolar points out a major difference between the visible and the audible: “The visible world presents relative stability, permanence, distinctiveness, and a location at a distance; the audible presents fluidity, passing, a certain inchoate, amorphous character, and a lack of distance. Voice is elusive, always changing, becoming, elapsing, with unclear contours, as opposed to the permanence, solidity, durability of the seen” (2006: 117). According to Dolar, the object voice always displays something of an effect emancipated from its cause. There is a gap between its source and its auditory result that can never be totally bridged (67). Thus the voice is magnetic. By its nature, voice knows neither interior nor exterior. It is difficult to keep the voice at a distance. One is constantly exposed to the voice precisely because no distance can be maintained from it. Voice addresses something that is always beyond itself including what is essentially unsayable. It works performatively. It acts. Steven Connor has already stated that one’s voice is not something that one merely has, or even something that s/he is. Rather it is something that s/he does. A voice is not a condition, nor yet an attribute, but an event. It is less something that exists than something which occurs. “If my voice is something that happens,” he further argues, “then it is of considerable consequence to whom it happens, which is to say, who hears it. To say that my voice comes from me is also to say that it departs from me” (Connor: 2000: 4-5). In a sense, there is always something that remains beyond language itself. Hearing can also change what is seen. Voice is on the site of event, not of fixity of things or the visibility of beings. Seeing an object or a subject, hearing a voice and listening to it can mark the moment in which it starts to operate as magnetic and therefore, is able to appeal to the senses, facilitate events and situations, to introduce dis/connections and mobilize bodies.

I argue that the sonic leaves its traces in resonance producing in us an enormous charge of sense and emotion as well as thoughts and intelligence which pushes us simultaneously into events and which draws us towards movements and actions. This is what the voice has done in the *Voice of My Father* (2012), a film by Zeynel Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy. The film investigates the voice recorded on cassette tapes as an active link between event and truth, between individuality and community. *Voice of My Father* shows us that the return of the voice is magnetic in the sense that it is the source of wonder in searching for the truth.

Chronicling the thirty-year history of a Kurdish Alevi family, *Voice of My Father* tells the story of a son who searches for his own voice through the cassette tapes that his father sent from abroad. Based upon actual events and actual tape records left from Zeynel Doğan’s father, this semi-fictional film is about forgetting and remembering. It is a journey into magnetizing situations and their electrified effects in a very particular way. Throughout the film, filmic images are haunted by the voice in the cassette tapes. Through the voice on the cassette tapes, memory is conjured up in order to link the repressed past of a family to the perpetual present.

In the film, when Mehmet, the main character, moves to a new house with his pregnant wife, he finds a tape among his belongings. Containing his and his mother’s voice, this tape has been recorded to be sent, like a letter, to his father. After this discovery, Mehmet cannot stop himself from leaving Diyarbakır for Elbistan to find the tapes that his father has recorded. In Elbistan,



he finds Basê, his mother, thinking about nothing but her eldest son Mehmet who has left home a long time ago. Basê deters Mehmet from searching for the tapes. His mother seems to cling on to a perpetual present. The frozen moments in her life are instantiated only by the silent phone calls she frequently receives. Basê strongly believes that these phone calls are coming from Hasan who left home to join the Kurdish guerillas up in the mountains. As Mehmet witnesses his mother's life and continues looking for the tapes, he begins to learn things about his family he did not know.

In *Voice of My Father*, the trauma caused by the Maraş pogroms that happened in December 1978 is articulated through the loss of the voice in the silent phone calls and the speechlessness of the mother. But we witness the return of the voice in the film as the result of the existence of the recorded tapes. Even the surrounding environment, the houses and the school, birds and trees, wind and grass, mountains and stones, their sounds and noises join in this silence to announce the language of the trauma. The voice of the father on the other hand, never articulates the events in the past. Yet the existence of the cassette tapes is elaborated in the film as the Lacanian *objet petit a*, that is, as the left-over of "the real". His speech is a signifier that insists on expression and continually undercuts any given or fixed meanings. His voice is intense, worried and at some point nervous as he must earn in Libya to care of his family. He warns his wife to live a normal life, to fuse into society without attracting attention. His language is shifted from Kurdish to Turkish as he gives advice to his sons to go to school and learn Turkish. Even the surrounding environment, mostly unpeopled, the house and the school, joins in this silence to announce the traumatic event and the repressed presences. *Voice of My Father* teaches us that silence is not mute. It is rather the other name of the horizon of the unsaid that traces out latent presences. The unsaid can be heard, should be sensed. We must see the meaning of any given speech not within the language itself, but as a reconstruction between voice and listener, between "I" and "the other". Listening is fundamentally plural. A certain transference occurs between the voice in the film and the listener(s). Iain Chambers claims that by acknowledging the necessity of the dispersal of a single History, one can start to hear composite voices: "In the movement from concentrated sight to dispersed sound, from the 'neutral' gaze to the interference of hearing, from the discriminating eye to the incidental ear, I abandon a fixed (ad)vantage for a mobile and exposed politics of listening –for a truth that is always becoming" (Chambers, 1996: 52). Just like Mehmet and his mother, we, the audience, are caught up in a chain of significations that tell us the truth. Truth manifests itself through the act of listening. In *Voice of My Father*, it is the voice of "the other" that signs. We encounter a "magnetic voice" in the film, a voice once its presence is revealed, is no longer possible to ignore it, to distance oneself from it. Being neither body nor language, voice fills in the rupture of recent history. An event arises through the excess of the aural at the intersection of percepts and effects. The voice is the link between life and death, between past and present, between body and language, between silence and speech, between witnessing and ethics. It moves or transmutes over distances and through times to de-regulate language and to search for a body or bodies. Generating a constant shift from voice to image, from voice to voice, from image to voice, from sound to word, voice is always there as silence. It is a call from which one cannot escape, there is a silence which one cannot silence. The disembodied voice in the tapes starts to function as a "surplus object" performatively revealing that there is much to see and more to listen. Through the articulation of a loss of voice and regaining of this voice, the film's strategy is to make the silence speak at the frontiers of the necessity of speech.

Language within and Beyond Voice

Above all, voice is a sound. The sound the voice makes always exceeds signification to some



degree, both before the entry into language and after. The voice is never completely standardized, forever retaining an individual flavour or texture. This is what Roland Barthes calls its “grain”. The grain refers to a bodily voice and should be understood as the ways in which the voice lies in the body –or in which the body lies in the voice (see Barthes, 1977: 179-189). Barthes encourages us to focus on a vocality that far from being a pure and simple sonority, or a mere bodily remainder, consists of a power relating to speech. In *Testimony* (2006), a video-work by Kutluğ Ataman, we are urged to engage with the grain of the voice in the form of the failure of speech. We are expected to learn from this failure of memory and recognition as the bearer of the voice does not stop to convey reality by “speaking” about the truth beyond language.

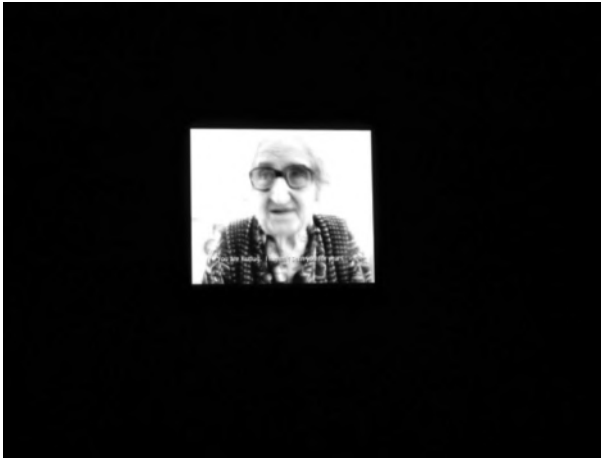


Figure 2: Kutluğ Ataman, *Testimony*, video-installation, 2006.

even taboo. In *Testimony*, this silenced, erased memory is doubled because of the memory loss of the old woman. Ataman’s entire body of work locates the audience in the midst of life stories. By listening to the people in front of the camera, who all speak eagerly and endlessly about their intimate life stories, troubles, and their social worlds, we are convinced that life is complicated and that what is called reality is the mixture of the real and the imaginary. Ataman’s parade of “talking and performing portraits” is all situated between documentary and fiction, between the real and the staged. But in *Testimony*, we cannot see this “theatre of the self”. Rather Ataman’s nanny is simply in front of us as who she is. In the video, the artist shows Kevser a photo for encouragement, a picture of Ataman’s old family house in Erzincan. But she doesn’t seem to comprehend:



Figure 3: Kutluğ Ataman, *Testimony*, video-installation, 2006.

In *Testimony* (2006), the artist’s erstwhile Armenian nanny, Kevser, who was brought into Ataman’s family by his great-grandfather after her own family was killed in 1915 begins to talk: “So you are Kutluğ. I thought Kutluğ was somewhere else.” The artist responds: “Tell me about your memories, tell me about Erzincan”. In the video shot on an ordinary day at home, we see the artist’s and his father’s nanny. The Armenian identity of the nanny, who came into Ataman’s family home as a baby, was kept secret by her and others. Thus her real identity remained unspoken or

even taboo. In *Testimony*, this silenced, erased memory is doubled because of the memory loss of the old woman. Ataman’s entire body of work locates the audience in the midst of life stories. By listening to the people in front of the camera, who all speak eagerly and endlessly about their intimate life stories, troubles, and their social worlds, we are convinced that life is complicated and that what is called reality is the mixture of the real and the imaginary. Ataman’s parade of “talking and performing portraits” is all situated between documentary and fiction, between the real and the staged. But in *Testimony*, we cannot see this “theatre of the self”. Rather Ataman’s nanny is simply in front of us as who she is. In the video, the artist shows Kevser a photo for encouragement, a picture of Ataman’s old family house in Erzincan. But she doesn’t seem to comprehend: “I am very confused today ... My son, I am completely lost”. He asks if she remembers her Armenian mother and father. She comes up with only meaningless generalities: “Those were the good old days. Weren’t they my dear Kutluğ.” She adds quickly: “Now you are Kutluğ aren’t you? You are Kutluğ. I haven’t seen you for years. You disappear like the others.” Ataman shows her a couple of portrait photographs, but she cannot remember anything at all except one person: a photograph of a young man with a *kalpak* on his head recalls her Atatürk.



In *Testimony*, the nanny's severe memory loss is not just a matter of forgetting her personal past. It also creates a testimony regarding the difficulty Turkish society has in verbalizing its own past. Kevser's speech is shattered inside our ears. Yet the resonance and the vibration of the voice and the bare sensibility of the voice, has the power to announce a "politics of truth", to put it in Foucault's words. Foucault defines the politics of truth not as something that is defined by a correspondence to reality (as with the mimicry of documentary realism), but rather "as a force inherent to principles and which has to be developed in a discourse ... something which is in front of the individual as a point of attraction, a kind of magnetic force which attracts him towards a goal" (Demos, 2010: 36). This is what we witness in relation to Ataman's attraction to speaking subjects, none of whom by their performative speech acts, fall into the fixed and stable categories of identity policed by the State or the society, his own passion to make political films without being political. As a performative speech act, Kevser's speech transforms into a magnetic force which attracts its audiences towards a witness to the unwitnessable. Her speech might be noisy, but it is language, in fact, a powerful language. It is the language of the truth of imagination and affect. It is the language of the sense and the sensible. As T.J. Demos writes about the speech of Kevser:

"She speaks to the blockages, the lacunae, that initiate the process of imagination that fills the gaps of memory. These gaps also testify to the impossibility of complete recall, and thus of any singular truth. While this void may be the zero degree of imagination, the point from which imagination develops, it is also the sign of loss, pure presence, death." (35-36)

In *Testimony*, the presence of the old woman who is (un)speaking pushes us to listen what we cannot hear, makes us to understand what we cannot make sense of. In this regard, we can suggest that the artistic production cannot simply be considered as the activity of the ontology of production through the language of (re)presentation. It should rather be an activity of creative ontology activating the mobile forces of the visible and invisible, the heard and the unheard, the perceived and the unperceived, the sensed or the unsensed. It is where we go way beyond linguistic language, that is, "language-as-word" (Ihde, 2007: 147). "Magnetic voice" is the voices of things, of others, and of myself. It is both voice and sound.

The Foreignness of the Artwork's Tongue

In our times, artists use the performative and subversive strategies to disrupt the logic of (re)presentation both in the aesthetic and in the political sense. Art is no longer an image of something, a description of something, or an appearance of identity. In the context of art, "the magnetic" refers to a particular sort of potentiality that an audio-visual artwork can carry in itself. Now, I wish to discuss the ways in which there is a language of speech with(out) words which belongs to the sense and the sensible, rather than writing as meaning. Moreover, this particular language can be disembodied. The language of the "magnetic voice" corresponds to the absence of fulfillable non-embodied meanings.

Dilek Winchester's multi-layered sound installation *On Reading and Writing* (2007) speaks in the language of the "magnetic voice". Figured both as readers and listeners, we are plunged into the impossible scene of cultural translation which is interactive reflecting upon the complexity between language and speech, between voice and body. In this context, "magnetic voice" resides in the between-space of the multiplicity of languages and cultures.





Figure 4: Dilek Winchester, *On Reading and Writing*, sound installation, 2007.

In *On Reading and Writing*, Winchester deals with the historical, yet repressed presence of the Karamanlidika and Armeno-Turkish novels and plays written in Turkish by Turkish-speaking Greeks and Armenians by using their respective alphabets. The installation consists of two sections. In the first section, there is a display of the recent publications of three historical novels written in the Latin alphabet and the electronically copied forms of these three books originally written in the Greek alphabet, Armenian alphabet and Arab alphabet respectively during the Ottoman period. Recalling the museum display, each book is accompanied by a catalogue-card providing various data including title, author, print date, number of pages, provenance, language and the alphabet of the language. According to the official history of Turkish literature, *Taaşuk-u Talat ve Fitnat*, printed in the Ottoman alphabet in 1872 by Şemsettin Sami is the first Turkish novel. However, the existence of two other novels from the same period, at least, disturbs this historical fact: *Akabi Hikayesi* by Vartan Paşa published in the Armenian alphabet from 1851 and *Temaşa-i Dünya ve Cefakar u Cefakeş* by Evangelinos Misailidis from 1872 in the Greek alphabet. These novels were written in Greek or Armenian alphabet, yet if one does not know Ottoman Turkish, it is impossible to read these texts, as they are in Turkish.

Thus there is an inability or confusion in locating the exact first novel in the history of Turkish literature. Certainly, Winchester does not seek to find an origin or a historical fact. Rather she focuses on sequences, perspectives and consequences.



Figure 5: Dilek Winchester, *On Reading and Writing*, sound installation (detail), 2007.

Comprising a wide range of artistic practices from installations to drawings, from photographs to videos, Winchester deals with language as a cultural form. In her artistic practices, language mostly appears in its written form in relation to the visible, but in *On Reading and Writing*, the written word is accompanied by the (im)possibility of speech. We witness an unbridgeable gap between vocality and textuality. We are puzzled by a language game the artist has carefully set up based upon the idea that as there has to be a continuum

between voice, voiced reading, and inner voice only with reading. This sound installation focuses on the fact that, even today, no one can read without the noticeable presence of outwardly silent but inwardly sounded words. It uncannily reminds us of the fact that sound and voice reside in writing. Orality precedes writing, as Walter Ong has pointed out:

“But, in all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives. Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings. ‘Reading’ a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination, syllable-by-syllable in slow reading or sketchily in the rapid reading common to high-technology cultures. Writing can never dispense with orality.” (1988: 8)

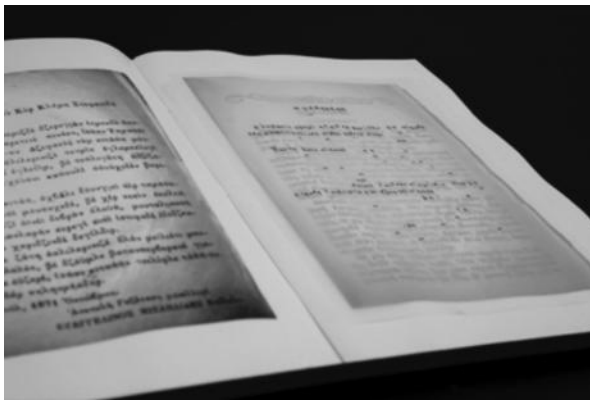


Figure 6: Dilek Winchester, *On Reading and Writing*, sound installation (detail), 2007.

Winchester’s sound installation shows to us that acoustics and optics, resonance and reflection, all require participation in which one’s own conception continuously takes in the role of the other. In contrast to the logic of archive as representations, which is the institutional architecture of a social power over memory, Winchester’s archive “performs” the past by addressing different ways of access to traumatic events and repressed languages and bodies. Archival material does not only determine a meaning or a truth, but also enunciative

im/possibilities that it lays down for future memories: the condition of the emergence of the documents, the forms of their appearances through accumulations and classifications, the rules of their transmissions and interpretations, and the regulation of their functioning and transformations. When Michel Foucault pointed out, in relation to the systems of statements recorded and preserved in the field of medicine, political economy, and biology over centuries, that “[t]he archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (Foucault, 2000: 129), he was pointing the logic of all archives. This logic is firmly tied to the present in which the value, the meaning, and the relevance of archive are all managed. In this respect, the archive is a “performative structure” with effects and temporal or frequent situations. Winchester’s display introduces an archival anxiety to the logic of the archive. In the copies of the book on display we can track Winchester’s act of transcription half way through. Learning a language is about moving from one alphabet to another, from one cultural code to another. By leaving the transcription marks readily available for view, the artist seems to comment on the shift from the multiplicity of voices in the Ottoman culture to the unanimous Latin one that has come with the foundation of the Turkish Republic. A family of spoken languages, once everywhere assemblable, thus comprehensible, within an Arabic orthography, has lost that unity.

When Benedict Anderson questions modern nations as “imagined communities”, he stresses the interaction between capitalism and print as well as the development of vernacular languages of nations. Anderson argues that what made the new communities imaginable was a half-

fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity. He notes that the element of fatality is essential (Anderson, 1991: 42-43), in the sense of a general condition of irremediable linguistic diversity. Print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language.



Figure 7: Dilek Winchester, *On Reading and Writing*, sound installation (detail), 2007.

Print-languages created unified fields of exchange and communication below one unified language and above spoken vernaculars. As a result, the linguistic Babel of the Ottoman Empire, its relational language field, its magnetic field that is depended upon cultural permeability, has been lost, certain voices have been silenced or muted. Laurent Mignon, whose work focuses on a different kind of literary history that distances itself from cultural essentialism and nationalism, states that there are close ties between the shap-

ing of the literary canon and the construction of national discourse. Mignon adds that almost no non-Muslim writer who published in Turkish in pre-Republican Turkey is mentioned in literary studies published after the establishment of the Republic. As non-Muslim writers who wrote in Turkish were excluded from literary history, one must also note as a significant phenomenon how the ethnic background of more or less canonized literary figures in Turkish literary histories written after the beginning [1839] of the Tanzimat (Reorganization) period was disregarded: for instance, Şemseddin Sami, the author of the first Turkish novel in Arabic script was of Albanian descent, while Ziya Gökalp, a founding figure of Turkish nationalism was a Zaza; and the mother tongue of Ahmet Haşım, who introduced a different, unique interpretation of symbolism, was Arabic. Mignon finds the reason for this discrimination implemented against non-Muslim writers and poets in the founding doctrine of the Republic of Turkey: The Turkish nation, according to Mustafa Kemal, did not comprise all the peoples that lived within the borders of Misak-ı Milli, or the National Pact; the Christian and Jewish communities had not even been considered millets within the framework of this pact (Mignon, 2009: 22-23) Therefore Mignon states that religion, and not language, is adopted as the only norm in Turkish literary history writing and in how national literature is defined (131).

The obvious foreignness of the tongues featured in the complex installation symbolizes the radical foreignness of the experience of the historical past as well as the present. In *On Reading and Writing*, the foreignness of the tongue continues without losing its impact in the second section of the installation. This time, it takes its departure point exactly from the voices of cultural translation inherent in everyday life as well as literature in the 19th century of the Ottoman Empire. On three blackboards, the artist transcribes in white chalk three paragraphs from a text written by herself in Turkish using the Greek, Arabic and Armenian alphabets of the Ottoman period. What comes to the fore in the visual repertoire of the blackboards is the suspension of the semantic register, the reality of devocalization. Since it is impossible to read these writings if one cannot dwell into two languages at the same time, the artist provides headphones for each

writing on the blackboard. Each text is recited by an electronic voice of text-to-speech software. While this digital, inhuman voice uncannily mimics the male voice, it recalls the figure of a child who syllabicates language as learning to speak or learning to read and write.

Clearly, the installation invokes the iconic photograph that depicts Atatürk as he was introducing the new Latin alphabet on a big, portable blackboard to the newly established Republic of Turkey. The digital voice operates as a resistant remainder signifying that which escapes representation or what is left behind after linguistic sovereignty. The blackboards are the sign of the zero point in history without noise. *On Reading and Writing* is noisy as it investigates silence. Containing a slightly autobiographical reference, the writings on Winchester's blackboards narrate through the eyes of a young child. His/her utterances tell us the fact that there were others who wrote in Ottoman Turkish in the 19th century albeit in different scripts such as Armenian and Greek. In the Arabic letters, the child feels sad because she cannot decipher and understand the letters that her father wrote to her mother in his letter, or in the Greek alphabet the child utterly surprised when he learns in his first days at school that not all kids speak different languages at home and in school, or in the Armenian alphabet the child was disappointed when he realized in the school that he is not taught the same letters with his first and closest friends who started school a few years earlier than him.

These three short stories correspond to the life instances during which a child himself/herself moves from orality to literacy, from speaking subject to reading subject. As has been interrogated by Ong, the shift from the oral culture to writing marks a relinquishing of the voice. According to him, the shift from oral to written speech is essentially a shift from sound to visual space, also. Writing had reconstituted the originally oral, spoken word in visual space. Print embedded the word in space more definitely. He writes:

“Eventually, print replaced the lingering hearing-dominance in the world of thought and expression with the sight-dominance which had its beginnings with writing but could not flourish with the support of writing alone. Print situates words in space more relentlessly than writing ever did. Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space.”
(Ong, 1988: 119)

It cannot be coincidental that three historical novels displayed in the installation were among the first novels published in print during the Ottoman Empire, marking the shift from oral culture to the literacy. Generally speaking, in writing, letters correspond to voiceless symbols which are only visual. Alphabetic writing, like that of the Greeks, consists substantially in a muting of speech. Substituting the acoustic sphere with a visual map, the written sign translates sound and eliminates it. The writings on the blackboards do not consist of mere pictures, of representation of things, but are the representation of an utterance, of words that someone says or is imagined saying. Yet in *On Reading and Writing* things are more complicated than that. Digital voice uncannily inhabits a different kind of embodiment.

At first sight, the digital voice multiplies the foreignness inherited in our subjectivities. Dolar stresses upon the ways in which the technology of voice recording and reproduction does not introduce an unprecedented experience of the voice, rather it magnifies and extends something that was already in the voice, although in a concealed way, covered by the aura of authenticity, individuality, expression, uniqueness. He argues that



“...one can’t pit the authentic voice, stemming from a ‘live source’ against the voice artificially contrived and replicated by technology. It is not the technology which disrupted the unalloyed presence of the voice and its aura, its untarnished sway and unrepeatability, there is rather something in the nature of the voice itself, which always pointed to this disruption, something by which the voice was never just a pledge of presence, but rather an indicator of an impossible presence. Where it seemed the most pervasive, it referred at the same time the presence to a void. Where it seemed the most authentic, it was at the same time a foreign body, a prosthesis, a quasi-artificial bodily extension. Technology magnified this part and brought it to a universal function, commonly available. But it magnified both sides at the same time: it made the prosthetic nature of the voice palpable, but thereby not dissipating the structural illusion, it rather kept covering the gap that it opened with ever more formidable and imposing technical possibilities. So the astounding thing is perhaps not so much the unprecedented experience of the voice, but how easily it could be recuperated.” (2010: 101)

The machine generates bad communication, it makes the text noisy and hard to understand. But we come to realize the fact that the digital voice is our only link for reestablishing vocality back to its origin. It is for sure that meaning is in crisis where sight and sound do not harmoniously complement each other. But these moments of crisis are pregnant in new and radical meanings. Someone sees a sign that is unknown to him/her. Yet it is not an empty sign, but a sound that will signify something. Therefore, I read this digital voice as an excess, as a surplus sign which paradoxically enough gives the reading its necessary vocality, its linguistic signs with its zeroes and ones. Winchester’s work convinces us that this excess is, in fact, what the scene opens up. The digital voice makes the signifiers and the signified audible in the manner of a child who imitates language to learn speech. Voice is shaped through learning experiences and techniques of socialization. The act of speaking is the act of producing chains of sounds, phonetic units that are recognizable, that we agree upon. Text-to-speech as an artificial medium cannot sustain the ‘deceit of presence’ that the voice could convincingly convey. It rather multiplies this absence by announcing impossible, yet necessary presences.

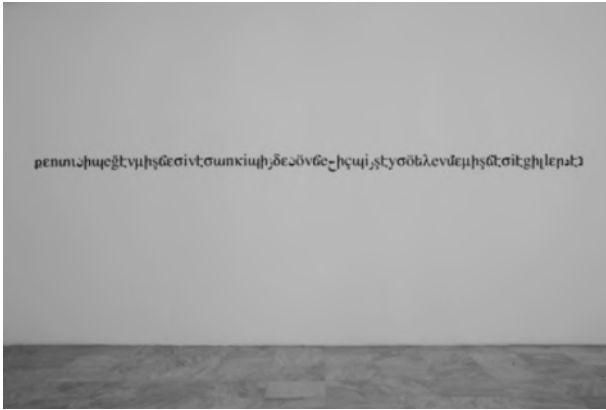


Figure 8: Dilek Winchester, *Untitled* (Kendini beğenmiş sesinesanki bizden önce hiçbir şey söylenmemiş sesine gillerden), 2012.

The digital voice in *On Reading and Writing* urges us to move across the space to engage with immaterial histories, intangible realities, hidden places, speculative facts, lost stories, and repressed presences. In this regard, the work opens up the magnetized and magnetizable topography of cultural translation. Within the language of translation, voice is always ‘magnetic’ as it denies dependence, interdependence, stability and permanence. The “magnetic voice” can only be named “the untranslatable”. Culture cannot be fixed

into one unified language; things cannot be articulated in one unified identity without splitting. As Sarat Maharaj has claimed, a notion of translation activates both the visual and the sonic: “Beyond the sense of word and image are sounds which cannot be entirely drawn into the net of



signification and cannot entirely be decoded and deciphered as meaning this, that or the other” (2001: 39-40). There is a competition of presence in *On Reading and Writing*. Every image, every script as well as every sound and every syllable are also the presence of something absent. Their ontological status is always in question. Meaning therefore is constituted in the interplay between excess and lack. This brings us once more the realm of “the untranslatable”.

What Winchester’s work really delves into is an examination of the effects of multi-linguality and the usage of multi-alphabets on the perception of identity. She investigates issues of national identity and transculturality at the collective and individual level. She comments upon the relations between language and nationalist ideology, between artistic practices and politics. *On Reading and Writing* traces out the rich scene of cultural translation which carry us beyond ideological and political silencing, concealments and voids shedding light on the historical co-existence of different cultures, on cultural complexity and polyphony. This aspect of her work can be clearly seen in her installation *Untitled (Kendinibeğenmişesinesankibizdenöncehiçbirşey söylenmemişesinegillerden, 2012)*. Winchester borrows this word from a novel by Oğuz Atay. The word is made up and its literal translation roughly “one of those who come from a lineage who praise themselves and pretend there was no one before them”. Winchester multiplies the excess of this word, of this sentence by re-writing it in five different alphabets (Greek, Armenian, Arabic, Latin, Hebrew), all in the cultural baggage of Turkey. Thus culture gets magnetized. Murat Çankara, a literary critic, writes about this linguistic strangeness:

“What, then, does it mean to write Atay’s word in different scripts? To me, it is irony at its best. It is recalling, into one ‘non-existent’ word, of the scripts that once hosted Turkish, inscribed using at least thirteen writing systems throughout its history. A reunion, so to speak. The irony, once again, is multiplied as the word renders visible the link between narcissism and ignorance of what was said before us. If we are willing to know what was said in Turkish before us, we first have to sever the arbitrary relationship between language and script” (2012: 67).

Winchester’s re-writing of Atay’s invented word with ‘an impossible language’ intermixed with five languages reflects upon the aesthetic potentialities of language and its political affects. This language is a “minor language,” to put in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s words. Deleuze and Guattari re-read Kafka’s work through their notion of “minor literature” – the use of a major language that subverts it from within. According to the philosophers, everything in “minor language” is political: “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 17). And once the language is deterritorialized, it can gain its magnetic quality. Deleuze and Guattari write: “Since the language is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity. Oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it. Arrive at a perfect and unformed expression, a materially intense expression” (19). In other words, all critical language must operate within the confines of the dominant language and culture. Winchester has achieved this through the framework of the legacy of Conceptual Art whose existence depends on concepts rather than objects. This is the main characteristic of the “minor language”: “just as a language of sense is traversed by a line of escape – in order to liberate a living and expressive material that speaks for itself and has no need of being put into a form” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 21). “Minor language” is magnetic; it is the distribution of sounds, voices, accents, senses,



and even nonsenses. There is no longer the self and “the other” in a continuum of reversible intensities: “... it is now a question of a becoming that includes the maximum of difference as a difference of intensity, the crossing of a barrier, a rising or a falling, a bending or an erecting, an accent on the word. ... To make the sequences vibrate, to open the word onto unexpected internal intensities – in short, an asignifying *intensive utilization* of language” (22).

Winchester’s intense installations based on (visual) language assemblages carry the binding promises for making use of the polylingualism of one’s own language, to make a minor yet intensive use of it, to find points of non-culture or untranslatability by which a (visual) language can be magnetized, escaping itself and entering into linguistic worlds of the others, into other bodies and other languages.

Conclusion

“... it is the ear of the other that signs,” Jacques Derrida once said (Derrida, 1988: 51). By “to sign”, he means “to sign one’s signature” in the context of his discussion on autobiography. Derrida speaks of the ear as an organ for perceiving differences: “The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the autos of my autobiography. ... A text is signed only much later by the other” (51). The philosopher is concerned with the act of addressing. The addressee signs with his/her ear, not the other way around. Even if s/he comes along so late and is so unknown, it is the “other” that writes the text, the object, the artwork by seeing it, by hearing it, by reading it. This means that it is we as readers, as audiences who have been entrusted with the responsibility of the signature of the other’s text, of the other’s objects, of the other’s artworks which we have inherited. In a way, we can think of what Derrida calls “sign” as a “semiotic sign” of a different kind. This is what I have tried to do with voice and sound throughout the discussion. In the article, as a “surplus sign”, the “magnetic voice” belongs to the moments of creative condition and production for a rethinking of silence and noise, language and non-language, presence and absence, past and present, cultural identity and alterity. Engaged with the “magnetic voice,” we have gained access to history, cultural memory and community.

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