

Notes on a Practice

Spring had finally come, and daylight extended with it. The clocks go forward, the grand stretch is noticed by all and potentiality is in the air as the spring equinox passes as I walk the forty minute journey to the choir rehearsal. While carrying my camera and sound recorder, I think of the material at hand. Using video and sound has allowed me to capture essences of my artistic process. While working with lens-based explorations, I think about how to experiment with its materiality, its qualities and filmic techniques, which come with the process of shooting. My route is busy and filled with site after site of yellow and orange hi-vis workers, digging up the streets as if in an endless state of excavation. I follow how the landscape changes, how the light illuminates areas which are subject to seasonal misgivings.

The choir's rehearsal centres on watching my three minute video; depicting movements and gestures of empty hands while carrying out craft-based demonstrations. Set on a blue background, the video presents the left and right hand, moving in and out of view on the screen. The hands contort and manoeuvre in the absence of material, revealing the negative spaces left behind when the material or object is removed from its grasp. Through past sculptural experiments, I have cast these spaces in bronze, aluminium, wax and plaster, allowing the authenticity of the object to be questioned.

Every Tuesday at 6pm I meet with five people, all with an intention to improvise the voice. By using the voice as an object, I can further explore the dexterity of the body and its movement when making. The hand is not a lone character when negotiating with a material; my weight shifts from one foot to another, I firmly plant my feet, my elbows angle out to mark my space, my neck holds its posture forward, I hold my breath, my stomach becomes rigid and releases to anchor myself. We begin each rehearsal with a warm up. Body stretching, rotation of the shoulders and the shaking out of any built-up tension are followed by breathing exercises, humming and playful experiments of vocal noises. We repeat this routine before each rehearsal, to release strain and tension from the body in order to protect and explore our vocal chords.

The empty hands begin to orchestrate our vocals, each hand showing tension, strain and contraction as they move from left to right on the screen. A correlation between the hand and the voice become apparent. The removal of tension in our voice is now present in the gait of the hands. We begin to map the movement of the gestures through our voice's exploration. A breath, a sigh, a gasp, a soft hum somewhat channelling the labouring of breath when making.

A combination of abstract vocals and guttural noises fill the rehearsal space. In Jaki Irvine's *If The Ground Should Open* (2017), Irvine "uses the Scottish cainntaireachd system; a compositional strategy used to build chant-like vocalizations and bagpipe music", resulting in perceived abstract sounds that "are based on the sonic qualities of female insurgent's names -split open into elongated vowels' (Perry, 2017). This use of vocal repertoire could lay an approach for the response from the choir. But within our exploration and response to the video, we become more connected to the action that the hand is taking. Their repetitive movements are used to mark time, moving on and off screen, providing rests to catch the breath.

By using photography, a new language can be unfurled, a rhythmic communication between the body and the voice. The camera I brought on my journey now sits behind us, recording each practice, capturing the events of the rehearsal. Multiple microphones pick up sound as it bleeds from one voice to another. This becomes an interesting point of view and departure within the collaboration; as the behind the scene footage reveals a deeper view between the hand and voice. My attention is drawn to the space between the recorded audio and the collaboration.

In my use of it, the camera captures the liminality; its content is of value. In Adam Chodzko's video work *Night Visions* (1998) the viewer witnesses 'something new' within a two-screen synchronised video projection: an improvised lighting design with a generated community of lighting technicians (Chodzko, 1998). The physical preparation and set up is documented alongside the finished result of what heaven's lighting is perceived to look like.

The scene is crafted at the hands of the technicians, they know their material, their equipment and the body becomes in-sync with that of the mechanical elements. The anthropology of actions, labour and work can speak of the conversation between the materials-to-hand within landscape based contexts and our effect on the environment in which we occupy. This collaboration between artist and community forms an understanding of their skills and abilities.

I think of the collaborative work *For you, only you* (2008) by Sonia Boyce and composer, Mikhail Karikis with the singing group Alamire. In Boyce's approach she invites people do something they already know how to do and questions, 'is there anything there to be working with?' (Boyce, 2008). In collaboration with the choir there is no formula to improvisation. The negative spaces, left behind by the removal of the material have potential to be filled by an aural object; an object collectively speaking of the labour-at-hand.

This quote from Hannah Arendt's, *The Human Condition* 'Labour but not work requires for best result a rhythmically ordered performance and in so far as many labourers gang together, needs a rhythmic co-ordination of all individual movements' re-enforces the collaboration between the choir and I (Arendt, 1958, p. 145-146). It is the notions of labour, work and action which fuel the rhythm of the voice. We take in these actions as rhythmic percussions, extend our breath to the labour involved and proceed with intentions on the work being undertaken by the hands in the video. The performance of the everyday, can lend a hand to that of basic materials to work from and through video and sound I can explore these notions of materiality.

From acts of digging up the street, to drilling geological natural resources 1200 feet underground, to a group of vocalists rhythmically working together to create something new, the everyday dawns an unearthing of potential. In Anne Tallentire's practice she explores video to re-adjust something in the space between performance art and video art, something that is neither, "but art that uses video, performance etc as its basic materials" (Tallentire, 2005)¹. With each walk to the choir, new or repetitive observations occur, like a crane passing overhead into construction site workers emulating movement without gravity. The rhythmic co-ordination can be seen between material and machine while the hand becomes invisible.

Attendance at the rehearsals lulls and soars from week to week. The weather takes some of the choir members' hostage. The elongated daylight creates opportunities, as the seasons could change from day to day. Sitting in the rehearsal studios and practice room, you would forget the brightness, which we have become devoid of in the sound proofed room. It is padded, like a cell, to protect ourselves, fitted with foam walls to soften the spill of noise from outside-in and inside-out. We separate the hands, three people on the left and two on the right. The hands are not ambidextrous and the vocals response result in one hand playing off another.

The left hand predominantly holds and grasps more than the right. The right hand has more flexibility and creates melody in-terms of the vocal response, as the left creates a constant note to play with and feed off. A harmonised outtake offers an opportunity to play with the boundaries for compositional technique. I have uncertainty in the improvisational structure of the response and wonder could this video be responded to in other ways? This uncertainty hovers over the making of artwork in a way which I doubt will ever leave. The results could be endless, creating multiple formats, adhering to vocal ranges and musical sensitivities. A new discovery could occur each time, illuminating all the possibilities.

¹ In Drift: Diagram vii, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Leith addresses artistic concerns and subject matter of Anne Tallentire's art practice for her exhibition entitled DRIFT held at Void Derry in October 2005.

Bibliography

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