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Sympoietic vocal practice

ABSTRACT

In this Voicing, Ute Wassermann describes how sympoietic vocal practice brings her into resonance with the world in different ways, creating a complex network of relationships within her body between various vocal identities. Stories are told about how her many voices and the environment exist in a mutually stimulating feedback relationship. She gives examples of how her sympoietic voice collaborates with the polyphonies of other-than-human voices. She communicates with voices sounding from objects, and at the same time is influenced by them. Does her voice remain human, or will it become the other?

KEYWORDS

voice
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improvisation
composition

Over the last 30 years, I have developed a vocal practice, which I describe as sympoietic. Sympoietic vocal practice results in situated, multidimensional, responsive listening and singing, transforming the human voice into an extreme, flexible, multiphonic sound instrument.

Furthermore, my voice can be expanded through the addition of bird whistles, lo-fi electronics, resonators and different types of microphones and transducers. As well as giving rise to pieces for solo voice, my singing engages with field recordings, everyday objects, self-invented instruments or acoustic costumes. I do not consider my voice as a detached entity, but rather as participating in a complex web of relationships with the many voices in my body, with other-than-human voices and in collaboration with other musicians. As a vocal artist, I work in diverse areas of experimental music – improvisation, composition and performance/sound art. This kind of separation into different categories is actually of no significance to me: on the contrary, the various music-scenes complement and cross-fertilize each other.

Donna Haraway describes sympoiesis as:

a simple word; it means 'making-with'. [...] That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. *Sympoiesis* is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.

(2016: 58, original emphasis)

In what follows, I explore how sympoietic singing creates a complex network of relationships within my body between various vocal identities.

THE VOICE-AS-BODY

Vocal sounds are generated by particular tensions in the body. In the course of experimentation, I search for extremes and limits, following the internal grain of the sound, like a sculptor whose work emerges from the natural laws of stone.

Breathing, the source of song, is a continuous process of exchange between the organism and the outside world. I engage in many different ways with diverse breathing patterns, such as extremely long air flows, panting, wheezing, ingressive singing, holding back and releasing air, sudden outbursts. Articulative movements of the tongue, palate, lips and larynx shape the flow of breath in a variety of ways. They govern the tone of the voice – the vibrating stream of air – by redirecting it within the body, letting it run against obstacles, narrowing, expanding, branching, blocking, fragmenting, accelerating and decelerating it, causing it to pulsate or explode. I invent relationships between breath- and muscle-pressures, extreme speed or time-stretching of articulation and differently directed voice-projection. The results are many-voiced oscillating sculptural sounds, and resonance phenomena in the body and in space.

For example, a long-held, ingressive multiphonic causes my pulse to race, and this transgressive, intensely emotional state demands a lightning-fast vocal reaction towards relaxation, which turns out to be uncontrolled and unexpected. Or, I might sing signals of the kind that appear in birdsong or in electronic pulsations: with patterns of inhaling and exhaling I move a repetitive, high, flute-like tongue trill from the row of teeth to the back of the mouth and down the throat and up inside the skull. The trill turns into something rough, synthesizer-like, no longer definable as a voice.

I play with both controlled and uncontrollable processes. I allow myself to be surprised by the sensory and sonic results of consciously induced risks and accidents. In everyday life, accidents can be very dangerous, or at least annoying. With my singing, accidents are a source of liberation. Consciously induced loss of control brings me into a sphere of heightened awareness. It transforms my voice. This contributes significantly to my sense of well-being.

The practice of improvisation builds a deeply anchored somatic memory for complex vocal processes and expressions, and in consequence a constantly recontextualizing and expanding catalogue of sounds. During improvisation, the past (memory) and the present come together in a state of high concentration. A linear conception of time no longer exists. This timelessness, and the sometimes-extreme somatic experience, evoke a trance-like state in live performance, as encountered in various oral musical traditions. Improvisation leads me into the unknown. Improvisation in this case is a feedback process between listening inwardly and outwardly, a feedback between singing or sounding and a continuously growing and changing personal sound language.

I go to the extreme regions of my voice. I experiment. I conceive. I invent concepts that – onstage – I will expand, change or destroy in an ongoing process of creation. My voice changes its colour like a chameleon. It subverts common gender norms. My singing comprises diverse vocal identities that are always interrelated by overlapping, complementing, contradiction and proliferation. With my sympoietic practice I enact many beings within one being (= my voice).

Sympoietic vocal practice takes the human voice beyond itself.

It is unpredictable and responsive.

It is intimate. It is noise.

It oscillates between electronic, in/organic, human and animal vocal qualities.

Sympoietic vocal practice explores many beings within one being.

Sympoietic vocal practice interacts with other-than-human voices.

It is a daily habit and routine of tuning in with the sounds of the environment.

OTHER-THAN-HUMAN VOICES

Since my childhood, I have experienced my voice as being situated within a network of relationships. On our walks together, my father communicated with the various birds in the forest by whistling. In our garden we watched squeaking red beetles whose favourite perches were lilies. We would squeak like these bugs and named them 'lily squeakers'. My participation in the environment was established through such communication with the other-than-human voices.

In 2000, I performed in Hong Kong, where a security guard at the venue asked me if there was a name for what I did. Was it singing? I explained how I developed my vocal language and that I was particularly interested in bird-song. His response was: 'now I understand, what you do is not singing, it is birdtalking!'

A few years later, I released my first solo CD *birdtalking*, which I recorded in the broadcasting studio of Radio Bremen in 2005. With *birdtalking* I explore a variety of multiphonics, chirrups, tremoli, ululations, glottal trills and yodels. I tune into the bewildering polyphonies of bird song with its melodic fragments that might be abruptly broken off, with its repetitions and variations, with its unpredictable phrasing from short calls to chains of twitters, trills and glissandi.

In the following year, I started to integrate palate whistles and bird whistles within my vocal practice. I now have a collection of around 50 birdcall whistles, including a large number from the Brazilian manufacturer Maurílio Coelho – Pios da Mata, the Woodland Birdcall Whistles, a heritage of the State of Espírito Santo. These objects have been made by Maurílio Coelho for over a 100 years. They bear witness to and preserve the memory of the biodiversity of Espírito Santo, and are still used to this day by ornithologists to attract birds.

First, I learned the different playing techniques of the bird whistles, including ingressive breathing, vibrating membranes or modulation through hand movements. I imitated these sounds with my voice and assimilated them. Imitation morphed into invention. I established an individual relationship with each whistle.

1. To see a performance of 'strange songs for voice and bird calls' (Wassermann 2013), please go to: <https://utewassermann.com/composer-performer/strange-songs-for-voice-bird-calls/>.

I sang through the pipes with similar or widely divergent frequencies relative to theirs.

I alternated voice and whistle, creating flowing transitions or contrasts between them.

I created clusters by masking my singing with multiple pipes at once. By now the pipes felt more like extended body parts or transplants.

I embodied a hybrid vocal persona with swirling, trilling, screeching, sighing, breathing and singing tone-colours. I started to perform improvised solos that led to my composition 'strange songs for voice and bird calls' (Wassermann 2013).¹

The bird whistle holds a memory: the voice still sounds in the pipe, even if the bird is now extinct. I enter into a relationship with an object that bears a memory of birdsong.

This evokes memories of my communication with the birds in the woods, in the garden, on the fields, on the seaside. Through sympoietic vocal practice, I enter into various relationships with the object 'bird whistle', with the past and the present, with actual bird song and with my own voice in relation to it.

As Julian Cowley puts it, 'Wassermann sings as a bird, rather than like one. And as philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari point out in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "Becoming is never imitating"' (2016: 53).



Figure 1: Ute Wassermann, concert with Speak Easy, 2016. Festival Konfrontationen, Nickelsdorf. © Peter Gannushkin.

IMAGINARY ACOUSTIC HABITATS

In 1995, I published everyday stories about the voice in relationship to the environment:

I take a seat in the back of the car. There's a huge dog sitting next to me. He growls and I answer. His growl gets more and more wild.

The singer throws out his yodel. He receives it back as an echo from another place.

When I sing, the big green leaves of the avocado plant move up and down.

Mattress voices. Lying down I hear a mysterious, deep, echoing sound. It seems to sound right in the middle of my head. Where does it come from? I later find that the springs in the mattress amplify my own little sleepy sighs.

I bake a cake, and when I take it out of the oven it is burned black. I soak the mould in water. The cake starts to chirrup and screech.
(Wassermann 1995: n.pag.)

My daily habit of tuning into and improvising with vocal and environmental sounds gave rise to various compositions such as 'Hábitat Imaginario' (2016), 'Go-Between' (2020) or 'plankton' (2021), which I summarize below.²

WORKING WITH A SOUND ARCHIVE IN A LIVE SETTING

Hábitat Imaginario

Eight-channel intervention and installation for voice, bird whistles and field recordings

In 2016, the collective *Poetica Sonora* invited me for a residency at the Fonoteca Nacional de México in Coyoacán, Mexico City. I was commissioned to compose and perform a site-specific eight-channel intervention for the Fonoteca's garden – *Jardín Sonoro* – using recordings from the archive.

This is the context in which I read Bernie Krause's book *The Great Animal Orchestra* (2012). Something I found particularly interesting was his detailed presentation of how recorded soundscapes are constituted: each living organism finds its own frequency range, one that is not otherwise occupied in the overall sound spectrum, so that the organism's vocal signals are clearly audible, and may diverge or synchronize rhythmically or in pitch, comparably, for example, to an ensemble of improvising musicians or a many-layered musical composition. Bernie Krause uses spectrograms to prove how human acoustic influence in the form of, for example, aircraft noise or woodcutting, drastically reduces the polyphony of the habitat. Species that can no longer make themselves heard become extinct.

I was intrigued by the idea of using the archive as a source to create an imaginary acoustic habitat with other-than-human voices in relationship to my voice. This would take my sympoietic singing further: my voice would enter into relationships not only with bird whistles but with a sound space of archived voices, composed voices and the present voices living in the garden.

2. To listen to 'Hábitat Imaginario' (Wassermann 2016), please visit: <https://utewassermann.com/composer-performer/habitat-imaginario/>. To listen to 'Go-Between' (Wassermann 2020a), please go to: <https://utewassermann.com/composer-performer/go-between/>.

Will I perceive myself as an individual voice, or will I become a soundscape?

Will my voice remain human or will it become the other?

I listened to numerous recordings of Mexico's rich soundscapes. At the listening and editing stage, I improvised alongside the recordings. I tuned into their sonorities by vocalizing until I internalized them – until they became part of my bodily system. I sampled, looped and superimposed fragments such as the voices of birds, monkeys, bison and insects from different regions of Mexico, or the whistles of street vendors.

During breaks, I sat in the garden and listened to the sound atmosphere. In my mind I heard the faint whistles of the street vendors, mingling with nearby chirps, buzzes, hums and with the quasi-electronic sounds of the chorus of cicadas.

Later in the sound studio, I worked with eight-channel spatialization. I improvised with a composed framework of a polyphony of the sampled other-than-human voices. I experimented with the frequency spectrum of my voice and with a wide range of short repetitive rhythmic patterns within the polyphony of the composed imaginary acoustic habitat.

My voice merged with the sounds of cicadas, coming from different directions and difficult to locate.

My voice, masked with bird whistles and sampled bird voices, was composed into a flock of birds in a tree.

Call-and-response relationships over long distances came into being between my voice and the voices of bison.

I merged bird and monkey voices indissolubly with my voice to create imaginary beings.

In performance I became the other but not completely.

The rich polyphony of non-human voices gave me the opportunity to enter into new relationships with them again and again improvisationally. Each performance was unique and unlike all the others.

In this connection, the words of Donna Haraway are apposite: 'we have a mammalian job to do, with our biotic and abiotic sympoietic collaborators, colaborers. We need to make kin symchthonically, sympoietically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with-become-with, compose-with-the earth-bound' (2016: 102).

You can listen to 'Hábitat Imaginario' as part of *SoundWalk Berlin* in yet another live setting, at the large pond of Volkspark Friedrichshain, where the voices of ducks, swans and walkers mingle with the work. My experiences with Hábitat Imaginario led me to compose 'Go-Between' for cello and voice and field recordings. This piece was written for cellist and singer Alice Purton and is part of the album *The New Unusual*, commissioned by Distractfold Ensemble.

VOICE, FIELD RECORDINGS AND OBJECTS

We went camping in the desert. She started drumming. I sang against the drum and we could feel the vibrations in our hands. Then the coyotes answered. They got very excited and seemed to be close. Shall I join in with them?

(A memory from my notebook, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, 1990)

My recent research for my new work 'plankton' involves voice, whistles, metal resonators and field recordings. 'plankton' addresses sonic pollution and at the same time explores water as a poetic resonance space. During a three-week residency at Atelier Josepha in Ahrenshoop at the Baltic Sea, I connected with the immersiveness of nature.

I sat in huge tufts of sea grass and recorded their rustle in the wind.
 I recorded the noise of the surf and the gurgling water near the groynes in the sea.
 I stuck a hydrophone in the sand and discovered a microcosm of sounds.
 I recorded birdsong and screaming cows, the hum of wind turbines and the fierce rustling of the leaves of trees during a storm.
 I recorded the sound of raindrops on glasses and on metal vessels that I found in the house.
 I improvised on the beach, against the wind, with a megaphone of the kind used on boats in the past.
 I went swimming in wind and rain.

The beauty of the landscape and its invisible threats are inextricably linked: I thought of the many people who died in the Baltic Sea as refugees, or murdered as victims of National Socialism. I thought of the endangered ecosystem, subjected to sound pollution by ship traffic, or underwater explosions of the Second World War ammunition, several millions of tonnes of which are still corroding on the seabed. A ticking time bomb.

The afternoons I spent in the studio playing and improvising.
 I used the recordings of ocean noise and rustling beach grass to excite a zinc bucket filled with water.
 The water rippled with the induced sound.
 The rhythm of the ocean waves asked me to move the bucket back and forth.
 From this movement evolved another layer of waves with massive turbulent resonances.
 I vocalized with an alienated, violent ocean in a bucket that began to transform into an instrument for my voice.
 Bird song started to twitter through a transducer in a metal bowl filled with water. I responded by chirping and singing through little organ pipes that I dipped into the water and took out again. Occasionally, I dipped a hydrophone in the bowl. Birdsong, a faint ambient noise on the recording, and my whistling morphed into a disembodied, metallic-technological soundscape.

I composed a web of relationships between sound, movement and objects. In 'plankton', my sympoietic voice collaborates with the other-than-human voices sounding from the objects and, at the same time, its own sound is influenced by them.

As Tim Ingold says,

organic life as I envisage it, is active rather than reactive, the creative unfolding of an entire field of relations within which beings emerge and take on the particular forms they do, each in relation to the others. Life, in this view is not the realisation of pre-specified forms but the very

3. To see a performance of 'Mutual Dependencies' (Wassermann 2019), please go to: <https://utewassermann.com/composer-performer/mutual-dependencies/>.

process and carries it forward, arises as a singular centre of awareness and agency: an enfoldment, at some particular nexus within it, of the generative potential that is life itself.

(2000: 19)

VOICE AND OBJECTS

Washing the dishes I sing aloud a song. A high-pitched clanging sound suddenly blends loudly into my voice from somewhere. Always at the same place, at a certain pitch, the glasses in the cupboard bang against each other.

(Wassermann 1995: n.pag.)



Figure 2: Ute Wassermann, vocal feedback suit, 1989. Hamburg. © Silke Goes.

Singing makes the air vibrate not only in one's own resonant body but also in objects, in microphones/loudspeakers, in the bodies of others, in space. Through singing, vibrations can be transmitted and then transformed through bodies, objects or the environment. My sympoietic vocal practice and the environment exist in a mutually stimulating feedback relationship.

My piece 'Mutual Dependencies', commissioned by the Maulwerker vocal ensemble in 2019, works with vocal feedback suits made from sheet metal and speakers. This piece is a further development of my solo *ricercare for voice and sheet copper* (1989).³

When I was a student, I lived at the port of Hamburg, where at that time there were still many small metal workshops. I became curious about transferring my voice to thin metal sheets and exploring the resulting sounds and their tactile sensation.

Since direct singing against the foils did not give satisfactory results, I screwed copper foil on small loudspeakers. I experimented with the positions of two microphones on the surface of this object and I improvised to find the frequencies of my voice in sympathy with the resonances of the metal sheets. My singing developed such a close relationship with the object that it felt coherent to connect it to my body. Now it felt like a skin, a living shield. With induced feedback it even seemed to sound on its own – my ‘vocal feedback suit’. Again, I improvised and experimented. This time I scanned my mouth and the body expanding surfaces with different microphone positions searching for *subcutaneous* acoustic responses. I discovered various feedback processes between my voice and the sensitive reactions of the metal surfaces, resulting in polyphonies between voice, voice-driven metal sheets and metallic feedback. The ‘vocal feedback suit’ sometimes reacts rather unpredictably, so I had to let go of my ego in order to respond to its peculiarities. We entered into a reciprocal relationship.

Years later, in a rehearsal phase, the vocalists of the ensemble Maulwerker became accustomed to these peculiarities of the vocal feedback suit. For each of the voices, we investigated which frequencies and articulations were best at making the metal vibrate. Immersive, constantly changing sounds were created through feedback generated in the metal, characteristic sound fields consisting of breathing, creaking and whistling sounds that oscillated between pure vocal sound and the voice sounding through the metal, or whirring sounds created by rubbing microphones against the metal, with an underlay of whistling tones. These sound fields were interspersed with solo moments in which individual voices stimulated the resonance of the metal sheets.



Figure 3: Ute Wassermann, *Aus Atem*, 2020. Berlin. © Photomusix/Cristina Marx.

My performance ‘Aus Atem for Inhaling Vocalist and Bags of Exhaled Air’ was inspired by the current pandemic, which had put the future of singing

4. To see a performance of 'Aus Atem for Inhaling Vocalist and Bags of Exhaled Air' (Wassermann 2020b), please visit: <https://utewassermann.com/composer-performer/aus-atem/>.

into question.⁴ My concept here is to generate with my singing as few aerosols as possible. The staging of this piece involves a light fitting equipped with a microphone, on which a stack of parchment and cellophane bags is placed.

A childhood memory: We sang with comb and paper. We used to inflate paper bags and let them burst and pop. How would it feel to sing with paper as a partner? Can I capture my voice – my aerosols – in bags and create exciting sounds at the same time? Is it physically possible to sing inhaling for a longer period of time?

First, I went in search of suitable paper bags with a rich variety of crackling sounds. In the studio, I explored various acoustic and visual processes between my breathing patterns and the sound and shape of cellophane and parchment bags. I experimented with different types of microphones: a vocal mike, a throat microphone, a lavalier microphone to amplify the inside of the bags and an overhead mike. I explored ingressive singing and various acoustic and visual processes between my breathing patterns and the sound and shape of cellophane and parchment bags. I mixed, matched and merged the sounds of the paper with my vocal sounds. The claustrophobic sound spectrum of my ingressive singing ranged from ingressive wheezing, whistling, creaking, shrill and frail multiphonics, to soft and high bel-canto-like tones.

The bags crackled and growled with my heavy panting. They expanded and contracted frantically. If I panted for too long, I started to cough. I felt I did not get enough oxygen.

Very slow breathing resulted in soft and relaxing crackling sounds, like whispers, while the bag came to life slowly.

My clear-pitched, bel-canto-like singing got distorted when I sang against a transparent cellophane bag. The bag masked and distorted the shape of my mouth.

My singing slowly filled the bag with air. At the end of my breath, I closed the bag and captured my voice inside it. I put down a voice in a bag.

I placed the several breath-filled bags in front of me on the light fitting, so that over time a sculpture of paper bags, exhaled breath and light was assembled.

I gently touched the luminous, air-filled bags and whispered a duet with their almost inaudible sounds.

I took two bags from the stack on the light fitting. I slid them over my hand like a glove, crumpled them up and rubbed them between my hands like soap.

And more.

This piece consists of different chapters in which the bags, responding to my breathing patterns, take on the role of a vibrating mask, a breath reservoir, an air filter, an inhaler and a drum machine. I train my mind by practising different concepts. When they lead me into unknown areas during my performance I will expand, change or even destroy these concepts.

Sympoietic vocal practice puts me in touch with the world in many different ways. Where is the threshold at which my voice (or the body) makes contact with the outside world? Does it sing in my body, in the object, in space, in the

body of the listener? The boundary between self, object and environment is constantly redrawn in different ways, so that this boundary itself becomes an illusion, behind which an audibly more complex reality lies concealed.

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She regularly gives international master classes and lecture performances at art colleges, universities, symposia and festivals.

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