

# The transitioning of sound from consciousness into the external space

Inspired to the Stage Performance *Linear and Aerial Perspectives* by Clara Tomaz

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**Abstract—** In this paper it is my aim to show how the videos with performance in *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* by Clara Tomaz explore the boundaries between local consciousness, the body and the world. In this context, I also provide a possible answer to Marvin Minsky’s open question about what it really means to ‘like’ music [1].

*Consciousness; body; music; sound; performance; boundaries; assemblage; discursive formations; language; vocalist; improvisation.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The investigation starts from philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea that, if I am to know an object, I need to know both its external and internal properties [2]. My interpretation is that, if the ‘object’ is a human being, we may think of ‘internal properties’ as individual consciousness (made of emotions, vibrations, perceptions and thoughts), and ‘external properties’ as the empirical world the human being is immersed in.

My most recent work *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* poses one main question: does the body really mark the separation between internal and external properties of human beings? Is the body really a definite border between consciousness and the empirical world, or consciousness can expand in the space beyond the body? The answer is positive, and such an expansion can be understood with the transitioning of sound – in its pre-verbal and verbal forms - from consciousness into the external space. In this context, consciousness is the location where the first idea of sound is created, the body turns into a musical instrument performing the sound itself, and the external space is the receiver and interpreter of such a sound. The body, rather than representing a boundary, separating consciousness from the empirical world, becomes a medium that allows internal consciousness to become part of the external world.

## II. BODY

My idea of the body as an instrument has been influenced by the performance artist Orlan’s and Stelarc’s works on the body and consciousness. In particular, in these two artists’ approaches I see the exploration of different aspects that complement each other: in Orlan’s work I perceive a separation of consciousness from the body, and in Stelarc’s a negation of any relationship between the body and consciousness.

French performer Orlan’s surgical performances [3] are meaningful in the way she plays with the body and makes her medium and studio out of it. She acts like a sculptor using her own skin in place of clay. She breaks the boundaries of the “sacredness” of the body and she detaches it from the concept of consciousness. Orlan experiments with her body, changes some of its characteristics, and plays with her own facial features, while her identity both as a human being and as an artist remains unchanged. Through his entire career Australian artist Stelarc has conducted an unprecedented research on the body and its relationship to consciousness. In the various suspension performances [4] that Stelarc gave in several public spaces in the late 70s and 80s, where he inserted metal hooks in his skin to be lifted above the audience, his intention was to show how the skin is really just an empty container. As Stelarc explained at the Kurie International Video festival 2009 [5], the suspension performances were strategies to physically exhaust the body and show its obsolescence. And by obsolescence Stelarc meant a body that is absent, empty and performing largely involuntarily. *The Prosthetic Head* (2003), Stelarc’s conversational avatar, brings the artist’s research to the extreme where the whole concept of the body in relation to consciousness is doubted and discussed: the Prosthetic Head is an avatar image saying that bodies and machines are ponderous and their metabolisms perform gravity with weight and friction. On the contrary, electronic images are ethereal and perform literally at the speed of light. As a consequence, images are immortal because avatars have no organs [6]. Here Stelarc tries to overcome the body both empirically and conceptually by taking the idea of its

obsolescence to a complete negation of the body. In an interview with Marquard Smith, Stelarc states that, if it were possible to make a membrane permeable to oxygen, then humans could breathe through the skin. And if the skin possessed some sophisticated photosynthetic capabilities, then it could produce nutrients for the body. So simply through a change of skin, Stelarc imagines we could hollow out the human body, which would become literally a body without organs, a body that doesn't need to be "organ-ized" [8].

I find Stelarc's overall provoking position about the obsolescence of the body very fascinating and absolutely inspiring. The only objection I have with his approach is that I think consciousness is largely related to perception. So, if we hollow the body, as suggested by Stelarc, and reduce the self to an intelligent avatar, it means we identify the self with intelligence and get rid of all the sensory perception aspect that requires a body and the five senses to exist. As an artist myself, I have developed my own understanding of the body as an "assemblage" of organs. And I use the word "assemblage" here in the philosophical meaning that scholars Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe as lines of articulation, strata and territories, but also lines of flight, movements of de-stratification. All these, lines and measurable speeds, constitute an "assemblage". Then Deleuze and Guattari assume this assemblage is in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. By this latest definition the two philosophers mean a virtual value of bodies and machines, a level of unexpressed potentiality [8]. Deleuze and Guattari's idea of an object-assemblage in connection with other assemblages refers back to Foucault's definition for discursive formations: discursive formations not only relate to coexistence or interaction of heterogeneous elements, but also to the relationship established between heterogeneous elements [9]. As a consequence, if we assume the conception of the human body as a discursive formation among organs or as an assemblage of parts, we are defining it as an object governed by mechanical relationships that can be potentially revisited and rethought in new combinations, or discourses, at any time. Contemporary surgical techniques related to transplants and reconstructions of body parts are an empirical evidence of such an idea. As human beings we are born with an innate perception of our self-identity tied to our body. In *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* I provoke the audience to view the body in its double-channel instrumental function, as a medium of exchange between internal and external reality: the body is at the same time an instrument of perception that allows the external world to reach our consciousness through the five senses, and also a musical instrument bringing the voice of our consciousness into the external world.

### III. LOCAL CONSCIOUSNESS

If the body can be considered as an assemblage of organs, then what is local consciousness? Could consciousness be regarded as an assemblage of perceptions? The answer provided by *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* is

positive; the performance investigates how human beings experience through perception and perspectives, how they coordinate thoughts and emotions per association and how they reconstruct and represent reality by using such assemblage of perceptions.

One of the major influences on my work in the field of consciousness is Irish writer James Joyce's use of the stream of consciousness technique in *Ulysses* [10] and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [11]. In Molly Bloom's internal monologue from the eighteenth chapter of *Ulysses*, Joyce creates a masterpiece in representing the female character's stream of thoughts as they spring up in the mind before logic intervenes to process, order and organize them. The three scholars Hugh, Hint and Hibbard in their analysis of the modern novel assume that in the mind of an individual at a given moment their stream of consciousness is a mixture of all the levels of awareness, an unending flow of sensations, thoughts, memories, associations and reflections [12]; if the exact content of the mind as consciousness is to be described at any moment, then these varied, disjointed, and illogical elements must find expression in a flow of words, images and ideas, similar to the unorganized flow of the mind. It is exactly this "flow of words, images and ideas, similar to the unorganized flow of the mind" that can explain consciousness as an assemblage of perceptions. It is only an apparently disconnected and unorganized assemblage because it actually implies "discursive formations" as defined by Foucault. Foucault states that discursive formations not only refer to coexistence or interaction of heterogeneous elements, but also to the relationship established between heterogeneous elements [9]. I would add that the relationship established between flows of words, images and ideas as they spring up the mind is not based on logic, but it still functions on simple, primitive, sometimes literal, associations. In order to best represent this primitive and disorganized phase of the character's consciousness Joyce writes pages and pages of Molly Bloom's interior monologue without punctuation and syntactical structure. At least two of the three videos included in *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* develop following free association in place of logic. Joyce's interest in primitive and literal processes of human consciousness have deeply influenced the video with performance *DEVIATIONS AND STRAIGHT LINE*, for example, where the two apparently separated layers of video visuals - illustrating feet walking on different kinds of ground - and abstract vocalizing with phonemes find an association in the element of the beach (working here like the word "sun" in Molly's interior monologue, which makes her switch from thoughts around atheism to romantic memories of a former partner's proposal [10]). Video visuals and abstract vocalizing finally converge into a narration, which ends up representing a third separate layer in the video.

### IV. SOUND

In chapter 1, I defined the sounds humans can produce as a vehicle for the expansion of consciousness into the external

world. Starting from the question posed by *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* - “does the body really mark the separation between internal and external properties of human beings? Is the body really a definite border between individual consciousness and the empirical world, or consciousness can expand in the space beyond the body?” – I stated that such expansion can be understood with the idea of sound transitioning from internal consciousness into the external space. *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* investigates language as an assemblage of sounds where the meaning of words and speech stops to be central in order to privilege pure sound, musicality and rhythm.

Throughout the twentieth century, musicians have explored materials drawn from environments situated outside what was previously considered the realm of music: not only exploring new techniques, but also reconsidering aspects of everyday life as important compositional resources. One of the most fundamental of such everyday sonic resources is language [13], which has inspired outstanding composers like Meredith Monk and Robert Ashley. Meredith Monk’s sound work for vocalist mainly deals with the abstract use of speech intonation and expressiveness of conversation modes, which often means a polyphonic use of choirs as in *Dolmen Music* (1979). In this composition pre-verbal sounds are usually preferred, full words omitted, or, if they are present, they are used for their sound quality, separated from their meaning. In an interview Monk points out that she thinks of the voice as an instrument provided by the body, and instrumentals usually don’t have words [14].

The liberation of the word from its syntactic context and the liberation of phonetics from the semantic were two essential components that paved the way for the revolution in vocal music of the fifties and sixties [15]. Robert Ashley was a pioneer in the process of drawing music out of words [13] refusing the reverse traditional process of setting words to music. In his work *She was a visitor* (1967) the voice repeats the same 4-word sentence of the title incessantly from beginning to end, thus setting the pace of the whole composition and presenting, in the background, minimal modulations of electronically processed sound that seem to illustrate an organic slow change of space/environment. In *Automatic Writing* (1979), instead, the voice is used in a way that resembles Meredith Monk’s style: here Ashley focuses on the intonation and modes of conversation creating an environment of intimacy between a female whispering voice and a male electronically processed voice. The composer reaches an effect similar to voices filtered by a wall, through which only color, pitch and intensity of sound can be perceived, and no meaning can be associated. The background sound of the whole composition is very minimal and seems to react very subtly to the voices, thus reinforcing the idea of intimacy. As Ashley himself states in his article *As So It Goes, Depending* (1980), there is a hard line between speaking and singing, hard to find but still there and imposed in the form of an obligation. By studying this line we realize it keeps moving toward speech, at least in our time [15].

*LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* refuses Ashley’s idea of a hard line between speaking and singing: by stating that sound and language represent the vehicle that allows consciousness to expand into the external world, any distinction or categorization of the sound is overlooked and avoided. In their connotation as vehicles for the expansion of consciousness, singing and speaking imply no difference and no hard line between them. They both belong to the area of sound and both allow consciousness to exist in an undefined dimension where “internal” is at the same time “external”: the consciousness - as the original internal site where emotions, thoughts, perceptions and dreams are generated - and its sonic interpretation in the external world become one indistinguishable thing. In other words, the idea of sound, the emotion or thought that generates it, its interpretation in terms of performance, and its propagation in the space, do all happen in the same dimension. Such dimension refuses any distinction between singing, speaking, internal and external: as poetically illustrated in *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES*, all these contrasting elements coexist and, by blending into each other, they transcend the idea of language as based on social conventions.

As a former linguist, I often had to work on language in terms of pre-verbal-sounds, phonemes, composition of words, and sentence structure. I often found myself disassembling sentences and words in order to get to the root sounds both in the process of learning and teaching foreign languages. When I became speech-impaired suddenly at the age of 37, I went exactly through the same path in the process of rehabilitation after a surgery that had compromised my oral communication skills. In both these personal experiences language and speech stopped to be for me a natural and uncontrolled wave of expression. The assumption that humans are capable of constructing language to express every sense, without having any idea of each word’s meaning, just as people speak without knowing how the individual sounds are produced [2], was getting farther and farther from me. My perception of language and sound led me to new considerations on the nature of language itself. My first reaction as an artist was to reproduce creatively the idea that language is a construction of individual sounds that exist separately and have unique connotation. Having to work on each phoneme individually in order to become partially fluent in speech during rehabilitation made me sensibly aware that language is an assemblage of sounds just as the body is an assemblage of organs, and consciousness an assemblage of perceptions.

## V. CONCERT AS DISCOURSE OF CONSCIOUSNESSES

*LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* draws the conclusion that as humans we exist in an undefined dimension where “internal” is at the same time “external”: thanks to the sound the body can produce, consciousness expands into a space beyond the body and becomes part of it. In return, the external world is also involved in the sound that a human being produces. An empty space is filled with sound when I talk or sing. If my sound is the expression of my

consciousness, then it is my consciousness - in terms of vibrations, emotions, perceptions and thoughts – that is filling the space around me and beyond my body.

The three videos with performance in *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* explore language as a major sonic resource and expression of consciousness. The vocalist uses language in all its aspects, from pure sound (pre-verbal modulations), to fundamentals of language (phonemes), association of meaning (words and sentences), and organized speech (narration). The vocalist's voice interprets the emotions and free thoughts of her own consciousness, while the musicians of the improvisation ensemble accompany the vocalist by interpreting their own individual consciousness along with what they perceive – which means a personal elaboration - of the vocalist's consciousness. The choice of guided improvisation in *LINEAR AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVES* emphasizes the liberal expression of one's consciousness in the moment. Consciousness is in constant becoming because it reacts to the external world that it perceives in a sensory way through the body. The sound that interprets such reaction (and is performed by the body as a musical instrument) ends up being connoted by different qualities of rhythm, pitch, and color, depending on the moment it is performed. The audience receives such variety of sounds, vibrations and emotions coming from the performers, and reacts with new emotions, vibrations and thoughts, which are the expression of their own individual consciousnesses.

In conclusion, I refer again to scholars Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's definition of 'assemblage' [8], and Michel Foucault's concept of 'discursive formations' [9], to support the following idea: the assemblage of vocalist's and improvising musicians' consciousnesses fills the space with sound, blurs the distinction of internal and external, and, by provoking a reaction, it involves the audience with their own complex assemblage of individual consciousnesses. It's a concert of consciousnesses in discursive formation, a dialog that goes beyond sound itself and involves the very essence of human beings: their consciousness. At this point, if I am to answer Marvin Minsky's question about what it means when we say we 'like' music, or a specific piece of music [1], then I say that our appreciation depends on how much we feel involved in the discursive formation that puts our consciousness in dialog at least with the performer, if not with composer, improviser, several performers, the audience of a

big theatre, or even larger masses of human beings, as in the case induced by mass events like network concerts.

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