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Studio Without Master

How to Speak with Your Mouth Full?

We want to tell a dream that nobody has dreamed. We do not want to interpret it. We want to live it and digest it.

What we attempt in the Studio Without Master (SWM) in practice will be performed here on a theoretical basis. The non-articulated program of SWM takes shape in the body of this text, which can be read either as a note on the theory of ventriloquism or – as will become clear later – as an act of ventriloquism itself.¹

What may at first appear as a detached and belated metaphor will serve in this article both as a description of the current situation and as a critique, thus making the concept's overall situation more satisfactory.

Subaltern Bellies

The ventriloquist metaphor is not a particularly new one. Ventriloquism has been used so often in critical theory and identity politics that it has almost become a dead metaphor (see Davis 1998: 133). In academic jargon the concept of ventriloquism comes to mind every time we discuss 'speaking on behalf of or for a vicarious Other' (ibid). Ventriloquistic 'dolls' or 'puppets' can be viewed in the broadest sense as figures or objects that are used to speak through. They are often from marginalized or oppressed groups or have taken on the appearance of such groups – be it a woman (from Pythia of Delphi to spiritist mediums in the modern age), an Asian or Black person, or members of other minorities oppressed by society (like alcoholics). The figure of ventriloquism suggests itself every time we speak of those who cannot

advocate for themselves and who 'need to be represented by someone else' (Marx 1852). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks in this context directly about 'subaltern ventriloquism' – in fact about those whose right to speak and to be heard has been taken away (Spivak 1999). Using the ventriloquist's trick, they are given a voice, identical with the power to act.

On one hand we want to exploit the metaphor's ubiquity, but we also want to use it in a new way. While retaining the concept's ambivalence, we want to overcome it by pushing it further. The ambivalence of ventriloquism lies in multiple uncertainties: Where does the voice come from? Who is actually speaking? Who is speaking on behalf of whom? Isn't there a paradox in the usage of this metaphor in critical theory – admitting the voice of subalterns while problematizing their self-existence as orators? Put another way – is there equality between (bestowed) voice and the ability to act? We won't answer these questions here, but we ought to bear this creeping ambiguity of ventriloquism in mind. However, anyone who watches a ventriloquist show knows he or she has been tricked – but this knowledge is a source of pleasure (see Latour in Cooren 2010: XIV).

Gastromance²

In ventriloquism's long history, its forms and functions have gone through many changes. Although we cannot discuss them all here, we should at least mention its mythical beginnings which itself merits theoretical consideration and which we can use as a starting point for another, more incisive concept of ventriloquism. Its

¹ In the article there are various references to specific forms of ventriloquism. The texts referred to are sometimes retold and sometimes quoted. They are extracted from the original contexts and then used directly on purpose. As such, it is not clear whether the voice is coming from below or above the line.

² Here we combined two words: *gastromancy* (i.e. an ancient technique of foretelling based on interpreting abdominal sounds) and *romance* (quite a different genre which is somehow closer to our goals).

oldest traces can be found in Ancient Greece, where it was used as technique for augury (gastromancy) and for fun at the same time. The most famous Greek ventriloquist was Eurycles, who makes a brief but eloquent appearance in Plato's *Sophist*. The main character of this *dialogue* defends the possibility and usefulness of calling things by different names – for example in metaphor. According to Plato, those who renounce this possibility have compromising words in their speech anyway, as if 'the wonderful Eurycles' was speaking from their insides (Plato 1921). In this text, Plato performs a transfer 'from carnality of testimony to ambivalence of language' (Connor 2000: 50-51). He sees ventriloquism as 'a metaphor for the indispensability of metaphor' (ibid). It becomes a kind of meta-metaphor, which is no longer one rhetorical figure among others, but a kind of mechanism working deeper in the core of the language. In this reading of the *Sophist*, ventriloquism features as a trick responsible for the very possibility of expressing something.³

Polyphonic Paunch

Other contemporary thinkers see (the metaphor of) ventriloquism playing an even more fundamental role. François Cooren speaks about the 'communicative constitution of reality', at whose core there is a multiple operation of ventriloquism (Cooren/Sandler 2014: 239).⁴ Cooren argues persuasively that when 'we' talk, numerous voices are sounding. Every speech consists of many assumptions, intentions and effects. He disturbs the constellation of active speaker, passive puppet and individual voice, offering new, provocative conditions of action. According to Cooren, acting (telling things and doing things) involves the whole network of both human and nonhuman elements. Puppets and ventriloquists (or according to Cooren: figures and agents) can no longer be separated (see Cooren 2010: 171). A suprapersonal voice (in the wider sense: the totality of rules, traditions, ideas, etc.) is internalized and embodied in us. And we are those who articulate it. This two-way process is therefore always active and passive at the same time. Untraceable origin of agency (emotions, values, collectives, etc.) leads to something like a mutual projection of a 'head' and 'belly' – projections of the one speaking and the one through whom language is spoken. With this 'trick' of ventriloquizing (simultaneous embodiment/animation), societies are established; we may speak of a studio, a company, or a nation (see ibid: 159). Ventriloquism thus enables us to make use of authorities or collectives and also to create collectives and change them. This shift away from a rigidly individual, subjectivist perspective doesn't mean that ventriloquist's dolls – or speaking bellies – are not responsible for their own acts. The opposite

is true: when we notice the strings leading upwards from our wooden limbs and when we identify the fingers that are moving our jaws, we gain a responsible attitude.

Belly Without Organs

In his book about medieval carnival culture, Mikhail Bakhtin, the big theorist of the belly, offers a compelling description of the mechanism of 'degradation': 'Degradation and debasement of the higher do not have a formal and relative character in grotesque realism. "Upward" and "downward" have here an absolute and strictly topographical meaning' (Bakhtin 1984: 21). In their bodily aspect, the 'upper part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks. [...] To degrade [...] means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation [...] has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one' (ibid). In our reading, concepts of 'up' and 'down' naturally link to the institutional hierarchy and to (sadly) formulaic pedagogical practice. The operation of 'disparagement' inspired by Bakhtin reveals the fantastic anatomy of our speaking belly.

The belly we are talking about belongs – if we say so – to the body without organs as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This body without organs constitutes a release from the oppression of the powerful trinity of organism (organization), signification (interpretation) and subjectification (see Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 159-160). We can identify these with the head: the head organizes when it controls the organism; head and face, where the voice comes from, are privileged parts of the body when it comes to making meaning and subjectivity. However hard it is to imagine dispensing with this head, the possible benefit makes it seem worth a try. If we try to think about the body without organs, getting rid of the head, we follow a path of potentially productive experimentation, testing established hierarchies towards the creation of new tactics and subjectivities. These subjectivities are temporary and works-in-progress. Inside a belly, in a collective or in anonymity, tactical depersonification, micro-politics and disidentification are asserted (see Preciado 2013: 397-398). They are not supposed to lead to rigid identities fighting each other, but to a redefinition of existing identities: sometimes it is necessary to be unable to recognize yourself. This misidentification is a precondition for the possibility of changing reality (see ibid). In our view, artistic education should improve this process. But to be able to do so, it must become part of the new reality, again and again.

³ Figures of speech start living their own lives. They undress in acts of speech. Not completely, however. They know how to be seductive; something must always be left to the imagination.

⁴ Cooren also uses a metaphor of ventriloquism in his other texts, mainly in Cooren 2010.

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Studio Without Master

Temporary Manifesto

SWM's meetings are based on sharing knowledge. We believe that knowledge should not become private capital concentrated in one person's hand.

Being aware of our different social and educational ranks prompted us to organize lessons such as critical reading sessions and various workshops.

Though there is not always a specific agenda, we still meet on a regular basis, as boredom can be more inspiring than demand for high-productivity and competitiveness.

We believe that invention cannot be evaluated through any mastery.

Agency or ability to act is not perceived as something that can be given or designed in advance, but as something fragile that is created in an ongoing process.

A meeting is no longer a must-deliver situation.

Having no space of our own, we move between different places, either in the school building, in some other public space, or at home. Not in and not out, but obviously entangled with school, we believe that discussing school affairs publicly can challenge the exclusivity of the art space and the academy and generally shed some light on the meaning of the institution itself.