SOLO FOR SELF-TALK CHAMBER:

EXPERIENCE ON THE SOUND/SENSE CONTINUUM OF LANGUAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

My recent work as an artist is centred around a search for what Heidegger calls an "experience with language"—moments in which our awareness of language spikes and our relationship with it changes. Where I found the most potential is on the sound/ sense continuum of the human voice, and it is an oscillation between the extremes of this continuum that defines my recent works. This paper examines these works and their underpinning ideas, but focuses on the culminating project of my thesis: *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber*. For this project, I spoke aloud to myself for fourteen hours, one hour at a time, in a purpose-built room. The process was documented and exhibited as a book work, a video and a performance, all of which are discussed in detail.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Immediately preceding graduate school, a thoughtful friend gave me Heidegger's *On the Way to Language*. There is a quote in it that has stayed with me throughout the past two years of my studies, and it is one I come back to often. "If it is true that man finds the proper abode of his existence in language," Heidegger says, "then an experience we undergo with language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence." (57) As soon as I read this I felt it instinctively to be true, but the question I return to again and again is this: what is "an experience we undergo with language"? When do we have an "experience with language"? Heidegger is not speaking here of our relatively unconscious day–to–day use of language, but rather a situation in which language—or the idea of it—makes its presence felt. An experience with language is, in Heidegger's own words, a "moment in which language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being." (59) These *moments*—wherein our awareness of language spikes and our relationship with it shifts—are what I am searching for in my work. This search is the starting point from which all of my work develops.

That is the foundational part of my art practice—what I think of as its core—but I would like to turn now to what distinguishes my practice and what I have come to focus on in my research.

First, I would describe my work as being formalist, in that *most* of my attention is on the material aspects of language. There are many conflicting (and negative) definitions of formalism, but I relate most to one from the world of poetry. In the introduction to Viktor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*, Gerald Bruns says, "Formalist poetry (defamiliarizes) by foregrounding the materiality of language, disrupting the signifying function in order to free words from... symbolic order." (xiii) I do not ignore meaning entirely, or somehow seek to negate it, but I choose to focus first on the signifier and not the signified. I do so as a means of coming in to a different kind of contact with language. I believe that when one focuses on the material of language, the meaning that results is often pointed back towards language itself.

One of the richest and most complicated signifiers connected to language is voice, and this is what I concentrated on in my final year of research.

WHAT IS THE VOICE?

Like the word language, voice is a term so familiar that it has lost some of its meaning. Voice, as I think of it, exists as a continuum. On one end is sound; on the other, sense. [1] On the far extreme of sound there is pure vocal expression—grunts, hums, and even less discernible combinations of vocal noise. At the extreme of sense, we have not just speech, but something like the careful and articulated speech of a theatrical monologue.

Delimited between those two outermost points is the potential of the human voice. In his book *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar offers a more philosophical definition:

> It is precisely the voice that holds bodies and languages together.
> Language is attached to the body through the voice, as if the voice were
> to fulfill the function of the pineal gland in a new Cartesian divide of
> substances. (60)

Voice, as Dolar defines it, exists in the overlap between body and language. His reference of Descartes' understanding of the pineal gland—as the "seat of the soul"—is particularly apt. [2] We have presence in our physical body and presence in our ideas, but voice is what binds and completes the two.

One should not ignore, however, the immediate definitions that come to mind when reflecting on voice. We often think of voice as a synonym for speech, and there is good reason for this. "Speech," says philosopher Adriana Cavarero, is, after all, the voice's "essential destination." (12) And yet Cavarero reminds us that "the sphere of the voice is constitutively broader than that of speech: it exceeds it." (13)

This brings up an intriguing tension in the inner relationships of the voice: while it is essentially defined as meaningful speech, it contains within it a wide field of other

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1   I borrow this idea, and some examples, from R. Murray Schaefer's *When Words Sing*. On page 26 of this book Schaefer speaks of voice on a continuum, but more as it relates to singing.

2   Lokhorst, Gert-Jan. "Descartes and the Pineal Gland." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. 26 May 2013 <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pineal-gland/>.

sonic articulations—speech-like or not. This means that regardless of how far from speech the voice gets—be it a gasp or a cough—there is always a reference back to speech and to meaning. We are trained to expect meaning from the voice, and when we do not get it we find ourselves in unfamiliar—and in my mind exciting—territory. The potential of meaning and its constant presence is a kind of energy that infuses the voice. It then becomes a matter of finding a way of converting this energy into something. The "something" I am after, as I mentioned earlier, is what I explained as an "experience with language". Each project I undertake has this as its motivation. The major work of my research, then, has been in finding the most productive means by which to achieve this end. What I have found is that I am most excited by the potential for travel back and forth across the sound/sense continuum of voice. It is an oscillation between the voice's two extremes that defines my recent works and what ties them together.

Before discussing these works, and the culminating exhibition of my degree, I would like to turn to a work by another artist that beautifully exemplifies the kind of action I have found most profitable in my own work.

ALVIN LUCIER'S *I AM SITTING IN A ROOM* (1969)

In Alvin Lucier's sound work *I Am Sitting in a Room (for voice on tape)*, Lucier takes us on a journey from one side of the voice continuum to the other. The piece begins on the side of sense, with Lucier recording a reading of the following text:

> I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am
> recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back
> into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room
> reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps
> the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the
> natural resonant frequencies of room articulated by speech. I regard this
> activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but, more as a
> way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have. (Lucier 1)

This initial text telegraphs what will happen over the course of the piece: the first recording is played out into the room and re-recorded over and over until, thirty-two repetitions and forty minutes later, we have gradually arrived at something that has speech as its base but is located as pure sound. [3] In the liner notes for a 1970 recording of the piece, Nicolas Collins summarizes this nicely, saying, "Somehow, somewhere in the course of 40 minutes the meaning of what we've been listening to has slipped from the domain of language to that of harmony." (Lucier, 2)

Lucier's piece stands as one of the strongest examples of the kind of movement I have been interested in. There is a steady, linear progression from sense to sound, as if we are walking step by step from one destination to another off in the distance. What we experience is not so much a loss of meaning, but its slow fade as we get further and further away. In what transpires, in his movement, we have had an experience with language and voice that is remarkably different from our usual interactions with it. It provides the kind of insight that is, ironically, difficult to voice.

WHAT ABOUT THIS VOICE (2012)

In Lucier's aforementioned sound work, there is a linear movement from sense to sound in which we seem to travel the entire landscape of the voice. In my own *What About This Voice*, a performative video loop, this landscape is traversed in a more frantic and absurd way.

The piece acts as an inventory of one person's—my own—vocal potential. In it, I essentially "try on" various forms of my own voice. A repeated text—"what about this voice?"—and a looped video—a turn towards the camera—serve as a template from which to test different manifestations of my voice. Much like *I Am Sitting in a Room*, the starting point is my regular speaking voice. This changes quickly, however, and over the course of the piece my voice makes many different stops on the sound / sense spectrum;

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3   It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain what resonant frequencies are, and what, exactly, happens sonically in this piece. More important to know is that the sound is something like hearing a very gradual fade from speech into a semi-melodic ringing sound. The rhythm of the spoken text is more or less intact, but there are no discernible words.

Fig. 1   Still image from *What About This Voice* (2012)

everything from overly dramatic character voices to barely vocal mouth sounds. The sounds are not limited to what my voice can do on its own, but come in digitally manipulated and extended forms in which my speech is altered and sometimes destroyed. The transition between these different voices is progressive; less like turning the channel and more akin to a slow sweep across radio frequencies. The overall effect of this, I believe, relates back to Mladen Dolar's idea of the voice as the overlap between body and language. In a situation like this, the voice seems more like the product of a ventriloquist and becomes dislodged from body and language alike.

In thinking of works that have a similar effect, *What About This Voice* owes a large debt to Peter Rose's video *The Pressures of The Text* (1983). Rose's work, while more narrative in scope, is an exhaustive catalogue of speech forms that works its way from empty academic speech to frantic babble.
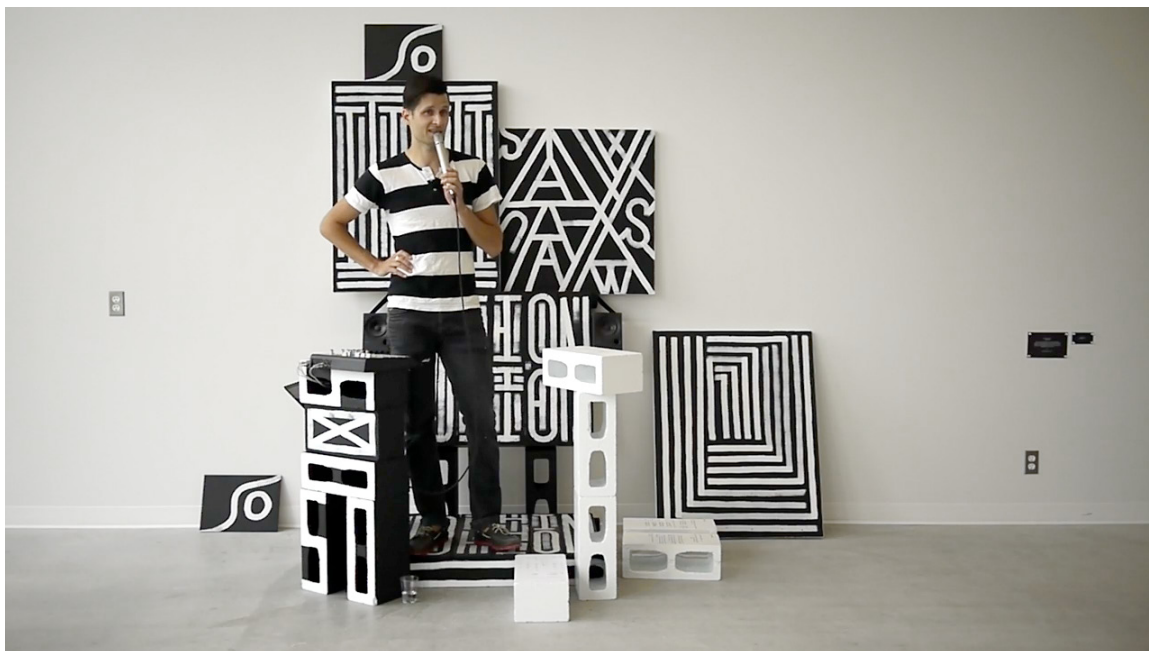
Fig.2   Still image from documentation video of *So So Soundsystem* (2012)

SO SO SOUNDSYSTEM (2012)

After working on *What About This Voice* I became interested in moving into live performance while exploring similar ideas.

So So Soundsystem owed two things to its development. First, I was inspired by text-sound works like Robert Ashley's "She Was A Visitor" (1967) and Charles Amirkhanian's "Church Car" (1980). These are essentially works of sound poetry in which the sound of speech is given precedence over its semantic and syntactic values. Second, I was experimenting at the time with applying looping and echo to live voice in performance. These two effects seemed to fit naturally with the voice: an echo is our voice coming back to us after its release, and is in some ways a primal form of recording; a loop is simply an echo that never fades away.

What resulted from these influences and experiments was *So So Soundsystem*, a twenty minute performance from within a small installation of paintings. There were also scores for each piece included in the installation, mounted on concrete blocks.

The piece as a whole was comprised of four short text-sound performances. In *Excuse Me,* a monotone "Excuse Me" was delivered and then looped. The pitch of this

loop was then "played" to create different forms of this same phrase. *Elusive Rhythm* was a loop slowly built up of the sounds one makes when trying to call forth an elusive word or idea. In *So I* I started from an empty loop, and then added in parts of a sentence out of order, slowly building a looping sentence that was then altered one word at a time to change its meaning. The final work of *So So Soundsystem* was *&*, which was the most improvisational of the four performances. This piece used echo as a means of transition from one sample of speech to another. Phrases and mini-monologues were spoken, repeated and subjected to echo so that the initial speech became increasingly confused. From within the sound of this confusion a new text was derived and then spoken. The process then began again.

In all four pieces there are only brief moments where we edge close to the sense side of the voice continuum. Other than language and voice itself, there is little "content" or meaning to the text. Because the speech is never complete nonsense there are times when there is the *feeling* of sense, but these moments do not last. Before long, the voice wanders off towards sound, lingering for a while, and then moving closer to sense again. This scenario plays out repeatedly. What we end up hearing has the veneer of speech, but many of the characteristics of music; not quite speech, and not quite song, but something between the two.

INTERVIEW FOR FIVE VOICES (2012)

In this piece, the process of an interview was used as a means to produce a musical composition. Where *So So Soundsystem* had a musicality to it, *Interview for Five Voices* was immediately recognizable as music, and as song.

Interview for Five Voices was a video and sound installation that took as its starting point five separate interviews with identical questions. These questions were the score for the piece and were almost entirely formal, in that their purpose was not to gather information but to generate a variety of mouth movements. (The questions can be seen on the score, fig. 4, which was part of the installation). These mouth movements
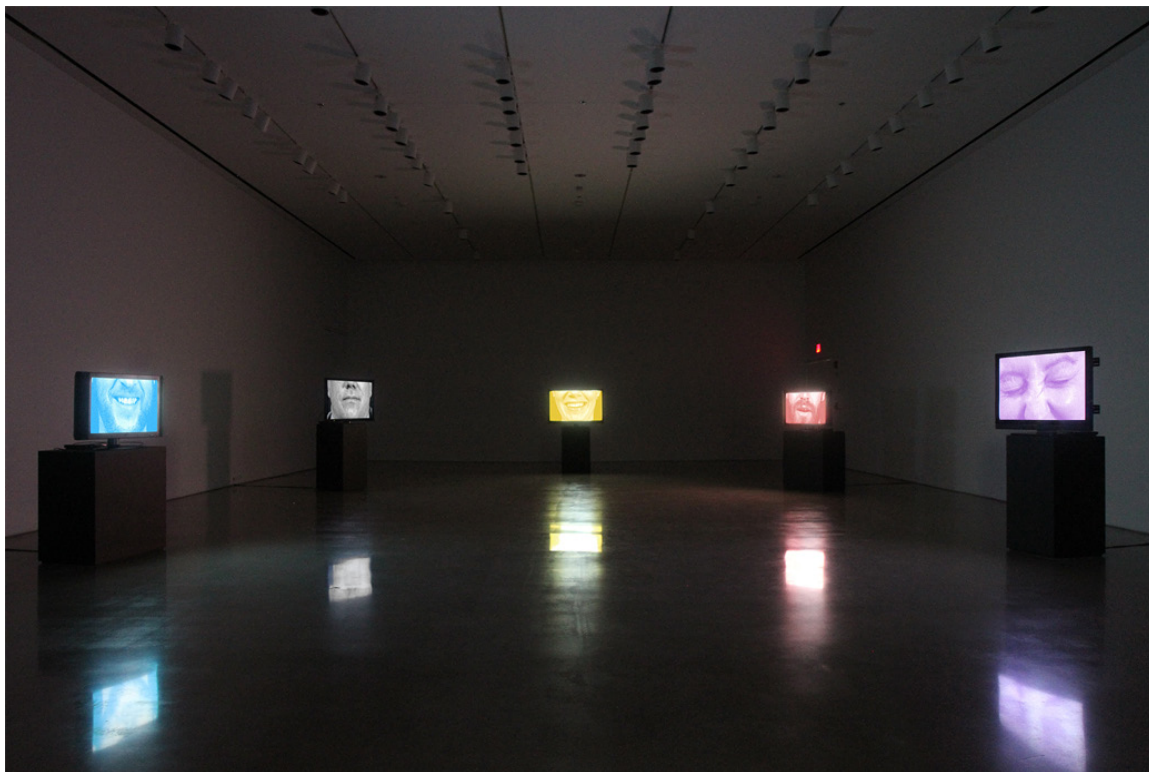
Fig.3   Installation view of *Interview for Five Voices* (2012)

then modulated the interviewee's raw speech material into a singing pulse. [4] In the exhibition the piece consisted of five televisions spread throughout a gallery's richly reverberant space, together forming a constantly shifting and indeterminate ambient music installation. The environment created was one of abstracted speech that fluctuated playfully between several poles: the spiritual and the absurd, song and speech, and, of course, sound and sense.

What is heard in *Interview for Five Voices* is speech without sense, and yet, as discussed earlier, the voice can never really be divorced from meaning. While sense has been in some ways extracted from what is heard in *Interview*, it remains as an idea and imbues what is left with a diffused vitality. Another noticeable aspect is what Roland

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4   This "raw speech material" that was modulated came in the form of an "ahhh" sound recorded from each of the interviewees in the pitch of the first letter of their name (Doug in D, for example). The "ahhh" sound was chosen because it is, according to R. Murray Schaefer, the "most frequent vowel sound in the English language. Elemental. Ur Sound."

INTERVIEW FOR FIVE VOICES

RAY FENWICK

COLIN
DOUG
ELENA
GRANT
ANGELA

QUESTIONS

IN ADDITION TO QUESTIONS: Explanation and clarification of questions, general discussion of questions, discussion of answers given, general conversation about the project, unrelated conversation, comments by interviewer, laughter.

I   Would you please hold still?

II What is your name?
    Say it and then spell it.

III Would you please say, "WHOA OH WOW,"
    several times?

IV QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT REQUIRE SOME THOUGHT
    Ⓐ What did you eat for dinner last Tuesday?
    Ⓑ What are the eye colours of your family members?

V   Would you please say, "OOH A PUPPY," several times?

VI How long can you hold your breath?
    Would you please try now?

VII Would you please say, "WEEEEEEEEEEEEE,"
    for as long as you feel like doing it?

VIII EASY QUESTION
    Ⓐ What did you do yesterday morning?

IX FREESTYLE PORTION
    Ⓐ Would you please open and close your mouth
    at a rhythm of your choosing for as long as you
    feel like doing it?

X   What is currently your favourite colour?

XI Would you please hold still?

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh⎯

COLIN IN Ⓒ
DOUG IN Ⓓ
ELENA IN Ⓔ
GRANT IN Ⓖ
ANGELA IN Ⓐ

ETC.

Fig.4   Score for *Interview for Five Voices* (2012)

Barthes calls the grain of the voice. "The 'grain'," says Barthes, "is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs." (188) It is the timbre of a voice, its imperfections, and the various ways in which it rubs up against the system of language. It is what gives a voice its individuality, a quality that is determined not by what the particular voice can achieve but how it achieves it. One of the strongest aspects of *Interview* is the simple revelation of the voice's persistence of identity, even in a highly abstracted form. Standing back from the installation, one hears the chorus of the five voices, but it is easy to pick out the individual voices and their grains. Moving closer to each individual television/voice only intensifies this effect.

　　Interview moves between several areas on the voice continuum, sometimes seeming to occupy multiple points simultaneously. The interviewees are, strictly speaking, neither singing nor speaking, and yet they give the impression of doing both, like the optical illusion that flips between multiple states. Complicating this further is the presence of the score, which gives clues as to what might be being uttered in some cases. We are brought closer to sense in those moments, but not in any meaningful way—it is merely a brief peek at what is hidden. It is in this swaying back and forth between sound and sense that the "experience with language" occurs in this piece.

A MOMENTARY BOUT OF LARYNGITIS

Interview for Five Voices was, to my mind, the most successful attempt I had made in my pursuit of an "experience with language". So successful, in fact, that I had no idea where to look next. Lacking direction, I thought it might be helpful to focus on somebody else's work for a while. The piece I turned my attention to was Robert Ashley's text-sound opera entitled *Perfect Lives*. While the piece itself was inspiring—especially the flowing, musical language and the seesaw between sound and speech—it was actually Ashley's account of how he developed it that would inspire what would eventually become my final thesis project.

　　"In writing *Perfect Lives*," said Ashley, "I had this practice: I'd go into a room, close the door and start singing." (149) Ashley developed *Perfect Lives* mainly through a process of singing and talking to himself. This, to me, seemed like a way to have

a truly unique "experience with language". It struck me that to talk to oneself both simultaneously simplified and complicated one's relationship to language, and this idea excited me with its potential.

It was then that I decided to create a special topics class for myself entitled *Intrapersonal Communication Workshop: A Special Topics in Talking to Myself*. The idea for the class was simple: I would create a space to talk to myself in, and then I would talk to myself for an hour at a time without stopping. I would do this one to two times a week. Initially I proposed the class as a means to generate ideas for my final project, but after only one "session" I realized emphatically that talking to myself held so much interest and potential that it had to become my entire focus. The project then began to develop into what I now call *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber*.

SOLO FOR SELF-TALK CHAMBER

Before I undertook the first self-talk session, I had several research questions that I wanted to answer for myself.

The first questions were somewhat practical: how would one manage to talk to himself for an hour at a time? What would one talk about? Would I impose rules on the process? The answers to these questions came from a practice similar to what I was going to do, albeit in written form: the process of freewriting. At the beginning of *New Investigations of Freewriting*, we are given a definition:

> Freewriting means:
> - No need to show anybody
> - No need to think about spelling, grammar, mechanics
> - No need even to make sense or be understandable (even to oneself)
> - No need to stay on topic
> - No need for any kind of quality, excellence, rightness or caring—that
>
> is, the writing can be garbage. (Belanoff, Elbow, Fontaine, xv)

The text goes on to say that "one constraint remains… and it turns out to be the most imperious one of all, namely the requirement to put words on paper and indeed to put

them down without stopping… One has freewritten perfectly so long as one has kept on writing." (xvi)

These definitions and rules struck a chord with me, and I adopted them as a set of guiding principles for my own speech-based version of freewriting. The point, for me, was the experience, not the content, and this is what freewriting focuses on. Freewriting is used as a warm-up exercise, but I also see it as a form of writing that edges close to so-called "automatic" writing without engaging in the pseudo-mystic ideas of stream-of-consciousness. I was not looking to somehow speak directly from the unconscious. I wanted to engage in an activity that was like a halfway point between thought and speech, something unencumbered by the dictates of a conversation.

Ideas of conscious and unconscious speaking led me to questions about the difference between inner speech and external speech: What was the difference between the two? Could I liken what I would be doing to a kind of externalized inner speech? For this, I turned to Lev Vygotsky's seminal work on the topic, *Thought and Language*. Vygotsky claims that what truly differentiates inner speech from outer speech is that inner speech, because it is an entirely personal monologue, has less explanation and expansion than is required for external speech—which is most often dialogue. "Inner speech," says Vygotsky, "is speech for oneself; external speech is for others." (131) This simple distinction is important, and relates to the structure of inner thought. In speaking to oneself, one can leave out large portions of information because the person you are speaking to—your self—does not need the full picture. Vygotsky's book helped me to realize that what I would be engaging in by talking to myself out loud could be conceptualized as a hybrid of internal and external speech. Of course, speaking out loud is always external, but I realized that in talking to myself, I could think of it more like an inner monologue.

The last question I wanted to reflect on before beginning was about making the most of the sessions: What could I do talking to myself that I could not—or would not do—in conversation? As someone interested in exploring alternative relationships with language, I felt I owed it to myself—and to the idea—to make the most of what the experience could offer. This, it seemed, was a chance to truly wander across the

sound/sense continuum and not be bound by the form and structure of conversation. In the circumstance I was about to put myself in, I did not have to stay on topic, make a point, or make sense of any kind. I could speak gibberish if I wanted to. I could alter my voice, sing, or get lost in a particularly sonorous word. These are some of the thoughts that passed through my mind, but I did not have a clear sense at the time of what would happen during the sessions. I only knew that I wanted to be vigilant about exploiting the potential.

Having clarified the idea of the project in my mind, I began the sessions.

SOLO FOR SELF-TALK CHAMBER: THE SESSIONS

As mentioned earlier, the sessions were an hour long. The entire hour was recorded on video and audio, with the video camera at a different angle for each session. I was not sure initially what I would do with the documentation, or if it would get used at all. What *was* certain was that I would transcribe the sessions and use this transcription later as a means to absorb what had transpired.

Each session took place in a small purpose-built room (within my studio) that subtly evolved over the course of the project. The goal of the room was to create an environment that felt conducive to the strange ritual I was putting myself through. Like the sessions themselves, the room was first and foremost a subjective, personal space— despite the fact that I knew at some point I would likely show it to others.

The room in its final form was dark, with the only sources of light being two stacked televisions. Each TV played a slowly shifting colour field, with the resulting light akin to a do-it-yourself perpetual sunset. On the walls, which were painted black, there were white mono-line drawings of vague symbols in a dense grid pattern. The symbols felt close to language, and yet remained ambiguous and full of potential. This seemed appropriate wallpaper for what I was doing. [5]

So what, exactly, *was* I doing? What transpired in the sessions? For a brief

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5   The form of the room described here is what it settled into after the first few sessions. Both the video aspects and the painting on the walls went through changes until I arrived at something I was comfortable with.

summary of this I would like to turn to the words of composer, performer, vocalist and performance artist Meredith Monk, whose work has seemingly touched every point on the sound / sense continuum. [6] In her essay *Notes on the Voice*, she outlines some of the ways she has used the voice throughout her work. I see a selection of these points as nicely descriptive of what I did:

> 1. The voice as a tool for discovering, activating, remembering, uncovering, demonstrating primordial/prelogical consciousness.
> 2. The voice as a means of becoming, portraying, embodying, incarnating another spirit.
> 5. The vocal landscape. (Jowitt, 56)

My own examples seem to fall within these categories. There were times when I recounted a very simple story. There were character monologues. There were times when I created a narrative based solely on the sound of words alone. Sometimes, rather than use words at all, I stretched or repeated portions of words. There are, in fact, too many subtle variations of what I did in each session to list them here. [7] While I would say the majority of what I said made some sense, what I am most proud of is that I allowed myself to meander away from sense, and to make the most of the experience.

As the sessions continued, I wrestled more and more with questions of how to translate the experience I was having into something I could share. While it was part of my degree requirement to show something publicly, this was not the sole motivator. I genuinely felt the process was exciting, and interesting, and I wanted to share the experience in some form. Could I lead people through their own self-talk session, as a kind of workshop? That would perhaps be the purest form of sharing—to get others to try it for themselves—but I was not interested in that kind of relationship.

The problem of how to share the experience started to lift when I transcribed the first session. What I was surprised to notice when reading it over was that it had the feel

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6   For an example of one such work—one I find tremendously inspiring—I would suggest *Dolmen Music* (1981), from the CD of the same name.

7   To see a summary of what happened in the sessions, see the index section of *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (book).
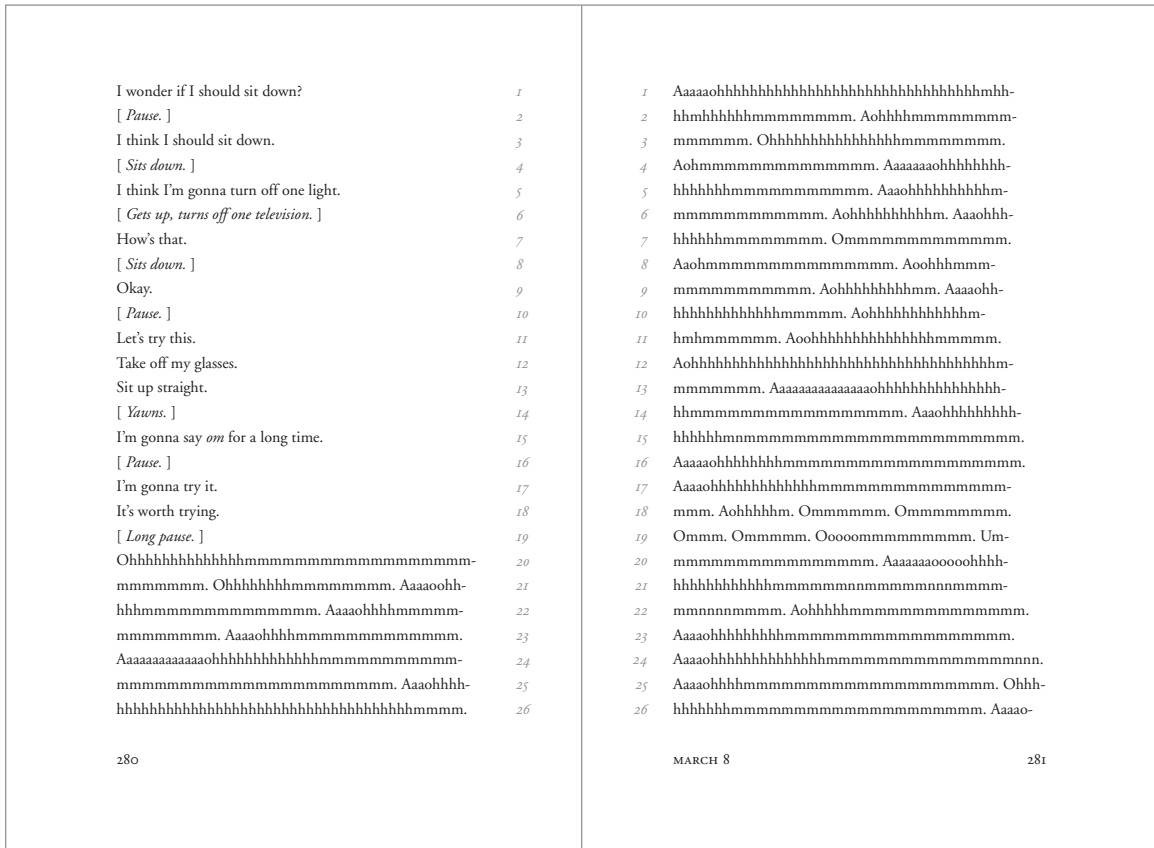
I wonder if I should sit down? — 1
[*Pause.*] — 2
I think I should sit down. — 3
[*Sits down.*] — 4
I think I'm gonna turn off one light. — 5
[*Gets up, turns off one television.*] — 6
How's that. — 7
[*Sits down.*] — 8
Okay. — 9
[*Pause.*] — 10
Let's try this. — 11
Take off my glasses. — 12
Sit up straight. — 13
[*Yawns.*] — 14
I'm gonna say *om* for a long time. — 15
[*Pause.*] — 16
I'm gonna try it. — 17
It's worth trying. — 18
[*Long pause.*] — 19
Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm- — 20
mmmmmmm. Ohhhhhhhhmmmmmmm. Aaaaoohh- — 21
hhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Aaaaohhhhmmmmm- — 22
mmmmmmmm. Aaaaohhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmm. — 23
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaohhhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmm- — 24
mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Aaaohhhh- — 25
hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhmmmm. — 26

1 — Aaaaaohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhmhh-
2 — hhmhhhhhmmmmmmm. Aohhhhmmmmmmmm-
3 — mmmmmm. Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmmmmm.
4 — Aohmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Aaaaaaaohhhhhhh-
5 — hhhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmm. Aaaohhhhhhhhhhm-
6 — mmmmmmmmmmmm. Aohhhhhhhhhhhm. Aaaohh-
7 — hhhhhhmmmmmmm. Ommmmmmmmmmmmm.
8 — Aaohmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Aoohhhmmm-
9 — mmmmmmmmmmm. Aohhhhhhhhhhhm. Aaaaohh-
10 — hhhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmm. Aohhhhhhhhhhhhhm-
11 — hmhmmmmmm. Aoohhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmm.
12 — Aohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhm-
13 — mmmmmm. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh-
14 — hhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Aaaohhhhhhhh-
15 — hhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.
16 — Aaaaaohhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.
17 — Aaaaohhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm-
18 — mmm. Aohhhhhm. Ommmmmm. Ommmmmmmm.
19 — Ommm. Ommmmm. Ooooommmmmmmmm. Um-
20 — mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Aaaaaaooooohhhh-
21 — hhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm-
22 — mmnnnnmmm. Aohhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmm.
23 — Aaaaohhhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.
24 — Aaaaohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmnnn.
25 — Aaaaohhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Ohhh-
26 — hhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Aaaao-

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Fig. 5   Spread from *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (book)

of a theatrical monologue. I then decided to enhance this by formatting it like a play, both in terms of its structure and its style (see fig. 5 for a spread from the book). I added simple stage directions and information that would allow a reader to interpret and recreate the session in a readerly way. From there, I made the choice to compile all the sessions into one large book; a monologue consisting of 14 hours of speech. This book would then become the primary document of the process and the centre of my thesis exhibition.

SOLO FOR SELF-TALK CHAMBER: THE BOOK

The name of the document is *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber*. It is a 412 page book, in print and digital form, that contains all 14 sessions that took place from January 8 through April 12, 2013.

It begins with a score, placed on the cover (fig. 6). The purpose of the score is two-fold: first, it sets out the parameters that in essence created the piece; second, it implies that the piece could be enacted by others, and that what follows is one such
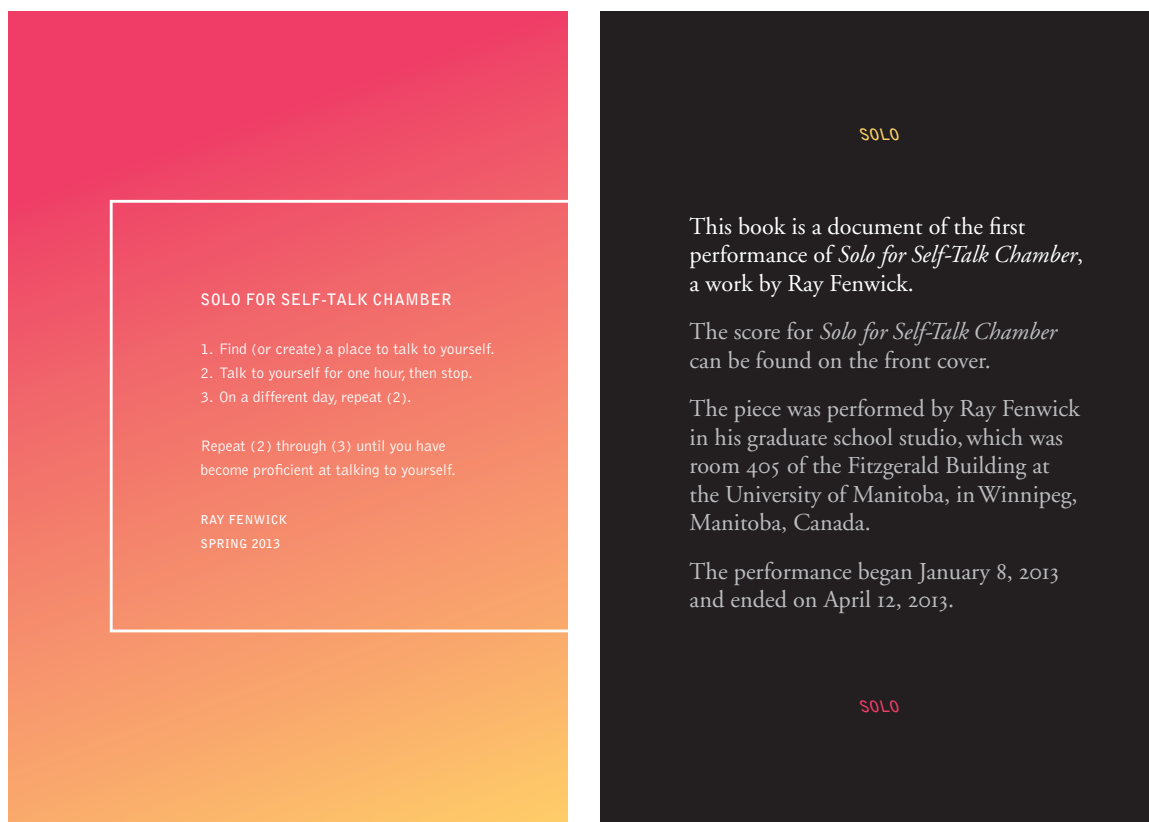
Fig. 6   Front (left) and back (right) cover of *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (book)

enactment. Whether or not the piece is ever re-performed, I like the idea that, because a score signals the potential of a performance, readers might briefly imagine themselves performing the piece. [8]

Another important part of the book is the index (see fig.7 for an example spread). This portion of the book is a cross between a table of contents and a subject index, and was placed at the front of the book rather than the back. The reader is given a selection of topics and actions that recur in the book and pages on which they can see examples. The purpose here was twofold: it allows for a different way of reading what is admittedly a long and gratuitous text; it serves to give a bird's-eye view of the kinds of things said and done in the sessions.

The benefit of the book is that it allows a reader to enter into the experience in a

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8   There is also a sense of absurdity here, in that I am essentially stating that any sustained bout of self-talk could become a work of art.

Fig.7   Spread from the index section of *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (book)

way that was, to my mind, more intimate than simply watching the video documentation. That being said, I was uncomfortable with the idea of simply placing a book on a pedestal within a gallery environment. This would, I thought, have the feeling of simply delivering a report and then walking away, which would be a missed opportunity.

SOLO FOR SELF-TALK CHAMBER: EXHIBITION & PERFORMANCE

I decided that I wanted to split the presentation of *Solo* into two parts: a gallery show that presented the book and a video, and a performance in my studio that I referred to as a "performative book launch".

The gallery show consisted of the book, a video loop and a panel. A printed copy of *Solo* was available for reading at one end of the gallery. Seating came in the form of the two chairs that were in the room that the sessions took place in. On the opposite end of the gallery was a video that was comprised of randomly cut together clips from each

Fig.8   Exhibition installation view—reading area, with score mounted on panel

session, with the combined audio of every session playing simultaneously at an almost inaudible level. This video acted as visual shorthand, giving a sense of what the sessions looked like from multiple angles, on multiple dates, from the first session to the last. The last element of the gallery exhibition was a single panel hung on the wall. On the panel was the score for *Solo*.

While those aspects would give a viewer a sense of the project, it was important to me that the audience should come to the place where the sessions took place rather than relying on some form of visual documentation. I decided to bring viewers into my studio for a performative book launch, where the focus was on the documentation of the project presented in the context of its origin.

The performance took place three times on the night of the exhibition opening, and consisted of several parts meant to tease out portions of the book in playful way. This was the sequence of the event:

1. A reading of the first page of the book.

2. Brief introduction of the project.

3. A reading of the score.

4. Readings of portions of the index.

5. A selection of instances where I sang to myself, sung as a medley.

6. A choral reading of a passage from the book.

7. Brief Q & A.

Because of the the size of my studio, the performance could only accommodate fifteen people at a time. Given the sense of intimacy in the work, this limited capacity turned out to be a strength. My desire to share the experience was satisfied, but it mitigated the sense of overt theatre that I wanted to avoid. I felt strongly that, should the piece become too close to a formal play, I would be exploiting—rather than celebrating—the experience.

There were two distinct parts to the book launch for *Solo*. The performative part was a celebration of the text, and brought the audience into a relationship with it. That experience is quite different from the one they would have with the text itself were they to read it later. Each part takes a different path back to what is ultimately the true centre of the piece, which is not the text at all but rather my experience talking to myself. My intention with the public portion of what I did was to share the results of an experiment and to deliver it in an interesting way, but it was the experiment itself that mattered most.

AN EXPERIENCE WE UNDERGO WITH LANGUAGE

The Heidegger quote I introduced at the beginning of the paper makes a bold claim: "An experience we undergo with language," he says, "will touch the innermost nexus of our existence." Over the course of this experiment, I went from trying to create an "experience with language" to engaging in one myself.

The result was that I was thrown into a highly complicated relationship with language. Prior to starting the project, I focused on the positive and exciting things that might happen during the sessions, but gave little thought to what else might happen. While there were indeed many thrilling and even joyful moments, it was just as often

unnerving, distressing, and embarrassing. One of the most confusing aspects of the sessions was how uncomfortable it felt to talk to myself. When we think of someone talking out loud to his or her self, we tend to think of the mentally ill—unless of course this talk has a purpose, like self-affirmation, or as practice for an important speech. It is an antisocial act to speak to oneself, and yet one's voice and one's language can, as mentioned earlier, be conceived of as what binds our body to our ideas. The act of talking to oneself is equal parts subversive and spiritual, and this is certainly how it felt to me. In the best moments, it felt revelatory.

When I think about *Solo*, what comes to mind most distinctly is a quote. Not Heidegger's words, but, perhaps fittingly, my own. In a crude and simple way, they sum up my thoughts on the experience:

> The only time you get to talk is in conversation with other people. That seems f***ed up to me. That doesn't seem *right*. That's *really f***ed up*, actually! I think I'm having a revelation…but it's hard to know when you're by yourself. (Fenwick, 99-100)

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APPENDIX: THESIS EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION

Solo for Self-Talk Chamber

June 21-28 2013

The School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba

Photographed by Ray Fenwick.

Works in Exhibition

<u>*Solo For Self-Talk Chamber* (score)</u>
28" X 28"
Vinyl adhesive on panel

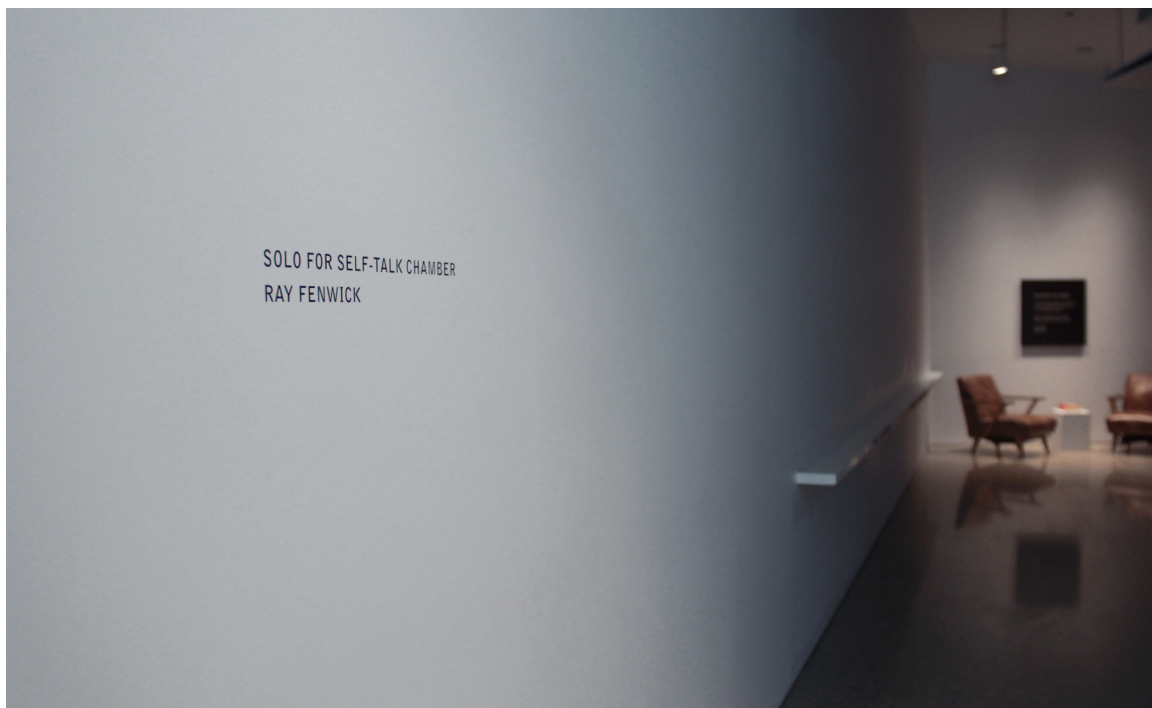<u>*Solo For Self-Talk Chamber* (book)</u>
420 pages

<u>*Solo For Self-Talk Chamber* (video)</u>
61:00 loop

<u>*Solo For Self-Talk Chamber* (performance)</u>
Performance in the artist's studio
Approximately 30:00

Installation view – entrance

Installation view – reading area at east wall

Installation view – *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (book) on plinth, in reading area

Installation view – *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (score), in reading area

Installation view – *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (video) on west wall opposite reading area

Installation view – *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (video) on west wall opposite reading area

Installation view – *Solo for Self-Talk Chamber* (performance)

Exhibition poster