

No Door on her Mouth

'Poetry reaches the unsaid, and leaves it unsaid. It's familiar, indecently close, overpowering at times, as gray as cloudy skies over melancholy mountain ranges; It's what it is, and for ever the question remains about its nature, and why we're still looking for an answer.'⁽¹⁾

Try substituting 'song' for 'poetry' in Etel Adnan's prose-poem and you get close to what Freya Dooley tries to catch in her fleeting yet remarkably dense work. 'Speakable Things', (2018) and 'The Host' (2019) build on what could be called sound essays, sometimes performed live with a pre-recorded soundtrack, or as multi-channel installations. 'Familiar, indecently close, overpowering at times', Dooley's works stalk the female voice and its rebuttal in voice loss or retreat from public performances, using rich and enthralling visual and acoustic collage. Through diverse, fragmented threads of ideas and images, her multi-layered, complex pieces emphasise the gendering of voice and how to destabilise it.

In 'The Host', Dooley explores the often-parasitic way that sound can occupy the body. Using the short story 'A Literary Nightmare' by Mark Twain, Dooley builds on the idea of an earworm that gets stuck in the head to investigate the anxiety of unwilling repetition.

In 'Speakable Things', the female voice that delivers much of the essay's narration in a detached, semi-mocking, semi-academic tone, situates the classical roots of female vocalisation in the depiction of Echo in Greek mythology, then moves to the musical phenomenon of Julie Andrews and fallen pop heroines Britney Spears and Mariah Carey.

Gender remains overwhelmingly divisive for women: it divides them from the other, 'the better', as well as dividing them from their prepubescent, untrammelled self, and their confident, creative core. For Dooley, another

division appears between the silent body of the woman and the sound of her singing. Through six named sections, 'Speakable Things' pushes this division to the point where it breaks and delivers a possible resolution in how we think about voiced gender.

The mouth as metonym for self-expression and its withholding is central to 'Speakable Things'. This piece begins surreptitiously with what sounds like whispering therapy or ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) where a sensuous, meditative, female voice tells us that the voice should be 'soft, easy, effortless, pleasurable... make yourself more susceptible to pleasure.' Here, 'pleasure' stands in for 'relaxation', a multi-million dollar industry, dominated by female whisperers. Whispering is speech that is afraid of itself, of being fully heard, of taking up room. Singing is speech taking flight, speech that makes us feel free, but, for most of us, only when alone.

As in other works which celebrate the interrupted voice, vocal bursts and choral snatches, Dooley cuts off this hushed, docile voice, mid-phrase. The film's narrator-lecturer introduces the character of Echo, the beautiful, doomed nymph who hung around Narcissus, who was so fixated on his own reflection, he barely noticed her. 'In myth, Echo is performative, promiscuous, chatty and a bit tragic.' Lively and irreverent, the narrator's colloquial authority marks her ironic feminist perspective as 'natural' in its deep undercutting of patriarchy's version. 'She's a musical temptress who oscillates between prude and prick tease', or 'she's the slut of the woods' as shown in 'Echo and Narcissus' by John William Waterhouse (1903), glimpsed here, provocatively bare-breasted. Or in 'Pan and Syrinx' by Rubens (1617-19) in which she tries to keep Pan from tearing off her clothes. As Anne Carson notes in her essay 'The Gender of Sound', quoted by Dooley, Sophocles described Echo as 'a girl with no door on her mouth'.⁽²⁾ What an extraordinary image: everything comes out and everyone is allowed in. There is no containment, known in ancient Greek as 'sophrosyne', the first sectional heading in 'Speakable Things', and said to describe the verbal continence required to organise and perpetuate most patriarchal thinking.

Dooley's spoken thesis is accompanied by the sound of a woman clearing her throat as if preparing to dare to speak. Other sonic intrusions and outbursts include the sound of a choir practicing scales, rehearsed lines and a dull, insistent electronic beat that attempts to break through the surface, wholly occupied by the female. Visual disruptions such as the close-up of a mouth, mouthing unheard speech; shots of the ocean, associated with female desire; and winter willows caught like long hair in the speeded-up breeze recur.

A new woman's voice signals a change in tone, introducing a diaristic, first person narrative that sounds like it's recorded in a large, empty hall and says, 'I have fantasies of filling a stage, of holding a crowd, of singing... expanding my voice myself.' Or is it '*my voice, my self*'? This seems to be at the heart of Dooley's investigation, the split between selfhood and the voice, asking which self produces the voice and for whom? Can one's voice be admired, loved, longed for, while the self is despised? As John Berger (who is also referenced in the exhibition's title) puts it, 'A song, when being sung... acquires a body... of its own.'⁽³⁾ That body, Dooley wryly suggests, must conform to the expectations played out in the singing voice: 'Echo is talented, outspoken... good for some things, but you wouldn't want to spend the day with her afterwards... her speech is an irritant but her song is a pleasure.'

Dooley explores what happens to the woman whose body can no longer produce the song she's famed for, and she chooses instead to use her voice to speak. Through familiar personae, Dooley shows how the female singer is ridiculed and hounded by media for taking her body back: 'She's a hot mess... she has some bad wants... she's lost her whistles.'

How much is muteness or the loss of the singing voice an unconscious act of survival? Federico Garcia Lorca, the gay, anti-fascist poet who was unable to speak under Franco, wrote of a boy who loses his voice: 'the king of the crickets took it... to wear his silence on his little finger'. He searches for it in a drop of water. The captive voice can only speak if it wears a cricket's clothes.⁽⁴⁾ Elisabet, the protagonist in Ingmar Bergman's

'Persona' (1966), chooses muteness to avoid the gendered roles of acting, mothering and wifing, highlighting how each is a chosen construction and 'mask'. The film posits listening and muteness as a powerful struggle for control between Elisabet and her nurse, Alma. Alma speaks and feels heard as never before. Here, muteness, it has been suggested, also stands in for the fear of an artistic block, the death of the creative voice, with body and soul represented by the two women. This theme goes on to trouble and fascinate Dooley in her new work, 'The Host'.

When Julie Andrews, Britney Spears and Mariah Carey all lost their voices, Dooley argues that they were punished for a much wider 'losing it' by failing to perform their allowed gendered sound. In the section 'stoma', meaning 'opening' in Greek, we see a brief flash of Britney from her weary performance at the 2007 MTV Music Awards, standing with her face turned away from camera, followed by a shot of De Kooning's painting 'Woman and Bicycle' (1953) with its leery-eyed, overflowing female caricature. If Echo has no door, she spills, she leaks, her insides pour out, 'her inside mouths erupt, messy... spillages of dangerous sexual deviance'. As Anne Carson explains, women's sounds of excess in mourning, keening, orgasm, childbirth, laughter and whooping are associated with 'monstrosity, disorder and death'. Talkativeness is maligned as gossip. You'd better 'keep one door closed to cancel out the others', warns the narrator. Song, Dooley proposes, is permitted, female, public speech. But it must stay soothing: 'All songs, even when their content or rendering is strongly masculine, operate maternally.'⁽⁵⁾

In her essay 'Signs, Sounds, Metals, Fires or An Economy of her Reader,' poet/essayist Quinn Latimer tells us that in ancient Greece, reading was first and foremost a vocal performance, allowing a distinctive exchange between writer and audience: 'a silent world of signs versus the living world of sounds... An ideology of reading and receiving... the relationship of sound and silence and voice is, like all relations, about power'.⁽⁶⁾ But she suggests that rather than simply a duo of language, a trio of language operated between the father, the creator, the daughter, the muse, and the suitor or husband, the reader/listener, who would marry the

daughter and proclaim the father's fame, audibly, thereby giving the girl a voice. 'A kind of fame. To have a voice. A kind of nonfame. To not. But voice suggests (expects, demands) a body. A presence, a meeting — a vessel and an audience.' Song is a way to control a woman's voice; own her, permit her a kind of pimped fame.

In the section 'kakaphony', the disruptive, shuddering sound of a suppressed sob being inhaled and exhaled, signals Echo's loss of voice and the imposition of silence. Sophocles once said that 'silence is the kosmos (good order) of women'⁽⁷⁾, and the penultimate section, 'kosmos', is silent, with surtitles running over what looks like the perfect pastel blue cloudscape of an Old Master painting. 'It is gone. She is separated. She is no longer able to sing.' She must gulp breath to manage any sound; her voice is destroyed; 'broken up like it's been dropped'. All she can do is mimic what she hears; a voice that is not hers, has no agency. Echo wastes away in a cave. Has the dominant discourse won?

*'Within: a chattering of girls who talk & talk, starling
murmuration of mathematical chaos across my sky –
Why do you talk so much? What is it that you have to hide?'⁽⁸⁾*

Dooley's film reopens the discourse where others have perhaps left it closed. In 'apeiron', 'the unbounded', the final section, Dooley's narrator is proud to admit that she likes the sound of her own voice. She speaks of the 'appeal of listening'. 'Speakable Things' ends by imagining Echo's relationship to Pan, in which he tears her up and scatters her in the landscape, as a release, as a voice spreading in multiple, which best describes a collective effort, a choir. Being everywhere around us, persuades Dooley, only makes Echo reverberate infinitely, as something plural, pagan and un-subjugated.

'Something impalpable has seduced the gods, but they're slowly dissolving. We look for their traces, wonder about the meaning of divine destiny. We're led by memory of a mountain that was, once, a state of mind.'⁽⁹⁾

Dooley's work makes us practice listening, makes us listen hard. Dale Spender once asked in *Man Made Language* if it is women's role to listen, be 'good listeners', be quiet and that is why listening has been devalued. When a parent scolds then shouts 'Do you hear me?', they mean 'Do you obey me?' taking us back to the Greek meaning of 'to listen' which is 'to obey'. Can determining a new politics of listening be a way to disobey? In their book *The Force of Listening*, Lucia Farinati and Claudia Firth, argue that we can redistribute the power of who is speaking and who is listening by 'listening together with others in order to become aware of your own conditions... And listening as a willingness to change them through a collective effort.'⁽¹⁰⁾

Through an acoustic interplay of dislocation and relocation, Dooley's work creates and deconstructs the habit of listening, the role of vocal performing and navigates and exaggerates the blur between private and public in the reception of the voice, voicings.

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- (1) Adnan, Etel, from 'Sea', *Sea and Fog* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2012)
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- (3) John Berger, 'Notes on Song', *Confabulations* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2016)
- (4) Lorca, FG, from 'The Little Mute Boy', *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1955)
- (5) Berger, *ibid.*
- (6) Latimer, Quinn, *Like a Woman: Essays, Readings Poems* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017) p.203-6
- (7) Carson, Anne, from 'The Gender of Sound', *Glass, Irony & God* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p.127
- (8) Alsadir, Nuar, *Fourth Person Singular* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017)
- (9) Adnan, Etel, from 'Fog', *Sea and Fog* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2012)
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