

Performative Voices: acting in the border areas

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Abstract

This article discusses the performative aspect of the voice in the process of musical creation, having as focus the work of composer and multimedia performer Meredith Monk. Considering how Meredith Monk works in the boundaries between art languages, one examines the special role that voice plays in her process of creation. Conceived as not separated from the body, the voice is revealed as a language, timeless, transposing cultural and language boundaries. Based on interviews and texts written by the artist, this study is also grounded on personal experience resulting from participation in the workshop *Dancing Voice, Singing Body* and on the performance *Impermanence*, all conducted in 2008 by Meredith Monk in São Paulo.

Keywords: Creation process, Meredith Monk, *performance Art*, performativity, voice.

Context, objectives and methodology

During the twentieth century the research of the body increases in importance in the context of art creation. Also the voice, perceived in its relation with the body, is the focus of many experiments, turning to be for some artists the main driving element of their processes of creation. Experimentation is fundamental, often organized from body's practice and from the investigation of body's processes. The vocal action is no longer organized according to pre-defined aesthetic criteria, incorporating every possibility of sound emission. New vocal parameters emerge simultaneously in different artistic languages: in music, in theater and in experimental poetry. Changes in aesthetic criteria occur throughout the twentieth century, leading to a voice that turns away from vocal patterns considered until then as ideal, such as the *Bel Canto*. Screams, whispers, moans, guttural sounds, whistles, clicks and many other possibilities of the vocal apparatus start to be discovered and incorporated in art creation. The voice reveals itself as sound, as language.

While following a path of discovery and exploitation of voice features, some

women stand out as creative artists, developing unique musical languages. In this study, conducted with support of the Foundation for Research of the State of São Paulo - FAPESP, one reflects on the performative aspect of the voice in the process of musical creation, examining the creative process of composer and performer Meredith Monk, who explores the voice in close relation to the body in actions that generate her musical creations and performances. Her strategy of work is to operate in border areas, "where the voice starts dancing, where the body starts singing, where theater becomes cinema" (Monk apud Jowitt, 1997: 2) Considering how her creations fit into the context of contemporary performances, one examines some characteristics of her process of creation and the special role that voice plays in this process. Based on the book edited by D. Jowitt, interviews and texts written by the artist herself, this study is also grounded on personal experience resulting from participation in the workshop *Dancing Voice, Singing Body*, on the performance *Impermanence* and on the lecture *Art as a Spiritual Practice*, all conducted in 2008 by Meredith Monk in São Paulo.

Interweaving Arts

Change of focus, mixing of art languages and the increasing dissolution of boundaries between the arts are trends of a significant part of contemporary art, especially after the 70's. The events that signal these changes are already found in the early twentieth century in the performances of the Futurists and Dadaists. The influence of these movements is noticeable later on, in part of the artistic production, resulting in profound transformations of artistic concepts. In 1952 composer John Cage, through the multimedia performance *Untitled Event*, held at *Black Mountain College*, inaugurates a new phase, retaking aesthetic concepts that were in embryonic form in the events of the *avant-gardes* of the beginning of the century. In the 60's, New York is taken by events of the *Fluxus* group and of the *Avant-garde* Festivals with their new media resources and technology. *Happenings* and multimedia events point to the consolidation of a new artistic genre, the *Performance Art*. With an unmistakable profile, the *Performance Art* asserts itself as an independent genre in the 70's (Glusberg 2003: 12). New performing artists emerge, working with the mix of languages and operating in border areas. Among

others Meredith Monk develops performances with voice, movement, music, theater and film, emphasizing the performative mode of production and expanding the concept of multimedia art.

The creative processes of Meredith Monk

Meredith Monk's goals are similar to part of contemporary art and of some representatives of *Performance Art*, a genre that she also experiences. Monk defends an art that can act directly on the senses and transform the perception, without the logic of words. She aims to make an art that breaks down boundaries between disciplines, "that seeks to reestablish the existing unity in music, theater, and dance" (Jowitt 1997: 17).

Born in New York City, Meredith Monk descends from a family of musicians, having an education based on the method of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, *Eurhythmics*. This provided the basis for the connection between music and movement, present in the development of her work. In 1964 Monk finishes her studies at *Sarah Lawrence College* in New York and begins her artistic production. She appears in the *Fluxus* events and in the *New York Avant-garde Festival* in 1965 with the pieces *Radar* and *Blackboard*, realizing with others the scenario of Erik Satie's Dada piece *Relâche* for this festival. Since then her production is continuous, whether in solo concerts as in *Our Lady of Late* (1973), duet for solo voice with glass, or composing great works for up to 150 performers, like *Lloyd and Needlebrain the Systems Kid: a live-movie* (1970).

Even when working with image and theater, Meredith Monk thinks in musical terms, organizing the material like in a musical composition. She considers herself composer (Duckworth 1999: 346). In her performances the music is the glue that unites the various components. Monk makes use of collage, juxtaposition and fragmentation. Her creative process is like a mosaic, in which the parts gradually acquire meaning through juxtaposition and repetition. Modular structures are repeated and sounds are layered, like images (Jowitt 1997: 11).

Other characteristics of Monk's pieces are the division in parts that can be performed on different days and locations, as well as the choice of unconventional spaces for performing. In *Needlebrain Lloyd and the Systems*

Kid: a live-movie (1970), performed at *Connecticut College*, Meredith Monk also uses strategies of film, approaching and distancing the audience by moving it between different locations, thus altering its perspective. Monk works carrying typical strategies from one language to another, in this case from film to live performance. Besides giving originality to her performances, these displacements can also allow the emergence of new forms of perception.

Meredith Monk makes use of “instrumental ostinatos that often underlie her vocal work as a floor that the voice can spring from and return to.” (Jowitt 1997: 12). She also uses looping and distortions. The instruments usually perform “repeated patterns or drone creating a carpet, a tapestry of sound for the voice to run on, fly over, slide down, cling to, weave through.” (Jowitt 1997: 56) An atmosphere is created or an idea already presented by the voice is strengthened by the use of instruments. In *Do you be* (1987), a piece for voice and piano, a slow succession of chords creates a melancholic atmosphere, opening space for Meredith Monk’s voice, that vocalizes exploring high pitches without using any words.

The voice as language

The voice is the starting point of the creative process of Meredith Monk in most of her performances. In general, Monk does not use text, but prefers to explore the resonance and musicality of her own voice through vocalizes and the use of repeated syllables, microtones, nasal tones or inventing a language of her own. Even when she makes use of words, the emphasis is on exploring the sound of the phonemes, drawing on different registers of the voice and exploring so many forms of emission as possible.

In *Notes on the voice* of 1976, Meredith Monk describes “the voice as a tool for discovering, activating, remembering, uncovering, demonstrating primordial / prelogical consciousness” (Jowitt 1997: 56). As a tool the voice is a language in itself, with power of direct communication. The absence of words lends her vocal work a universal quality. Meredith Monk thus describes her discovery:

Right from the beginning, I sensed that the voice could speak louder and more eloquently than a particular text could; that the voice itself was a language that spoke directly and had the possibility of universality. So I felt that words just got in the way (Cunningham 1998: 74).

By exploring the full range of the voice, Monk discovers timbres, textures, landscapes, genres and forms of emission, and builds a vocabulary of the voice. The daily vocal exercise is generally preceded by warming-up exercises with the body. Body movement and voice are in close connection. In conversation with Liza Bear, Monk says that what she “could do with the voice had a close connection to dancing” (Jowitt 1997: 82). She sees the voice as an independent physical instrument and works with it as a body movement. Already early in her career Meredith Monk had this revelation:

There was a one day sometime in 1965 when I realized, in a flash (...it really was a flash experience...), that the voice could have the kind of fluidity and flexibility of the body, say, like the articulation of a hand. That the voice could be an instrument and that I could make a vocabulary built on my own voice the way that I had in movement (Oteri 2000: 3).

By working directly with her voice and body, Monk discovers sounds and forms of emission that are not limited to the Western tradition. She explores the glottal break, throat singing and overtone singing, developing a technique known as *extended vocal technique*. In order to train others in her vocal language, Monk gives workshops. The way she works is labor-intensive, based on the connection between movement and sound. The processes of experimentation in groups involving an intense physical and vocal training make use of strategies from theater, dance and bodily practices. The improvisation exercises with body and voice can also use elements of film language, working with the idea of field size and shots, such as long shot, full shot, medium shot, close-up and zoom.

Impermanence: residue of a journey

Impermanence (2004) by Meredith Monk is a performance about the passage of time, the flux of life, a work “triggered by the unexpected death of her partner, Mieke van Hoek, in 2002” (Pellegrinelli 2008). It is a reflection on what remains of our transitory nature or at the end of a process or even after

a performance, a theme presented in her earlier works through the idea of residue.

In notes about the creation process of *Portable*, a piece performed at *Judson Memorial Church* in New York in 1966, Monk writes: "I started thinking about the idea of residue. Something left behind or coming after a process has ended... I began to think of a piece that had as its material things left behind" (Jowitt 1997: 18). In the first version of this performance, Meredith Monk "carried a bag filled with materials (objects to be left)" and "when the piece was over, the floor was a canvas of tape and objects" (Jowitt 1997: 19).

The same theme reappears in *Juice: a theater cantata in three installments* (1969), for 85 performers. *Juice* was presented in New York in three different locations: in the *Guggenheim Museum*, in the *Minor Latham Playhouse* at *Barnard College* and at a downtown loft. This last installment was just an exhibit of the objects that remained of the previous two, showing again the concept of residue (Jowitt 1997: 7). In *Volcano Songs* (1994), a performance in which Monk works with shadows on the ground, an entire existence is seen as residue. "That was an idea of the residue of life or of time stopping, like Pompeii. The idea that a person's whole life could exist only as a residue..." says Monk (Cunningham 1998: 81).

Impermanence, a project that has its start in 2004, seems to return to the idea of residue and to what remains after a lifetime. The performance itself can be perceived as residue of a journey. Singers, dancers and musicians perform this multimedia work. Staged in São Paulo in 2008 by Meredith Monk & *Vocal Ensemble*, this performance is about the various aspects of our impermanence. Voice, music, light and choreography create the magical atmosphere of each scene. At a special moment in this work Meredith Monk performs *Last Chance*. Her voice finds its way through two chords, that are alternated repeatedly on the piano, and starts listing a set of all the last possibilities and potential actions one can imagine: *last chance, last dance...last breath...last, last, last*. Each word is stretched out in a way to explore the sound possibilities of its ending, leaving a residual energy that insists on remaining. *Last, last, last* echoing the impermanence and its inexorability. The sound also lasts as residue remembering us of all last possible actions. With its performative quality the voice outlines the situation

and the sense of impermanence and residue. The voice resonates permeating the surroundings, turning itself into residue, remaining as perception even for a long time after the performance. The final piece of *Impermanence*, Mieke's Melody # 5, based on an original melody by Mieke van Hoek, brings the feeling that also a song can be a residue of a lifetime. As well as the recording can be the residue of a performance, as Pellegrinelli points out: "The recording of *Impermanence* is only a snapshot - the residue of a living, breathing form" (Pellegrinelli 2008).

Breathing

In *Little Breath*, another piece of *Impermanence*, the shortness of breath indicates the approaching end. Voices overlapped and intersected let audible the sounds of breathing. *Little Breath* send us back to *Walking Song*, a piece from *Volcano Songs* (1997), where one can also hear the air escaping, mixed with vocal sounds. Meredith Monk believes that "breathing is the beginning of everything and voice is an extension of the breath" (Monk 2008). While in *Walking Song* breathing is the energy for the path, in *Last Song* and *Little Breath*, breathing shows up as the last action, leaving behind its sounds, echoes of impermanence.

Beginning and end, breathing not just enables the voice's existence, but it is also present in the process of creation and realization of the performance, as well as in preparing the performer. Again, breathing is energy for the path.

As a performer going on stage, my preparation is very physical—warming up my voice, warming up my body—even if I am just singing a concert. It is getting back to the very essential thing of the beginning and end of life, which is the breath. That is how I prepare myself to perform (Monk 2002: 34)

The performativity of voice

Meredith Monk as composer and performer is one of the few that could accomplish the total work of art – the Gesamtkunstwerk. Moving with ease through the various artistic forms and languages, the basis of her work is the musical creation, developed primarily from the vocal work. The voice is like the body that moves. It is able to create spaces and situations, stimulating interactions and meaning what one has no words for. Able to reveal many

other voices and *personas* the voice occupies the borders, breaking down cultural and language boundaries. Working on the border areas between the arts, the performative voice is able to act directly on perception.

“The voice - the original instrument - can delineate feelings and states of being so that the music can be experienced directly by anyone. In that way, it is transcultural and it has a sense of timelessness...” (Monk 2002: 23) Meredith Monk’s voice sounds at once ancient and contemporary, archaic and modern, a voice able to embody characters of different ages and genders. Through its action the voice can delineate vocal landscapes and juxtapose different epochs. Because of its performative quality, the voice can create a world, making present what no longer is. As Meredith Monk thinks: “within one voice is the whole world” (Cunningham 1998: 75).

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Author's biography

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