

In the Space of Whispers

Monika Bakke

...she springs inexhaustibly from the touching together (of her lips)...¹

The space of whispers is very narrow or even tight because in a whisper a voice is almost glued to the lips. Whispers are as much auditory as tactile. Entering their space is possible through gentleness, attention and sensitivity if only whisper is at all directed to anybody. Whispers create the most gentle kind of auditive environment which according to Wolfgang Welsch is particularly needed because “an auditive culture would intensify our awareness of other people and nature; it would be capable of learning, rather than merely issuing decrees; entanglements and network – that is, the thought forms which we will in future need – lie far nearer to it from the start than do the conventional logical incisions; it would on the whole be full of understanding, reserved, symbiotic, receptive, open, tolerant...”²

There is another kind of whisper than the social kind, that is a whisper to oneself or for oneself: in a secret, in an asylum, in a dream, in a prayer, and near death. This kind of whisper dwells on the edge of the material world, or, as one could say, in a weak field of its presence. Whispers simultaneously give evidence of both being and disappearing. But the most peculiar kind of whisper is the one which we can only whisper about; it has neither an author nor is it directed to a specific receiver. It is especially taboo because it comes from the invisible and dangerous, chaotic and uncontrollable, evoking fear because associated with deception, madness, and seduction. A woman hearing such whispers and whispering it out is mad, but historically she is the one who once was an oracle or a medium. She is a sister of the Sirens, no less dangerous than they were.

We all learn whispers from a mother. She affectionately whispers to her child even when the umbilical cord has been cut. Mother’s whisper in relation to her unborn child is tactile and soft and it stands in absolute opposition to annunciation which comes from

1 Luce Irigaray (1991) *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 105.

2 Wolfgang Welsch (1997) *Undoing Aesthetics*. London. Sage, p. 151.

the father. Father's voice, being either direct or heard through an (angelic) agency, is always strong and single. It cannot be mistaken for anything else, and cannot disappear into an oblivion of everyday noise. But later, mother's whisper is usually lost and not transformed into a vibrating voice of a father because the difference between whisper and a full voice is not a matter of volume. Voice is setting a structure and a distance, while whispers put in touch also in a strict sense of this word. As Luce Irigaray suggests, through speaking women can touch each other all over at the same time. "In all senses."³ But sometimes a woman must withdraw alone into whispers, and doomed to the enclosure of her own world, she becomes more sensitive to the whispers of the world. But these whispers are not always understandable even for her because they are fragmentary and prone to get lost and discontinue. For a woman the most important thing is that they exist. Sometimes it is enough. They never stop but they can only stop being heard.

The space of whispers is traditionally a space of femininity: rich in meaning, dark, and fluidic. It is intimate because located closest to the body which makes it fragrant and tactile. It has neither a permanent shape, nor constancy and clarity so usually it is marginalized but also often invaded and transformed. Whispers are soundless and not returning in echo, so on the one hand are easy to hide and dismiss, but on the other hand their space is difficult to penetrate, dangerous, and unpredictable for those who do not inhabit it. Men are far less comfortable in there than women so they feel a need to sublimate fluidic whisper into something visual and solid. In the following text I will present two examples of two gender-related strategies of dealing with the space of whispers.

Two Lips

A Polish artist Izabella Gustowska (b. 1946) in a video installation entitled 'In a Whisper' has proposed an interesting representation of the feminine space created by whispers. In this case vision is obscured because the installation is presented in a dark room where the only light is provided by numerous small monitors showing the image of whispering women's lips. The sound which densely fills the space turns out to be completely illegible. One part of the installation consists of small case-like metal objects hiding the image of lips, while in the second part of the installation lips (as well as the monitors) are fully exposed because the cases are made out of clear material (plexiglas) and situated on a transparent table. Transparent material multiplies the effect and gives the impression of levitation. We encounter a specific line of symmetry here which divides the hidden lips from the exposed ones.

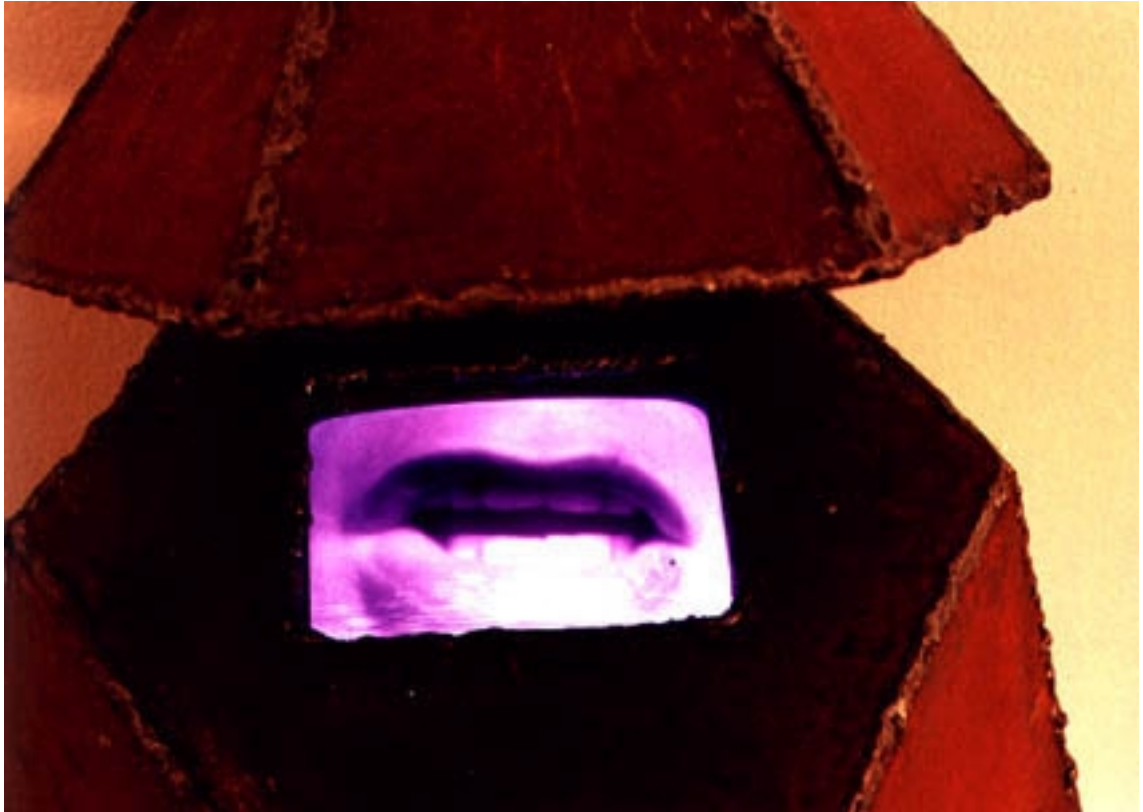
3 Luce Irigaray (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 209.



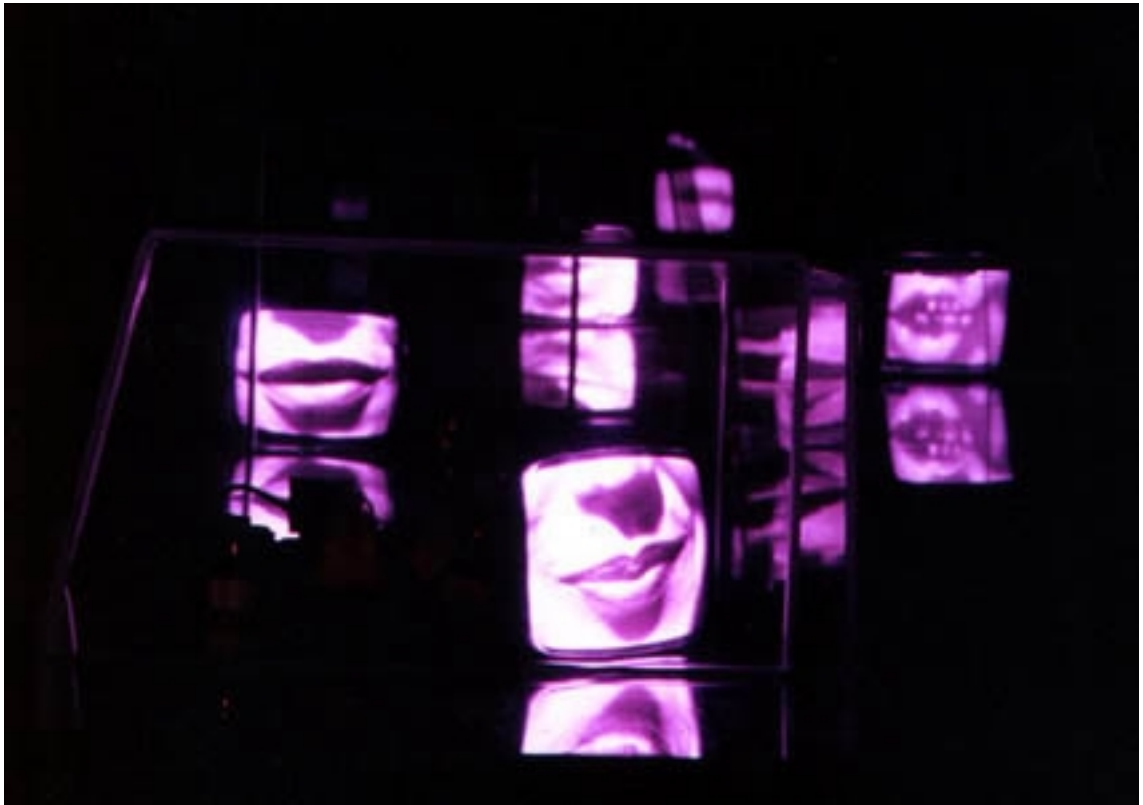
Luce Irigaray, by her famous metaphor of ‘two lips’ in a constant contact, turns our attention to specificity of female sexuality and to a predominance of the tactile. “First of all – Irigaray says – the tangible is received, perceived prior to the dichotomies of active and passive. It is received like a bath that affects without and within, in fluidity. It is never completely situated in the visible.”⁴ So that touch can escape the hierarchical order and a division for the one touching and the one being touched. Similarly whispers create such nonhierarchical space, with no audible domination. Moreover, whisper like a fluid “mixes with bodies of a like state, sometimes dilutes itself in them in an almost homogeneous manner, which makes the distinction between one and the other problematical and furthermore that it is already diffuse ‘in itself’, which disconcerts any attempt at static identification.”⁵

4 Luce Irigaray (1993) *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 164.

5 Luce Irigaray (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 111.



In Western culture lips symbolize soul, invention, and the source of speech, of truth, of life, but also lovers and sex. The connection with ‘the lips below’ (Irigaray’s term for labia) is rather clear here. In Gustowska’s installation, we find a representation of both ‘the below’ and ‘the above’ lips. Both kinds of lips are treated like ‘hidden’ treasures enclosed in cases although their enclosure can serve as a form of exposition as well (e.g. the clear cases). The intrigue of the whispering lips cannot be resolved by understanding the uttered words because its complexity is based on bodily sensations and pleasure of audible and tactile effects. Moreover, lips themselves in some way escape the viewer either because they participate in the illusory effect of multiplication, or because they are imprisoned in metal cases.



'In a whisper...' belongs to a big series of works entitled 'Singing Rooms' for which a question about constructing a feminine space by audible means is fundamental. These works are very private in character, they are arranged as small spaces individually marked by sounds, lights, and objects. They reveal a nonhierarchical coexistence of dreams, emotions, memories and expectations. Gustowska often uses her own childhood memory as well as memorabilia, and brings them (sounds, objects, colors) up to the surface of contemporary visuality. At first glance we could make an easy conclusion about this work following Bergson's idea that there cannot be a reflection which is not based on memory, but actually the experience of Gustowska's work leads rather towards a reflection that we are always already leaning towards something unexpected. This orientation towards the future is not a cause and effect based on continuation of the past, but it comes from our intuition and imagination. Although discovering one's future is as dangerous as discovering one's past.

Audibility Lost

As I have suggested so far, a feminine construction of a space of whispers is being done clearly from a perspective of the insider, that is someone who bodily (also in a tactile sense) feels at home there. A masculine way of constructing a space of whispers is totally different because it proceeds from the position of the outsider. The latter builds a view (strictly in a visual sense) distancing himself from touch, carefully listening in, and

empathy. A good example of such construction we can find in a painting by a Polish artist Jacek Malczewski (1854-1929) entitled 'Whispers' (also known as 'Painter and His Muse'). Here whispers' source is also a woman (a Muse) but the whispers themselves seem to be a kind of energy sublimated by man into a creative visual activity. As Irigaray points out "investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men. More than any other sense, the eye objectifies and it masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations."⁶ In Malczewski's painting whispers are not dispersed, mixing, or spilled but drawn towards a man who becomes a kind of an audible drain. He gets hold of whispers and transforms them into a visual object. They appear to him as a flow of sexual energy which he sublimates into an object of visual pleasure. Man listens to whispers for himself and not for them. He is not an Odysseus wandering into a dangerous audible space, but like a drain he gathers the chaotic flow together giving it a form. Already in his act of listening, whispers are transformed into solids and visualized as a woman's body discretely veiled by a clear fabric which only underlines her nakedness and her erotic appeal. The Muse, leaning over the man's body, whispers something directly into his ear. Her physical closeness is apparent as her face touches man's hair. The whisperer and whispers are probably the source of his desire, but also confusion and maybe even surprise. They are strange and their space is uninhabitable, hence they are to be either invaded or abandoned.

In a masculine representation whispers equal allure, deception, maybe even a trap. It is a feminine domain which despite its weakness and dispersion has an ability to take over and control a masculine imagination. But actually because it is bodily and shapeless at the same time, it maintains its power. The Muse leans over offering a whisper, a touch, a fragrance and closeness of her body. It seems to be an invitation and a promise of pleasure which unfortunately cannot be satisfactory for both a man and a woman. There is no fulfillment because there is no compromise on how they enjoy. A Muse-woman represents memory of a distant and forgotten past that is forgotten whispers which cannot be represented. She is a close cousin of the Sirens who produce a vibrating sound but no words to be deciphered. Although in the opinion of Renata Salecl there is a fundamental difference between them because "only Muses provide memory, since they enable their listeners to forget the trauma of life, while the Sirens put listeners in touch with what Lacan calls the knowledge in the real, that knowledge which the listeners do not want to know anything about. Inspired by the memory that the Muses provide, their listeners are to create works of art, while those who hear the knowledge offered by the Sirens's song immediately die."⁷

6 Irigaray quoted in Martin Jay (1993) *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 439.

7 Renata Salecl (1997) 'The Sirens of Feminine *Jouissance*', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 9(1): 17.



Whispers in Malczewski's painting are represented in the 'mechanics of solids'. Not only have they an author (a Muse), but also they have a specific receiver. So that whispers are not phantoms or madness devouring a wandering sailor lost in the abyss of the chaotic sea. They are frozen into a female body inviting a gaze. A painter, even on a quest for adventure, does it only in the frame of the symbolic culture which he represents and where he rules. But he no longer remembers the lesson to be learned from Orpheus, who, wanting to see, lost the beloved woman forever. Her faintly whispered farewell was not only a refusal to man but also to living in his world. But as a whisperer Euridice never died, she only died for him in order to be more with herself and for herself.⁸ But how would the story go, if only Orpheus could have listened to her steps, to her whispers on the way, all along?

Is then an auditive culture possible with the gaze of Orpheus? According to David Tomas "ambient sonic spaces tend to give rise to ephemeral and fragmentary histories in a sense that they are composed of surpluses; that is, acoustic fallout from physical activity, systemic or accidental impacts, and frictions of human bodies, objects, and processes."⁹ Whispers, I think, have been actually marginalized as frictions of the lips, and as such with other "sounds that seduce and entice, ... will lead the acoustic body to a sonic well, into a sensory hole that disappears in the direction of an originative sonic delirium, a sonic unconscious that lies beyond the descriptive powers of history."¹⁰ Western culture is certainly not an auditive one, and it has never been, but Tomas wants to convince us that we should finally change turning to the sonic space, make this unpopular choice, and start listening, that is, "accept sounds that envelope and swirl around the body".¹¹ Whispers will never be one and always many, ephemeral and so transparent that invisible. The Western culture has been refusing to hear them, even if it is obvious that they are around. "And there is no need to knock, just listen to hear the music. With very small ears."¹²

the author

Monika Bakke is an adjunct professor in the Philosophy Department at A. Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland. She is the author of the book *Open Body* and many articles on aesthetics, visual culture, and gender. She is an editor of the magazine *Czas Kultury* [Time of Culture].
Address: The Philosophy Department, UAM, Szamarzewskiego 89C, 60-569 Poznan, Poland
E-mail: july@amu.edu.pl

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- 8 A particularly interesting interpretation of the myth of Orpheus and Euridice can be found in Rainer Mairia Rilke's poem *Orpheus. Euridice. Hermes*. Orpheus tries to hear her steps but cannot do it hearing only his own ones, and Euridice is actually not interested in leaving her own life in death, where she is many, as drops of rain and skattered hair.
- 9 David Tomas (1996) *Transcultural Space and Transcultural Beings*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, p. 105.
- 10 David Tomas, *Transcultural Space*...p.136.
- 11 David Tomas, *Transcultural Space*...p.136.
- 12 Luce Irigaray (1991) *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 37.