

## **A word is a word is a word: the phonetic anatomy in Sophie Jung's work**

*"Word upon Word upon World upon Word upon Word upon World upon World upon Word upon Upon upon Upon word Upon word Upon world"*

To those familiar with Sophie Jung's work, the above title of performance might be perceived as one of her typical, theatrically-humorous wordplays she exposes confidently, frequently and with brilliance. Yet despite this talent for wordplay, her rhythmic examinations presuppose an urgent question that should be taken into consideration in relation to political agency: what is a word and what is its use?

"A woman is a word if woman is a word and a figure is only a figure if you can see its frame". In the dance track *Woman is a Word* by musician Empress Of (2016) which serves as feminist anthem to exemplify the normative and hegemonic association thereof, Lorely Rodriguez calls out the semantic objectification of female gender, along with a critique of the limitations associated with what a woman is considered to be and do. This is just one of recent pop-culture's examples reflecting the timely discourse around semantics in gender identity, and queer identity in particular. The main critique here is targeted at the social appropriation of the linguistic exemplification in the usage of gendered terms, which seems to mirror an increasingly popular act or gesture of denouncing gender association completely by the use of the non-binary term "they" instead of he or she. While personally, and within my own feminist position, I don't see the denunciation of the female, per se, as a necessity for emancipation – yet whole-heartedly appreciate and validate those who do for their non-binary identification – I think it's important to question gender semantics through scenarios in which the social assumption of habitual, lingual personification is pushed towards a new status, as that process creates true potential to liberate the oppressed from historical disempowerment. It is specifically useful to learn about such disambiguations through poetic and perhaps confusing prose, such as the above-referenced dance track shows. It is in this sense that the listener or receiver has a chance to contextualise what they hear through an artistic filter, while authenticating the according meaning in a process of active absorption.

Not only does Jung follow a similar strategy in her elaborately-phrased journeys through the various scenarios of cultural implications, she also adds an additional layer of distortion: her associative word chains are running and dancing, ebbing and flowing, entering and leaving her body. It's as if each object and its according articulation, produces a new layer of physical embodiment, which Sophie weaves into a lingual anatomy of her own:

*“Eye liner or bin liner  
Cruise liner or bruise, fine, her  
skin is that type, probably.  
{not the shrug. Avoid the shrug}  
or lie in her shadow and bask.  
Or ask:  
What HAS the world come to?  
Degrees are now bought  
on ever upward sliding  
scales are scrubbed off. Their value is high and higher.  
It's hot. There's a bit of death around.  
I would agree to degree. I mean I am ok with  
Degreasonable measures:  
I accept that my wife need not keep her lights on when reading.  
One reads in ones head.  
I don't accept that my boy can't have his automoto  
Bile and more bile. There is nothing left to throw up on the table.  
Vehiqually reasonable that a worker has to worker has to worker  
has to work her  
To the point of a shrug.  
That shrug.”*

The nonlinear, erratic and fast-changing scenarios Sophie Jung describes in an attempt to create additional layers to an image or object, bear an unconventional mannerism that is worth examining under the umbrella of feminist linguistics: without a doubt, she pays homage to the liberation from linear, rationalised objectivity as half-heartedly championed by the enlightenment ghost as per Helen Cixous' demand “women write yourselves”. Cixous' main concern in “The Laugh of the Medusa” was to disturb the phallogocentric tone of historical writers and male contemporaries, strongly encouraging women not to imitate such style, but instead to express themselves in their own languages through their own bodies, to form a more intimate and thus authentic connection with their physical subjectivity and extend that to their readers.

Jung not only actively stands against a patriarchal “making of sense” in her semantic agenda, but she also resonates the richness of her artistic discourse through body language, which pays an equal witness to the empowered imperative highlighted above. Roused, perhaps by an active, physical analysis of what's surrounding her, Jung seems to expose a preference to doing so in her prioritisation of bodysuits, or costumes that play with aspects of the nude. This penchant for a visual amplification of what's spoken mirrors her rhythmic throbbing of speech in an appropriate physique. And it is this physical methodology that marks the implications of

a word, not from an analytical, associative, painterly, or interpretive point of view, but from a physiological one. It is a reminder that a word, no matter its implications, is produced in the human body as a result of neurological transmitters and vocal outputs.

So perhaps the verdict is to recognise not what a word means, but what it *does*. Anatomically speaking, a word is introduced into life by the respiratory system, which is the physical centre of the human body. Admittedly, some might argue that the vocal origin of words is irrelevant since its true origin stems from the brain. My suggestion, however, is to examine this rationalistic claim somewhat more critically and within a broader spectrum of human anatomy in order to prove the political potential in Jung's work.

Let's take the example of birth-giving: is the delivery of a newborn triggered by neurological messengers only? A conscious command in the brain telling the body what to do? The exact circumstances leading up to the onset of labour cannot be fully explained from a medical point of view. Supposedly, this has to do with challenges around the assertion of neurological examinations during labour. However, note the chemical releases at stake: the hormone 'oxytocin' plays a key role in labour, stimulating the ripening of the cervix and leading to successive dilation (opening) during labour. This is also true of some other hormones released during labour called prolactin and relaxin, both endorphins. Until today, no proof has been found to justify the release of oxytocin, prolactin or relaxin through a neurological command or trigger, however, there seems to be a direct correlation between the released hormones and the stimulation of the brain. In short, there is a correspondence between the physiological functions of the body and the neurological activity in the brain and in physically-extreme occasions such as labour; the brain functions as a subordinate receiver, rather than being the mere controller or sender of information.

Birth-giving isn't the only example in the occurrence of a bodily takeover. Another is trauma. While the manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has until very recently been associated with an exclusively mental disorder, this conception is currently shifting into being acknowledged as a physical one. And while the pharma-commercialism-driven, patriarchal and discipline-obsessed authorities in the psychiatric realm seem to be sceptical towards adopting this notion, a quite impressive number of neurologists have started considering the pathology of the condition as an equally physical one, so not preliminary associable with functions of the brain. Furthermore, a variety of medical therapists working in disciplines such as osteopathy, physiotherapy and craniosacral therapy, consider PTSD as a condition with a physical pathology per se, with the British NHS currently training therapists in concurring trauma from a physical angle specifically.

The example of birth-giving and trauma provide reflection upon the body's articulations thriving from a purely physical origin, rather than being carried out by what is often considered as a conscious command of the brain. I propose that the same phenomenon can be applied to the vocal delivery of words. When we open our mouths for the sake of audibility,

sounds can be localised and anatomically differentiated: the sound “ng” for instance, creates a nasal vibration in the head chamber, whereas sounds like “mmh” and “nnnh” force the sound down the oesophagus and into the abdomen. “Mmh” and “nnnh” are both sounds that are considered as soothing by phonetic researchers; it is assumed that infants say “nnnh” and “mmh” to express hunger while stimulating the abdomen by vibrating their belly hence feeding their lust for physical matter with the help of internally-induced sounds. Honouring this respiratory origin, Jung alienates words into new ones while stuttering their beginnings or endings, again and again, exemplified by a physiological reflection of her body:

*“One could argue  
Are we bodies?  
One could argue  
One could are you bodies*

*What differentiates one body from the next, please? Chin up if you have the answer  
yes sir?  
“Fish are animals that are cold-blooded, have fins and a backbone.”*

*Are we bodies?  
Are you bodies and until when?  
How long over ago it is over the brim a border was crossed off  
For slip  
For slip  
For slip her he is in position over  
You under the impression.*

*What is missing for this to be a body? Partial gaps. Missing  
formation: a blood sack in its leaky age – it’s always been leaky.*

*Keep its punctures rubberglued whenever possible one would argue.  
Punctuate something, something big or unruly, thin or slime laden, maybe it passed all  
control checks and it’s the anxiety of crossing that makes you discharge your de vices  
my vices are one hole too many or if not too many then certainly too sweeping. Stop  
weeping the scales are tip toes around an open body  
Around an open question: It goes thusly*

*ARE WE BOD BOD BOD BOD BODIES  
And if so why not now as they stick their poking rods into my sacred area of original  
thought.*

*Dancing with the phallogocentric ghost of the Avant body guard the avant before we  
remember the past  
Elle et douce but not too eager. Calming colours call hers the backstage call mine  
everything else.”*

Consequently, and as reflected in the script above, this physically-orchestrated dramaturgy contains an unavoidable reference to the erotic and a desire to de-censor its visual persuasiveness towards an authorisation of the unruly body. It entails elements of Audre Lorde’s perspective on the erotic as power, whose ambition is to recognise female eroticism

as a somewhat useful, primaevial source of emancipation: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire.” Within the acknowledgement of this source, lies a power that has the potential to free those who wish to rebuke the limitations dictated by the male gaze, reminding us of the ability to act out against objectifying, pornographic conceptions of the female body, and most importantly, announcing our personal ability to physically and sexually identify ourselves.

In this ability to act and identify from within the personal as a conscious choice, lies the political act: “Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.”

Along with Jung’s dedication to the eroticisms and physicalities of the spoken, comes a notably frequent activity of verbal stammer, repetition, alienation and distortion. This practice is an equally important one to highlight:

*“You can lead a horse.  
And with a gun to its head (it has a gun, too)  
And with a gun to its head it will drink the flood back to a sustainable level.  
You can burn down the stables but you can’t make a horse draw in charcoal that it  
went to get from  
the burned down stables, though, can you?  
Re pent re pent re penthouse offers?  
Most of them have gone but we do still have a  
show home a new clear all clear  
Slated show home that is above all particles above all  
radiation levels with you when you least expect it.  
The slow growth  
Of hands on heads on shaking heads.  
Was that it, then?  
Limestone from Indiana, steel girders from Pittsburgh, cement and mortar from upper  
New York State, \_marble from Italy, France, \_ and \_England, \_wood\_ from \_northern and  
Pacific Coast\_ forests, and \_hardware\_ from \_New\_ England.” Even the facade used a  
variety of \_material, \_most prominently\_ Indiana limestone but also terracotta, brick and  
Swedish black  
granite  
knight  
knight  
knight  
knight  
knight  
knight  
knight  
knight  
knight*

knight  
knight  
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knight  
knight  
knight  
knight  
knight  
knight  
{points}  
knight\*

*\*I'm sorry, I felt it needed repeating. You see without his silver cladding he looks just like anyone else, like anyone else so you may well have missed him.\**

In the above excerpt, Jung's act of repetition brings us, the audience, to a momentary state of absurdity, a lapse wherein we process defamiliarisation as a way to cast ourselves away from the habitualisation of familiar hearing and meaning. It is this state of unfamiliarity where the true potential of art can be found: "The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." In Victor Shklovsky's 'Art as Technique', emphasis on the importance of lingual distortion is being laid out to distinguish prose from poetry, along with the necessity to prioritise poetic absurdity overall. It seems as though Sklovsky defines this technical dissociation as his non-negotiable insistence, demanding for its recognition as poetry's first and foremost tool.

But what does the act of defamiliarisation do for us as political bodies? Not only does it sharpen our skill to contextualise from within a place of unbiased curiosity, it also awakens our own, physiological function, crucial in outstripping biases that lead to discrimination and hence advocating change: the act of *listening*. And what is listening, if not a participatory announcement of our bodies? Listening makes us lift our attention so we can throw ourselves actively into realities that need to be re-invented, which in itself is an intrinsically political act. The more we listen, the more we have the opportunity to reshape predicted, heteronormative agendas that have been brought to us by political authorities who lack sincere involvement in integrating otherness, such as femininity or queerness.

Active, or even more so *critical* listening is our chance for solidarity. A solidarity that teaches us how to listen to other voices and in doing so, reminding us how to make ourselves heard. In our willingness to listen, we commit to an all-encompassing inclusivity that goes beyond the superficiality of quotas, opposing neo-liberal attempts for pluralist, multicultural unity and false harmony, or to quote Holly Lewis: "The violence of liberal pluralism lies precisely in its denial of the formation of solidarities, requiring instead that one mutter banal catechisms about the unity of mankind."

Sophie Jung, undoubtedly, urges us to listen to a critically-interwoven, twisted variety of lingual imagery, whilst calling for the physical reflection of the purpose in a word. Reminding us to perceive the political with the act of active listening – and without the aim of linear comprehension – we are given the chance to evoke the word within the chamber in which it dwells: our mouth and the surrounding membrane of our bodies. This physical participation allows us to raise our bodies in solidarity, exposing our personal, so it can be united in a dialogical activism that we have yet to claim as our own. Hence, in the tradition of Stein’s “a rose is a rose is a rose”, the meaning of a word lies in the act of how we *make* it.

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