

Indirect Speech

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Earlier this year, *Fillip* invited Silvia Kolbowski to produce an artist edition in conjunction with a talk for the Whitechapel Gallery, London, on the topic of indirect speech. To this assignment, the artist responded promptly with the piece *Dear Silvia...July, 2009*—which now exists as an editioned one-sided, 12 inch acetate record and, in print format, included in *Fillip* 11. The work consists of a small selection of e-mail messages culled from a large volume the artist received, presumably from various political lobbyists and NGOs, during the month of July 2009, exhorting her to attend to a wide variety of urgent issues. As a sound project, these personally addressed missives, all opening with a solicitous “Dear Silvia,” are delivered in the earnest but occasionally halting voice of a young girl.

Of course, there are very distinct differences between spoken and written language, but in this context it might be useful to consider the notion of indirect speech less as, literally, speech, but as the idea of voice, also in its metaphorical sense.

The voice is peculiar. On one hand it can be argued, as Homi Bhabha has done in his elaborations on “the site of enunciation,” that the voice is particular and as such underlies material conditions. Conversely, the voice is mysteriously immaterial, a phenomenon that Slavoj Žižek describes as alien, or even as something akin to an actual alien that possesses us, similar to the eponymous creature that, in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), bursts uncontrollably and violently from John Hurt’s chest. Perplexingly, the voice is inorganic, yet nevertheless issues from and inhabits this animal, mortal body of ours.

Indirect, or mediated, speech—often also referred to as “reported speech”—aside from defining a linguistic or grammatical construction, clearly also describes what any publication imparts, therefore particularly resonating within the context of a magazine. Indirect speech implies that somebody is speaking through a kind of “medium” or that somebody is speaking for, or on behalf of, someone else. This, in turn, implies a deferral of agency, much in the sense of the expression of “lending one’s voice” to something. Summoning the notion of ventriloquism, it alternatively also elicits the image of a sort of hybrid between a séance and an editorial meeting, where “spirits” are conjured through a medium and attempts are being made to invite certain voices.

As such, giving or lending a voice also points to the slippery business of representation as we know it in the context of art and philosophy. The problem of re-presenting the real, meaning figuring out what constitutes the real, involves a struggle with what Roland Barthes called, in reference to photography, “analogical plenitude,” the fact that even a photograph already contains too much information to be accurately, and faithfully, described.

As politicians and cultural producers might especially appreciate, the idea of reality and its representation is a dialectical one. A reality is usually created as a consensual fiction and, as such, reality’s ostensible representation, in other words, its fictionalization, is crucial in constructing it as a functional reality, that is, a constellation of facts and relationships from which agency can arise—in particular communal or societal agency. As something that can also imply representation in a political context, the voice is fundamental to the idea of democracy, a matter that Kolbowski’s work explicitly addresses.

What *Dear Silvia...July, 2009* also calls to mind, however, is a kind of indirect speech that has become uncannily naturalized in big-party politics, and where we perhaps briefly return to the idea of being possessed by a voice, or to ventriloquism: on different cognitive levels, we are often simultaneously aware of and oblivious to the fact that our politicians, those who speak for us, are actually spoken for. That what crosses their lips are not their own words, but those of speech-writers.

It might seem unsurprising that an American artist will address the American political landscape. However,

while it is obvious that the leader currently heading up US governmental politics has huge symbolic power that reaches far beyond any national borders, it is important to recall that this figure has renewed popular belief in the very possibility of political representation, that is to say, of representation as a good-faith contract.

In a sense, Kolbowski's project is a melancholic one, delivering proof that this promise is not being realized. As Chantal Mouffe argues, if the dominant centrist political parties are no longer able to articulate social conflicts and to negotiate them within the given political structures, these conflicts will find other forums to manifest. However, they will do this outside of the dominant political framework, which means not only that this dominant structure may not be affected, but also that any kind of safeguard to manage these conflicts is no longer at play.

Disconcertingly, what we read (and hear) in Kolbowski's work is the creepily conciliatory, solicitous tone with which these requests to "stand up and be counted," or, alternatively, to pay up, are delivered. The voice that speaks to us here, and that presumably issues from some nebulous digital NGO ether, has assumed the non-antagonistic tone of big-party politics, thereby veiling, and, one might argue, betraying, its underlying message, namely that there is a grievous problem, and it's not being dealt with. In other words, the opportunity for the crucial agonism that Mouffe espouses in her writing is lost once again, and instead of making their voices heard, citizens are simply asked to silently lend their voice (or donate their cash) to causes that have been identified elsewhere.

By destabilizing the writer/addressee paradigm, Silvia Kolbowski's work seems to undermine the entire notion of agency and responsibility, making it strangely precarious. The idea of having a child speak the text in the audio version of the work also seems a, perhaps cynical, play on the issue of responsibility, while simultaneously conjuring the "think-of-future-generations" ploy that so many political ads try to push and that is so effective in its visceral impact.

Dear Silvia...July, 2009 problematizes the crucial tension that seems to culminate in the idea of representation: that one way or the other, aesthetically, philosophically, or politically, a "reality" must be formulated, thereby undergoes a reading, and is thus no longer uninflected.