

Impure Thinking Practices and Clinical Acts: The sonorous becomings of Heidi Fast

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This article introduces the recent sound works of Heidi Fast, a Finnish voice and performance artist. Fast's creative practice operates between art and philosophy, and articulates several 'zones of becoming': what Fast designates as 'the clinical', 'the virtual' and 'vocal thought-material'. Using a methodology of routing, the article shows how these zones emerge as aesthetic, ethical and political concerns within Fast's work.

Since 2005, Fast's sound works have variously taken shape as miniature concerts, social sculptures, imaginary soundscapes and environmental music performances. Drawing upon the writings of theorists who have helped shape her practice, this article argues that Fast uses sound and voice to propose an 'actualising philosophy'. This philosophy actualises virtualities (unrealised potentials), affecting transformative shifts through tiny mutations in perceptions and behaviours.

←route→: a pathway, or opening, between two places

[place]: a network of relations

[...becoming...]: a place of mutation

←[...voice...]: a sonorous route; a sonorous place; a sonorous place of mutation

[...place of mutation...]		
formal essences	stateless essences	formed things
essentialities	materialities/corporealities	thingness
fixed, eternal elements	unfixed, unformed, imperceptible indeterminate, inexact elements	sensed, perceived elements
'the circle'	'roundness'	'round things: the wheel, the sun'

Figure 1. G. Ouzounian. Map of Akseli Virtanen's *Place of Mutation* (see Virtanen 2007).

1. INTRODUCTION

←I pay attention to vocalization into the world, the vocalizing of one's own becoming (Fast 2005) →[...]←
The notion of becoming does not simply refer to the fact that the self does not have a static being and is in constant flux. More precisely, it refers to an objective zone of indistinction or indiscernibility that always exists between any two multiplicities (Smith 1997) →

In her 2008 text *Compassionate Zones*, the Finnish artist Heidi Fast coins a remarkable phrase to describe an

area in which her creative practice develops: 'vocal thought-material' (Fast 2008a). By connecting what are typically disjointed terms – an act of routing – Fast posits a radical concept: that thought is not an immaterial form but a material substance, and that this substance can be located within the material productions of the voice. More specifically, Fast claims that her practice develops between 'vocal thought-material' and two other zones: 'the clinical' and 'the virtual'. In her works, 'the clinical' emerges as a state of art-working wherein routes, passageways or openings are created between disparate bodies, engaging them in processes of recovery or 'co-healing' (see Ettinger 2005; Ettinger and Virtanen 2005; Fast 2008). Fast employs the term 'virtual' in the Deleuzian sense, as unactualised potential.

This article shows how 'the clinical' and 'the virtual' operate within Fast's creative practice, and it provides conceptual routes for travelling between these zones of becoming. It introduces Fast's vocal works since 2005, which have variously taken shape as miniature concerts, social sculptures, imaginary soundscapes and environmental performances. Using Fast's own methodology of routing, it connects Fast's practice to the writing of theorists who have helped shape it: Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Bracha L. Ettinger, Alan Badiou, Akseli Virtanen and others. Through these routings, this article shows that Fast's works interrupt dominant ideas about what art is and what art does, and more specifically about what sound art is and what sound art does. It maintains that her practice is ultimately not located within the field of art but within a zone of indistinction between art and philosophy, where it proposes an 'actualising philosophy'. This philosophy actualises virtualities (unrealised potentials), affecting transformative shifts through small mutations in perceptions and behaviours – displacements specifically centred upon refocusing relationships between bodies and environments.

2. ZONES OF INDISTINCTION: ART AND PHILOSOPHY

←We must learn to think transversally (Guattari 2000: 43)→

In their co-written treatise *What is Philosophy?* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari embark upon an unusually

contradictory premise – unusual not in its oppositional stance, but in that it opposes their own larger philosophical project. Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophies typically develop within logics of multiplicity, heterogeneity, difference; they provide use-readers with tools for nomad thinking (see Deleuze and Guattari 2008). By contrast, *What is Philosophy?* works to delimit – not broaden – conceptual boundaries. It argues that philosophy can be defined as the creation of concepts, and it proposes that concepts share the following properties: they are multiple, heterogeneous, necessarily connected to other concepts, self-positing, incorporeal, and they involve ‘becomings’ (i.e. they develop within processes of actualisation) (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 1–34).

Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of philosophy as a creative enterprise may be compelling, but the way in which they arrive at it is in doubt: namely, that they define philosophy in opposition to other creative enterprises, such as science and art. They write: ‘philosophy extracts *concepts* ... whereas science extracts *prospects* ... and art extracts *percepts and affects*’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 24). With regards to science, they claim that ‘it is pointless to say that there are concepts in science ... science needs only propositions or functions’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 33). Similarly, they claim that the work of art is ‘a being of sensation and nothing else’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 164). In an unsubtle crescendo of delimiting thought, they close the first chapter of *What is Philosophy?* with the following statement: ‘The concept belongs to philosophy and philosophy alone’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 34).

It is understandable that Deleuze and Guattari would reserve special characteristics for philosophy, science and art (and they are careful to note that none is a superior enterprise). Still, it is jarring that they fail to consider the interstitial spaces wherein these fields converge and produce one another. What of the space, for example, where art meets philosophy – where art not only creates sensations but also concepts, and where philosophy, in turn, becomes sensational? It is within such a zone of indistinction that a creative enterprise such as Heidi Fast’s develops.

Alain Badiou describes this very same zone of indistinction in his 2005 text *Infinite Thought*. Here, Badiou writes of the ‘postmodern orientation’ in contemporary philosophy that it:

activates what might be called mixed practices, de-totalized practices, or impure thinking practices. It situates thought on the outskirts, in areas that cannot be circumscribed. In particular, it installs philosophical thought at the periphery of art, and proposes an untotizable mixture of the conceptual method of philosophy and the sense-oriented enterprise of art. (Badiou 2003: 33)

While I would not ascribe to it a specifically post-modern orientation (in that it is not particularly

concerned with deconstructing modernity), I understand Fast’s practice as a mixed practice, a de-totalised practice, an impure thinking practice – one that critically contaminates the fields of both art and philosophy. In introducing it, therefore, my questions are: what are the concepts that Fast’s art-working creates, and what are the sensations that her philosophy produces?

3. THE CLINICAL

← The philosopher of the future is both artist and doctor (Deleuze 2001: 66) → [...] ← The artist who is ... worked through by virtual strings practices her art – art that is an aesthetic-in-action – as a healing, healing that is an ethics-in-action (Ettinger 2005: 707) →

Although Heidi Fast describes herself as a voice artist and performance artist on different occasions, she feels she is ‘not thoroughly inside the field of art, and at the same time, not thoroughly outside it, either’ (Fast 2008c). Many contemporary artists conceive of their practice in interdisciplinary terms; what distinguishes Fast are the particular terms of her border-crossing. For the last few years, Fast has developed a ‘project of health’ at the centre of her work, one that aims for the ‘micro-recuperation or recovery of humanity’ (Fast 2008c). She conceives of this clinical project in ecological terms, as ‘making and resuscitating or “restoring to life” a multifaceted relationship with the surrounding life’ (Fast 2008c).

Fast began to explore the realm of the clinical in a twenty-minute vocal work, *Health Tones* (2005), which she presented several times at the Finnish Theatre Academy in 2005. *Health Tones* was held in a sparse black-box theatre in which chairs were arranged in two semi-circles, with loudspeakers placed at their sides and at their back. For each performance, Fast gave a text to half the audience, and headphones to the other half. She then took a microphone and began to ‘let voices out’ (Fast 2008b). Fast recalls:

I held the microphone at my neck, or at my chest, or at the back of my neck. At first, I sang these more ‘silent’ voices. Then, I sang some stronger ones. The point was not how the voices would sound as such, but the co-resonance of the particular sound in and from my body, the microphone, and the headphones as inseparable from my body, like the ends of a link or a thread. (Fast 2008c)

After redistributing the text and headphones and repeating this performance, Fast played a digital tape part of pre-recorded vocalisations. She had recorded these at various locations with the help of an assistant who miked her at different distances. Fast ‘sang with the tape and with the situation’, once again using the microphone to amplify her live voice (Fast 2008b).



Figures 2 and 3. Heidi Fast performing in *Health Tones* (2005) at the Finnish Theatre Academy. Photos by Sami Perttilä. Images courtesy of Heidi Fast.

Health Tones evolved out of several concerns. For one, Fast wanted to break from the musical traditions within which she had been trained and professionally active, namely jazz and popular music. For Fast, these traditions were limited in their conception of the voice as a strictly musical instrument. Rather than explore musical constructions, Fast wanted to employ the voice as a vehicle through which to investigate such abstract realms as ‘the distances between bodies’. This aesthetic considera-

tion is clearly audible in the tape part, a richly varied sequence of verbal and non-verbal vocalisations. The verbal parts feature Fast speaking phrases such as ‘I am starting to become’. The non-verbal vocalisations are alternately short and long in duration, even and broken in tone, soft and loud, heard as individual voices or as dense layers of voices, sequences of voices and chords. Each category or ‘instance’ of voice is spatialised such that it is heard at multiple locations, distances and intensities, moving towards and away from the listening body at varying speeds and directions, always illustrating Fast’s idea that ‘the voice is the spatialization of the body’ (Fast 2008b).

It is within this spatialisation of the voice that Fast’s conception of the clinical emerges: in *Health Tones*, the voice arrives at the listening body, penetrates it, and changes its composition at a multitude of rates, directions and intensities. In doing so, it creates an awareness of the listening body as a place, a plane, a *milieu*: a set of intersecting locations, a network of relations. It is within this heightened state of connectivity and awareness of the body-as-place – one whose existence is contingent upon the existence of other bodies/places – that transformation, or recovery, becomes possible. ‘To recover’, writes Fast, ‘means crucially to transform’ (Fast 2008a). The transformation that Fast imagines is of an ecological nature; it functions by inducing ‘a greater sense of the interconnectedness between humanity and non-humanity’ (Bennett 2004: 367).

→ Ecology is the study or story (logos) of the place where we live, or better, the place that we live ... that place is a dynamic flow of matter-energy that tends to settle into various bodies, bodies that often join forces, make connections, form alliances (Bennett 2004: 365). ←

Fast’s conception of the clinical state of sound is at once an ethics and an aesthetics. It locates within the field of art the responsibility to produce work that considers its position within a larger network of places, and it suggests a practical framework through which to do so. Specifically, it points to the unique capability of sound to exist as a ‘matter-energy’ that can reside within, move between, penetrate and transform bodies. In *Health Tones*, voice manifests or materialises the clinical state. It is not organised according to musical traditions or in order to transmit performances of virtuosity, but as a means for engendering a critical awareness of the placed body in relation to other bodies. More specifically, *Health Tones* aims for a transformative recognition of the listening body as a place of mutation: one that develops within multiple networks of becoming.

4. THE VIRTUAL

→ I find, first of all, that I pass from state to state ... I change, without ceasing to change. But this is not saying

enough. Change is far more radical than we are first inclined to suppose (Bergson 1911: 1). ←[...]→ It is not necessary to destroy everything nor begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this bush or this stone just a little, and thus everything. (Agamben 1993: 53)←

Fast has written that her work is always political and critical, but that the transformations it proposes take place ‘on a scale of small displacements or small impetuses ... The actualisation and the thinking [in my work] are only slight mutations or slight changes, not trying to change things all at once’ (Fast 2007b). Fast’s use of sound and voice is critical in this regard. She writes:

The voice – or sound in general – is not divisible into parts that can be controlled or quantified. Sound is not easily delimited. This is political, even though it may not be visible. My essential goal is to establish small islets that deal with multiplying the power in us, or in a nonhuman world. That is, to resist the violent praxis in society through intensities other than strong or powerful resistances: to ruffle and round the edges between interior and exterior, to open up the in-between. (Fast 2007b)

In 2006, Fast presented two sound works that illustrate this process of affecting transformative shifts through slight mutations. Both works were presented as part of the urban art project ‘Unknown City: From Place to Place’, and both took place in and around Hesperia Park, a sprawling urban park in Helsinki. The first, *A Nightsong Action*, was a ‘vocal course’ through the park. For this work, Fast hand-delivered letters of invitation to five hundred apartments surrounding the park. These read:

This letter invites you to *A Nightsong Action*.

To salute the spring. To diversify human voice in our common, public urban space.

I will walk along Hesperia Park and sing a long and even tone. Answer me with your own voice, from your window or balcony (or your neighbor’s) when you hear my voice, or come down to the street and sing with me! Sing with your voice until you no longer hear the others, or continue for as long as you wish.

The point of *A Nightsong Action* is not to strive for the clarity or beauty of the voice. You can (and should, if you wish), join it with very hoarse or clear singing, with whispers or shouts that ‘become’ from your throat. [...]

Approximately a dozen people arrived for *A Nightsong Action*. Fast sang long and even tones, and the participants joined her with ‘murmurs, shouts, and silence’ (Fast 2008b). Residents of nearby buildings intermittently joined with vocalisations from their windows, or simply watched the action unfold beneath them.

Fast observes that *A Nightsong Action* ‘did not have any special meaning or function ... it was an



Figures 4–6. Heidi Fast and participants in *A Nightsong Action*. Images courtesy of Heidi Fast.

unfunction in a way’, and recalls that many participants were self-conscious in that ‘it did not involve singing collective songs, but just making [meaningless sounds]’ (Fast 2008b). These observations point to the ways in which *A Nightsong Action*’s ‘un-functionality’ was critically transformative, specifically with regard to the participants’ relationship to their urban surroundings. *A Nightsong Action* invited participants to realise, through simple vocal acts, a new kind of city. The Finnish political theorist Akseli

Virtanen writes that, in Western cultures, the place of the *polis* [city] has been situated in ‘the transformation from voice to language’ (Virtanen 2004: 211). In *Politics*, for example, Aristotle argues that:

Among living beings only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure, and this is why it belongs to other living beings [...]. But language is for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have sensation of the good and the bad and of the just and the unjust is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings, and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city. (Virtanen 2004: 211)

A Nightsong Action posits an oppositional politics, in that its sonorous productions move not from voice to language, but precisely in the opposite direction: from language to voice. *A Nightsong Action* re-inserts the non-linguistic, collective voice into a public/urban space. Through this small mutation, it momentarily ‘un-does’ the traditional expression of the city, inviting participants to realise a different, more interconnected version. In this way, *A Nightsong Action* actualises a virtual city – urban forms and expressions that exist as potentials, but that must be actualised in order to emerge into view.

Another work that Fast presented for the ‘Unknown City’ project similarly aimed to bring about transformative shifts through the small mutation – what Giorgio Agamben has called ‘the tiny displacement’ (Agamben 1993: 53). This work was so slight, in fact, that it never actually materialised but existed as mere suggestion. *Sculpture of Silence – A Suggestion* (2006) took the form of a poster that Fast mounted on the front window of a shop overlooking Hesperia Park. The poster contained a suggestion for an imaginary soundscape in the park: a place wherein certain sounds would disappear through the use of a microphone–loudspeaker configuration within which certain incoming waveforms would be outputted out of phase. This negative sound-sculpture would thus comprise nothing more than ‘a range of silences’ (Fast 2008b).

Fast conceived of *Sculpture of Silence* upon observing that, at a particular location in the park, different elements conspired to create a particularly noisy atmosphere. Her ‘suggested sculpture’ was a kind of momentary resistance to this noise. Unlike other sculptures in the park, Fast’s would not take the form of a monument whose purpose it would be to awe the public through a permanent spatial inscription. Instead, it would be a temporary, inconspicuous marking whose power would derive not from its greatness but from its slightness – its ability to affect change through small, even negative, acts. Like *A Nightsong Action*, *Sculpture of Silence* would potentially reveal a different spatial expression through tiny displacements, in this case inviting momentary shifts in thoughts, perceptions and behaviours in order to actualise a virtual silent space.

5. VOCALITY AND PLACE

→Co-poietic transformational potentiality evolves along aesthetic and ethical paths, strings and threads, and produces a particular kind of knowledge (Ettinger 2005: 703)←

Fast’s actualising philosophy works on the level of the tiny displacement or the small mutation, and uses the voice to enable or actualise virtual worlds. At times, these virtual worlds are public ones, collectively imagined and enacted; at other times, they straddle public and private spaces, inviting audiences to re-imagine their everyday lives and the everyday spaces they inhabit as sites of transformational potentiality.

In 2006, Fast presented the vocal work *Amorous Dialogues – Practicing Acoustic Ranges* (2006) in and around a residential apartment building over the course of two days. On the first day, Fast gave an ‘open concert’ in a temporarily vacant apartment inside the building. For this, she assembled a panoply of materials: five loudspeakers, a synthesiser/sampler for triggering pre-recorded vocal samples, two videos, a blanket with a poem sewn into it, and a poster containing another poem. All the texts were meditations on place. Fast’s invitation to *Amorous Dialogues* read:

Heidi Fast invites a listener to a home that is not hers; where both are visitors. To a particular home, or question, about dwelling, inhabiting, adopting, to a place that is not quite any more, or not quite yet anybody’s. She brings to this apartment – a place that is becoming quiet – her own acoustic ‘place’ and a voice that has been composed for the space but that happens only temporarily. She creates vocal routes for an intimate dialogue between the visitor, the material and acoustic ‘residues’ of the home, the traces of dwelling and living, and herself. In opening the home to the public, the voice also calls out to other apartments in the building.

During the open concert Fast used the sampler/synthesiser to play prerecorded vocalisations. She notes that ‘the voice inside the apartment was “echoing” to other apartments inside the building, opening the home towards the public, while external sounds entered the space through open windows inside the apartment’ (Fast 2007a).

The second part of *Amorous Dialogues*, which took place the following afternoon, was a ‘social sculpture’ called *Song of the Dwellings*. For this, Fast invited audiences and residents of the apartment building to vocalise with her while moving up and down the central staircase of the building. Approximately thirty people participated, including residents of the building who opened their doors for the event.

With *Amorous Dialogues*, Fast intended to actualise a virtual world that would intersect with listeners’ everyday lives and thereby transform their relationships to their everyday surroundings and to one



Figures 7–9. Heidi Fast and audience members in the ‘open concert’. Photos by Pekka Mäkinen. Images courtesy of Heidi Fast.

another. As such, *Amorous Dialogues* can be located within a history of sound art that seeks to reconfigure experiences of the everyday through an engagement with sound, and within philosophies of everyday life that position the everyday as a site rife with transformational potentiality (cf. Lefebvre 1947; Lefebvre 1961; Bachelard 1994 [1958]; Debord 1961). In the late 1960s, as theories of everyday life proliferated in the writings of such philosophers as Henri Lefebvre, Gaston Bachelard and Guy Debord, the American artist Max Neuhaus – who coined the term ‘sound installation art’ – took audiences on listening walks that were intended



Figures 10 and 11. Heidi Fast and participants in *Song of the Dwellings*. Photos by Pekka Mäkinen. Images courtesy of Heidi Fast.

to foster a renewed attachment to their everyday environments. Neuhaus writes of his *LISTEN* (1967) works that:

I would ask the audience at a concert or lecture to collect outside the hall, stamp [the word ‘LISTEN’ onto] their hands, and lead them through their everyday environment. Saying nothing, I would simply concentrate on listening ... The group would proceed silently, and by the time we returned to the hall many had found a new way to listen for themselves. (Neuhaus 1988).

With the *LISTEN* series Neuhaus proposed that an active, focused listening could bring about a transformation of ‘space’ into ‘place’, meaning that an otherwise mundane environment could be rendered meaningful simply by listening to it. *LISTEN* not only precipitated Neuhaus’s earliest sound installations, it also inspired an enduring tradition of sound art that reconstitutes the everyday through sonic interventions.

In the case of *Amorous Dialogues*, Fast invites participants not only to listen to their everyday environments, but to vocalise in and through them – an act that draws their attention both to the ‘voices’ of the places they inhabit, and to their own roles in constructing these voices. And, whereas Neuhaus had sought to bring about a transformation from space to place with his *LISTEN* works, with *Amorous Dialogues* Fast intends to foster a sense of placelessness, asking audiences to join her in ‘becoming strangers’ in their own homes – to collectively lose their sense of belonging to place. In order to carry out this transformation from place to non-place, Fast deploys the voice in such a way that it blurs the boundaries between interior/exterior, private/public and individual/collective, recalling Paulo Virno’s idea that:

In today’s forms of life one ... the coupling of the terms public-private, as well as the coupling of the terms collective-individual, can no longer stand up on their own [...] Today, all forms of life have the experience of “not feeling at home” ... there is nothing more shared and more common, and in a certain sense more public, than the feeling of “not feeling at home”. (Virno 2004: 24–34)

In drawing audiences’ attention to their everyday spaces in a way that continuously defamiliarises them, Fast reveals not only virtual worlds but also virtual selves: unstable identities that straddle the spaces of foreignness/belonging, guest/resident, individual/collective. She fosters these virtual identities by modulating everyday environments with the voice – a substance so unstable that it permanently resides between states of being (materiality and immateriality, corporeality and incorporeality) – and finally posits that the voice itself is the ultimate place of mutation.

6. CONCLUSION

→ Everything will be as it is now, just a little different (Walter Benjamin, quoted in Agamben 1993: 53)←

Fast’s creative practice, while generally belonging to the tradition of sound art, is more precisely an art of routings, displacements and mutations. It works on the level of the tiny displacement in order to affect transformational shifts: it reveals, for example, alternative expressions of the city that develop in active relation to the voice, imaginary places of silence within noisy urban environments, the unstable boundaries between private/public and individual/collective, the foreignness of everyday spaces, and the hidden connections between disparate bodies – all virtualities that are actualised through their connection to the voice. Ultimately, Fast’s creative practice displaces itself from the field of sound art into other fields of production. As a creative enterprise, Fast’s is equally an art-working and an actualising philosophy, one that puts the sensational enterprise of art to the task of actualising virtualities.

Positioning the voice as a place of mutation, Fast’s work transforms our understanding of the limits of both artistic and philosophical practice.

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