

How to take care of your voice: exhaustion and other habitual affects when working within large-scale art institutions¹

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I would like to start this text by sharing a short video on YouTube: <<https://bit.ly/2lhBm93>>, in the hope of slightly disrupting the convention of the essay format. In this video, Kerri Ho—international vocal coach and internet expert on vocal matters—provides advice on **maintaining a healthy, rich voice**. She suggests to (1) warm up your voice every day, even when you are not singing, and (2) take care of your body by exercising and getting enough sleep. “A free body is equal to a free voice”, she proclaims casually. But freedom is tough to grasp when neither your body nor your voice depend solely on your individual actions to remain ‘free’.

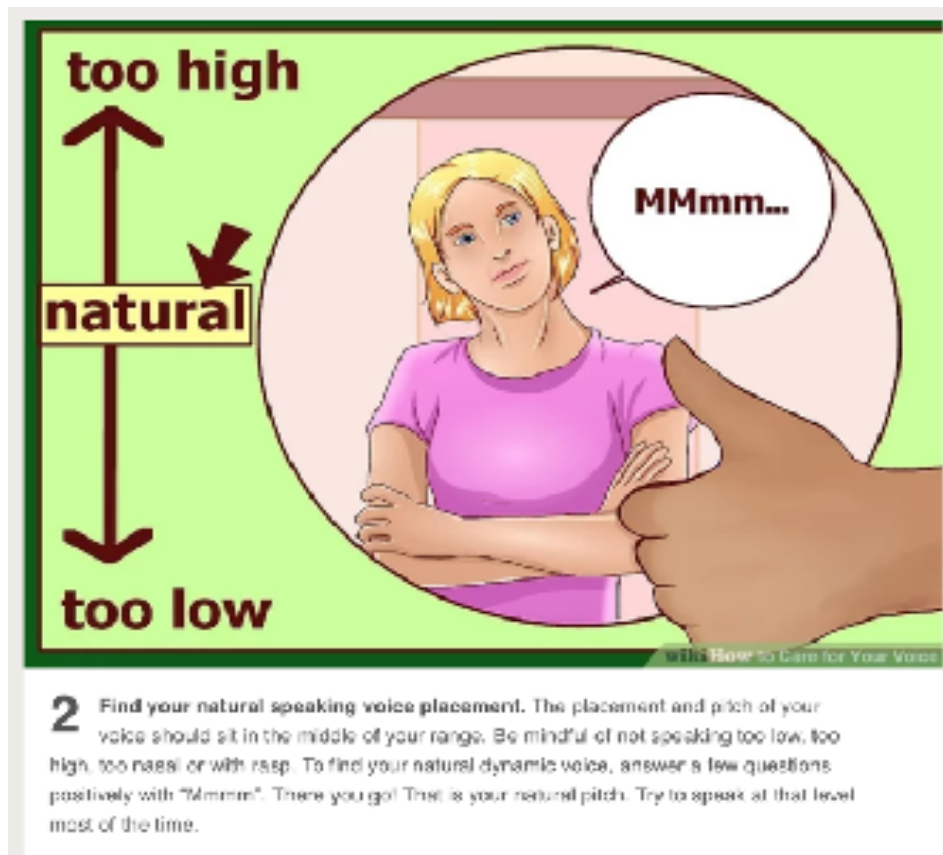
I am not a singer myself but what I am trying to do here is to think otherwise, with you, with regard to voicing: voicing an opinion, articulating a position, uttering a stance, as a femininity in this still deeply patriarchal world. And I am wondering whether exercises like the one you saw in the video could be of any assistance, if taken non-figuratively and with a bit of lightness.

I must say here that I treat the concept of ‘the voice’ both literally (as the sound that comes from my vocal cords, and—more generally and inclusively—as the faculty of utterance) and metaphorically (in the sense of opinion or right of expression), pertaining to the perception that these modalities are constitutively interlinked. Functioning vocal cords are, of course, not the only means for one to ‘have a voice’—gestures, signs, movements of the body are equally important media, at least in my mind. Even silence, when read *as such* (and not as

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This text was first written to be presented during the ‘Unsettling Feminist Curating’ symposium, held at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna on 1 December 2017, curated by Elke Krasny, Barbara Mahlkecht, Lara Perry, Dorothee Richter, the Department for Art and Education/Institute for Education in the Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, and *feminist Curators United fCU*. Slightly adjusted, it later formed the basis of a lecture for students of the MAS in Curating of the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), taking place at the OnCurating Project Space in Zurich on 16 March 2018. I would like to thank the participants of both these events for the attentive, curious, and hugely valuable conversations that helped me feel a bit less exposed and without which this text would not have been published. I am forever grateful to my former colleagues at the Athens Biennale and *documenta 14* for the experiences we shared, even in the hardest of times, and I sincerely hope that my words at moments of critique are not harmful to any of them. The sometimes informal style of my writing reflects the initial function of this text: to be read aloud for an intimate public.

speechlessness or censorship), can be another—an ‘other’—form of **voicing a stance**.



One basic advice that most of the websites I looked at give, websites about how to take care of your voice, is to “**find your natural voice pitch**”, your natural speaking voice. It means that the placement and pitch of your voice should sit in the middle of your range, not too low, not too high, not too nasal or with rasp. *To find your natural dynamic voice, answer a few questions positively with “Mmmm”. There you go! That is your natural pitch. Try to speak at that level most of the time.*

But how can I find my ‘natural voice’ in the context of an art institution? Do I need to answer positively with “Mmmm”, and there I go? What is my ‘natural opinion’, and how can I express it? Or, rather, is there ever a ‘natural opinion’, a ‘natural voice’ that is resting somewhere in me and could come forward? This insistence on ‘naturalness’ is stressful, is in itself exhausting. It requires you to be constantly aware of how you’re speaking, as if you have an unlimited capacity for self-consciousness, regardless of social norms and pressures. But screaming and whispering are also exhausting, as many vocal training websites point out.

This issue of ‘finding your own voice’—which is also what they advise these

days if you want to become successful in creative fields—has been bothering me a lot lately. I keep looking for it and have not been able to find it. Or at least, I have not been able to recognize it, to recognize a voice as *my voice*, within the art world, and more specifically within large-scale art institutions.

Let's get back to the issue of naturalness for a minute. As **Anne Carson** stresses in her essay *The Gender of Sound*, “very few women in public life do not worry that their voices are too high or too light or too shrill to command respect”.² She offers the example of Margaret Thatcher, who trained for years with a vocal coach to make her voice sound more like those of the other Honourable Members of Parliament and still earned the nickname ‘Attila the Hen’.

In 2018, long after Carol Gilligan published her seminal study *In a Different Voice*, masculinities and femininities continue to articulate themselves distinctively.³ Soundness of mind, moderation, self-control, and temperance in the use of sound and language are all virtues that produce ‘**the voice of reason**’, which is still the dominant (and masculine) form of public expression that organizes patriarchal thinking on ethical and emotional matters. Whatever utterance strays off from these virtues is considered less worthy of listening to. To quote Carson again, “what differentiates man from beast, male from female, civilization from wilderness is the use of rationally articulated speech: *logos*”.⁴

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Carson, Anne, ‘The Gender of Sound’, in: *Glass, Irony and God*, New York, NY: New Directions, 1995. p. 120.

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Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

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Carson, Anne, ‘The Gender of Sound’, in: *Glass, Irony and God*, New York, NY: New Directions, 1995. p. 128.



The Western art world, where I found myself working in, is part of the larger patriarchal structures that still organize our societies, and operates by the very same logic, even when it pretends not to be. I find it, therefore, extremely difficult to locate ‘my natural voice’ as if it *could* be different from the voice I am *called* (by society) to be talking in in order to be heard, to be included, to be respected, to be recognized.

I wondered whether following such advice as ‘take care of your body’ or ‘warm up every day’ would help. In some cases it did, but I couldn’t help but feel exhausted by the process of trying to articulate my thoughts in a way that they make reasonable, comfortable, appropriate sense to the institutional framework surrounding me. And the problem, or rather, the sentiment, remains: ***why do I still feel muted?***

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In light of this question, I will now try to share with you my experience of working within two art institutions, the Athens Biennale and *documenta 14*, and how this work shaped both my affective disposition and the search for my voice.

I will start with a short overview of the activities of the Athens Biennale, to give

a bit of context in case you might not be familiar with the institution.

The **Athens Biennale** was conceived by three individuals active in the arts, who wished to partake more actively in the emerging Greek contemporary art scene: Xenia Kalpaktsoglou, a curator; Poka-Yio, an artist; and Augustine Zenakos, an art critic. Like many other peripheral biennials, the Athens Biennale responded to the city's lack of art institutions and the associated absence of a web of artistic production, development and exchange. In 2005 they announced they would curate the first Athens Biennale, titled ***Destroy Athens***, which took place in September 2007. The directors/curators decided to start off this first edition with a bang, to make as loud a statement as possible and produce a biennial that could be compared to any other big international art event in terms of format, scale, calibre and visibility.

The second Athens Biennale was titled ***Heaven*** and opened in the summer of 2009. It was a very ambitious project, realized in a moment of transition, still too early for anyone to imagine the depth of the crisis that was to follow. As successful as it was in its over-identification with the biennial format (too many curators, too many artists, too many venues, too many events), it wasn't attended by that many visitors and most parallel activities seemed detached from the stakes of the exhibition itself.

By the autumn of 2010 the Greek debt crisis had erupted and the country was to become the ground for an experiment of harsh austerity, rife with insecure state structures and a breeding ground for fascist tendencies. In the meantime the Athens Biennale was gearing up for its third edition, ***Monodrome***, which was curated by the two directors (as the third one had left) and Nicolas Bourriaud. Driven by the realization that producing *another* contemporary art exhibition just wasn't enough, this Biennale had to be fluid, non-linear and collective. It was a very local project, hard to read at first instance without some understanding of the Greek context, yet an insightful contemplation on the conditions from which it was born.

Since Greece was still—and remains to this day—in crisis, the Athens Biennale produced its fourth edition once again as a response to the situation. Titled ***Agora***, it took place in the building of the Old Athens Stock Exchange and was curated by a team of forty-five artists, curators, theorists, and creative practitioners. Aiming to “explore creative alternatives to a state of bankruptcy”, it was structured around the pertinent question: “Now what?” It proposed the ‘discursive’ exhibition

model and unfolded less through the exhibited artworks and more through the one-hundred events that it hosted over a span of fifty-four days. It was the most heavily attended of all the Biennales.

Agora took place in 2013 and you might wonder what happened next, in 2015. Well, the fifth edition of the Biennale was titled ***Omonoia*** (the Greek word for ‘concord’) and is the most difficult to explain and talk about. Not only because this was the one that provoked in me, in the most literal sense, the feeling of exhaustion and not having a voice, but also because, for a number of reasons, it was a failed project. And failure is difficult to come to terms with.

Let me start from where I started.

I wish I had hiccups.

I started working at the Athens Biennale in 2010, in my early twenties. I was full of aspirations at that time and hadn’t worked in any art setting that sounded as big and as important. *Monodrome*, the third Athens Biennale, was my first. I worked as a voluntary production assistant and then as a tour guide, doing mostly trivial yet necessary tasks that no one else had time to do. It was a formative period for me, amidst the general restlessness of ‘the crisis’—I wanted to believe that I had finally found something to hold on to.

Then came the fourth Athens Biennale, *Agora*, in 2013. I was curious about how it was going to work out and felt very excited to be part of such a large curatorial team and meet new people and discuss and learn things. I was silent in most of the meetings, because I was working non-stop at the office and had no time for research and didn’t think I had anything to say... But still, I clung to the idea that this was

something crucial for the local art scene and for my quest to find my own place in it. In the end I missed all the fun because I had to go to London and start my master's degree.⁵

Then I came back from London and I spoke with the Biennale directors again about my potential involvement. The Biennale had won a prize from the European Cultural Foundation for *Agora* in April 2015, and they even paid us to travel to Brussels and meet with Dutch queens and princesses. That was a huge confidence boost. Adam Szymczyk, the artistic director of *documenta 14*, was also very keen to collaborate—he publically said that *Agora* had influenced him greatly in deciding to locate *documenta* in Athens. The collaboration never worked out in the end.

The team decided to continue working, even though it was quite clear that we were all burnt out and lacked a strong motivation to continue. We were only six people at the office. Most of us had second jobs to earn a living.

What to do next, after *Agora*? We couldn't really return to the exhibition or festival format. We wanted to do something else, something more 'ground-breaking': a biennial that was not a biennial anymore. Notice how I am starting now to use the pronoun '**we**' as I refer to my work for the Biennale. I find it impossible to avoid this type of identification when I am involved in something that I feel attached to, like it has become an integral part of myself. This 'we' will stay with me throughout the text on purpose, because any other pronoun may be more neutral, but would sound too dishonest or detached.

Xenia, one of the directors, became a mother and she needed some stability. We all wanted to feel secure and were too tired to keep working in the same precarious conditions. We decided to slow things down, to prolong the biennial time. Instead of producing an event in 2015 and another in 2017, we decided to stay open for two years and to finally try to transition from a *never-becoming-institution* to an

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Postgraduate programmes on art and culture (e.g. curating, creative writing, cultural management, film studies, museology, and so on) are almost non-existent in Greece. One of the very few and ridiculously expensive options, for people who want to further their academic engagement with such fields, is to study in the UK, as I did. I graduated with a degree in Museum Studies from University College London, where I formed close bonds of friendship and mutual support with my classmates—an international group of very inspiring young women with feminist concerns. I also worked at Cubitt Artists with curator Fatima Hellberg, and assisted in the development of an exhibition programme that presented mostly feminist art practices. Thus, the shift in my thinking about art and institutions in relation to gender and feminism has been heavily shaped by my UK education and the experience of living and working in London.

ever-becoming-institution.⁶

It became obvious from the beginning that it was impossible to do this without a plan, without a framework, without a team, without money, but none of us really had either the energy or the will to find all these missing elements. It looked almost suicidal to maintain a continuous public programme under these circumstances. And we turned to our old habit, of loud appearance and silent disappearance, of moments of visibility and condensed activity and moments of invisibility and recuperation. But even that was too much to handle, and exhaustion very quickly kicked in.

An anthropologist from London was invited to orchestrate the whole thing. Nobody was a curator, which was a way to horizontalize the content-producing process or another way to avoid responsibility. We didn't know what art to show and we had run out of ideas. We invited artists and socially-engaged collectives to work together on fighting off precarity. But working together without a transparent structure to contain us, without a holding environment, was no longer enough. What we had in freedom we lacked in care. That's where confusion kicked in.

In this state of confusion we focused solely on the realization of projects, on the tedious everyday admin. We didn't allow ourselves any room for reflection on the contents, on the direction things were going. Maybe we were scared to foresee a failure. We were merely trying to stay afloat. Boredom kicked in.

Meanwhile I was very excited by this second master's I had started, in Gender Studies at Panteion University in Athens. I had found something else to hold on to. I tried to understand what the Biennale meant to me at this point but couldn't. Throughout its editions, gender and feminism were hardly ever discussed as issues worth addressing within the team—not that they were brought forward in any other Greek art institution, but the Biennale had always aspired to be the most political of all. When I brought up such issues, I was mostly ignored or frowned upon. The patriarchal sexist tendencies within the Greek cultural scene were not regarded as a

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From the beginning, the Biennale aimed to never become an institution, in the sense that the people involved wanted to maintain a level of criticality against institutionalization, but would still work within a biennial format. This position created complex internal conflicts (e.g. horizontalism vs. hierarchy, precarity vs. stability) and became gradually more and more difficult to sustain, turning the Biennale into what Livia Pancu called a static and suspended 'almost institution' that ended up just embodying all our unfulfilled promises (for security, insurance, regular salary and responsibilities). In 2015, the position shifted from the wish to be a *never-becoming-institution* to building an *ever-becoming-institution*, something that could, most of all, provide stability but still leave room for critical experimentation. But, as you will see, that didn't work out either.

topic interesting enough to be scrutinized. Although instituting *otherwise* was always at stake, feminist practices of instituting were never a reference point.

My dedication to gender studies was read as a 'betrayal' to the promise of stability for the Biennale. I was clearly 'not committed enough' to saving it. But I had searched for solutions; I had tried, for too long. And then I started wondering, how can I be so attached to this *almost institution*? It pushed me over multiple times. My work was taken for granted. My opinions were disregarded. My suggestions exploited. I wasn't even getting paid. Bitterness kicked in, as a defense.

I realized all these feelings were not only specific to the Athens Biennale. Can there ever be a space of freedom and agency without co-optation and subjection? How could I cope with this ambivalence around me? That was a moment when feelings truly became mixed. And when feelings become so mixed, words tend to lose their grasp. When I have to talk about them, as I am doing now, I really wish I had hiccups.

I felt like this...



Marcel Broodthaers, *La Pluie (projet pour un texte)*, 1969, film still extracted from YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L6JO-U_ts8> Accessed 26 May 2018.

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Let's go back to the institution now and try to think of its predicament as a result of certain **habits**:

- When **crisis** becomes a habit—when it looks like everything's falling apart and there is no way out, and you continuously find yourself adapting and adjusting to conditions that keep shifting beyond your control, like treading water without drowning—you get so attuned to working (or living) this way, until it reaches the point where it feels like this is the *only* way to work or live.
- When **precarity** becomes a habit—when life becomes a constant training in contingency management, and you get accustomed to working with no insurance, no stable income, no set responsibilities and time-schedule—you are forced to find creative ways of *coping with*, otherwise you fall.
- When **ambition** becomes a habit—when you are persistently attached to an

insatiable desire to grow bigger and succeed better, to try beyond the possible, to gain even more recognition, to draw even more attention to yourself—to the point where you completely lose touch with where you started from.

- When **subversion** becomes a habit—when you are addicted to an urge to constantly reinvent yourself, in order not to become assimilated into the normative oppressive system that governs your being—when you are insistently trying not to settle for any identity and convention—to the point that everything seems like a mere exercise in words or gestures.

All these habits seemed to exist without the slightest attention to care, to process, to feeling, to listening to each other. A voice that asked for those things could not be heard, because it would compromise the habitual rationality of the patterns described above. A voice that asked for those things was the voice of **the feminist killjoy**, the voice that projects her insides to the outside, the voice that dares to say whatever is better left unsaid. In Anne Carson's words, "by projections and leakages of all kinds—somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual—females [are considered to] expose or expend what should be kept in. Females blurt out a direct translation of what should be formulated indirectly".⁷

The dominant, oppressive reaction to this leakage is, "Shut up!" or "Be quiet!" And I went quiet, until I decided to leave. The feeling of exhaustion, most of all, had become so urgent that the work-dynamic wasn't capable of containing it anymore.

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Ibid. p. 129.



With hindsight, after months of reflection and analysis, I find it valid to describe my relation to the Biennale as **a relation of “cruel optimism”**, where the promise of institutional stability could never be fulfilled.⁸ A few of us held on to this promise for a long time, because admitting the impossibility of its realization, or admitting defeat, would have left us sort of hopeless. When I realized that the Biennale will not—cannot—offer me what I wanted, that’s when my attachment frayed and all these negative emotions (exhaustion, confusion, boredom, bitterness) became something felt *as such*. They spilled relentlessly out of the insecure working conditions, the crisis as habit, the ambitious overdrive, and the smug subversiveness, which were no longer parts of an optimistic relation to my object of desire.

If you ask me what could have been done differently, I would say that, instead of going out full force for the fifth edition, we could have stopped the public activities of the institution, gotten some rest, and then worked thoughtfully on building the proper framework for a more sustainable future. Or we could have scaled everything down and done a project on this exhaustion that we were all left to deal with, as an

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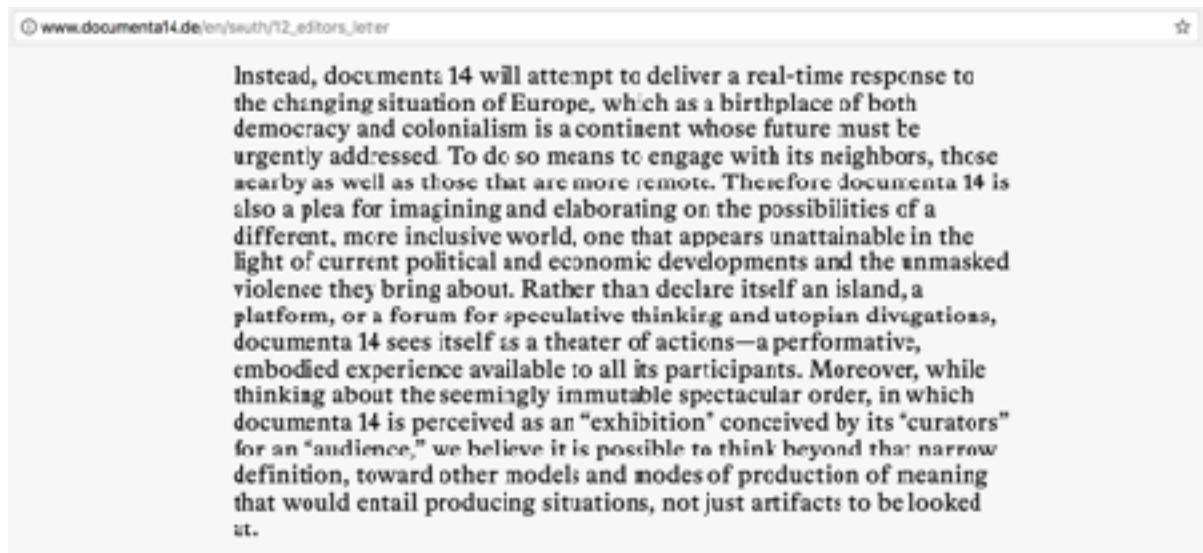
Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

attempt to embrace and come to terms with **failure**, which for me is a totally feminist project in its own right.

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What happens to my voice when I haven't gotten enough sleep? When, mentally and bodily, I've burnt up all my energy operating the institution? "We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired", says Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider*.⁹ Lorde seems to imply here that we have been socialized to keep on working and keep on speaking even when our body is exhausted, in order to fulfill the capitalist demands for productivity and ability. What she proposes is to hijack this logic and apply it equally when we are stunned with fear. As much as we have been trained to still speak even when tired, though, our voice comes out different: worn-out, trembling, restrained. It needs a certain type of treatment.

I hope I haven't tired you too much already. It's time for me to talk about **documenta 14** and I will be much briefer—it's only been a few months since my contract has ended and I haven't had enough time to recover.



I assume that most of you are familiar with the institution of *documenta* and

that there is no need for me to go into boring historical overviews. For those of you who aren't, the only thing I will say is that *documenta* is considered one of the most prestigious and trend-setting large-scale art exhibitions, at least in the Western world, and has been happening every five years in the city of Kassel in Germany since 1955. In 2017 *documenta 14*, under the working title ***Learning from Athens***, unfolded in both Athens and Kassel. The idea of a bilocated project, shared and divided between Greece and Germany, was an attempt “to deliver a real-time response to the changing situation of Europe, which as a birthplace of both democracy and colonialism is a continent whose future must be urgently addressed”. According to Szymczyk, Athens was chosen as the site where “the contradictions of the contemporary world, embodied by loaded directionals like East and West, North and South, meet and clash”—all quotes are from the editorial of the first *South* magazine, the main *documenta 14* publication.

I started working for *documenta 14* around October 2016 as an education producer, assisting in the planning and delivery of educational activities in Athens. I got this job after I met one of my bosses in an elevator; we then had a coffee and shared thoughts on feminism and female writers that we like. This itself was motivation enough for me to try out this opportunity. The other huge motivation was a decent salary accompanied with health insurance.



In the education department, I felt particularly comfortable being in a team comprised mostly of women, including people from very diverse backgrounds who

inserted issues of gender, embodiment and affect in both private and public conversations. In October 2016 we started a university module in the Athens School of Fine Arts for approximately 20 students from the bachelor of Fine Arts. Over the course of 9 months we had Feldenkrais lessons, photographed the school, wrote poems with words from texts we had studied, spread gossips, sang pirate songs, took breathing lessons, and played with our echoes. We also developed another programme for schools, where we asked *documenta 14* artists to contribute objects related to their practice. We visited ten classrooms with these objects and knitted, danced, made maps of the city, and discussed many topics, from gender to ecology to migration.

All these activities might sound ‘cool’ and ‘interesting’—to me they also sound important—but there was of course a downside. Big responsibilities and understaffing in our team led to prolonged working hours and produced a lot of stress. In Education we worked in a circular scheme: to avoid aggressive angles, we focused on process and listening to each other’s needs. But exhaustion could not be avoided, when the demands were so high.

The scale of the overall project was almost surreal—I felt like this...



Precarity was less of a materialized condition in *documenta 14* than in the Biennale and this allowed for my voice to sound more secure and assertive. I tried to step out of my quiet zone and there were moments when it worked. I was heard. But

despite fantasies and aspirations of collectivity the deep hierarchical order of things created conditions of depersonification, even if there were attempts to break it. I had already been employed for months when I kept receiving emails asking who I am and what my title is. There were so many colleagues, so many artists, so many collaborators, that I couldn't remember their names, let alone their voices. I mixed up Lala Rukh with Lala Vula and the son of Tracey Rose who was also named Lala. There were people in large team meetings whose voices I never heard. And mine was often too shy to claim the mike.

The Education department itself struggled to legitimize its existence in an institution that has been so traditionally focused on exhibition production. We did invest in programming that attempted to break with rigid hierarchies, but these same hierarchies struck us quite hard when negotiating salaries or justifying our budget. I felt like a tiny cogwheel in a huge machine that would continue to work with or without me, that would continue to work with or without all the marginalized, oppressed voices that the exhibition tried to put forward.

In several official *documenta 14* texts there were mentions of “a multiplicity of voices”, “a chorus of voices”, even “hearing voices”. I tried to understand why I still felt muted. I missed the voices of friends, of feminists and queers working in Greece, who were rarely invited to take part in the public programme, even though its claims directly referenced them.

Adam Szymczyk deployed and insisted on strategies of minimum disturbance in Athens; meaning that he wanted the presence of the project in the city to be as low-profile as possible and to stay away from grand public gestures. Whether this was out of respect, out of guilt, or out of lack of engagement and research is not for me to argue. But this stance was often locally interpreted, rightfully or not, as an arrogant or exclusionary silence. There was an inherent ambivalence in having an undisputedly hegemonic institution that makes radical political claims in public statements. Such a contradiction provoked a lot of protests... and posters.



documenta 14 declared itself a “theatre of actions” that “imagines and elaborates on the possibilities of a different, more inclusive world”—again a quote from the editorial of the first *South* magazine. Such statements sparked the interest of several radical political groups, specifically in Athens, which heavily criticized the art institution in the streets and beyond. Other parties joined in this wave of reactions, from individual artists and curators who wished to build their own pseudo-politically-conscious career to local agitated nationalists and ill-informed journalists, to shop owners who just wanted to attract the international art crowd.

I’ve described this to show how the presence of *documenta 14* (and of any *documenta*) in a contested city creates a particularly messy, chaotic, confused field of negotiation between art and politics. People that you thought were critical of nationalism made statements on how the exhibition was ‘disrespectfully’ appropriating ‘symbols of Greekness’; friends whom you hoped could express a nuanced view on processes of neo-colonization, now were talking about how ‘poor yet honorable’ Greece was being colonized by the ‘rich and cold-hearted’ Germans; colleagues that spent long dinners discussing revolution, horizontality, and decolonial practices were the first to exploit their employees when given the opportunity. I could give you many more examples but I think I already made my point. Anyway, I reached a moment where I had absolutely no clue where, and how, to stand: with or against the institution?

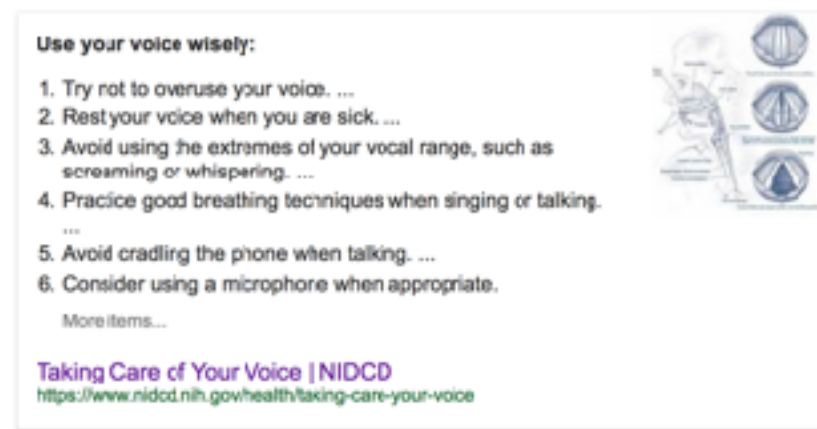
In and around such a large-scale structure, it seems that any form of

radicality is either oversimplified, co-opted or distorted, to the point where people thought that posters like the one above were produced by *documenta 14* itself.¹⁰

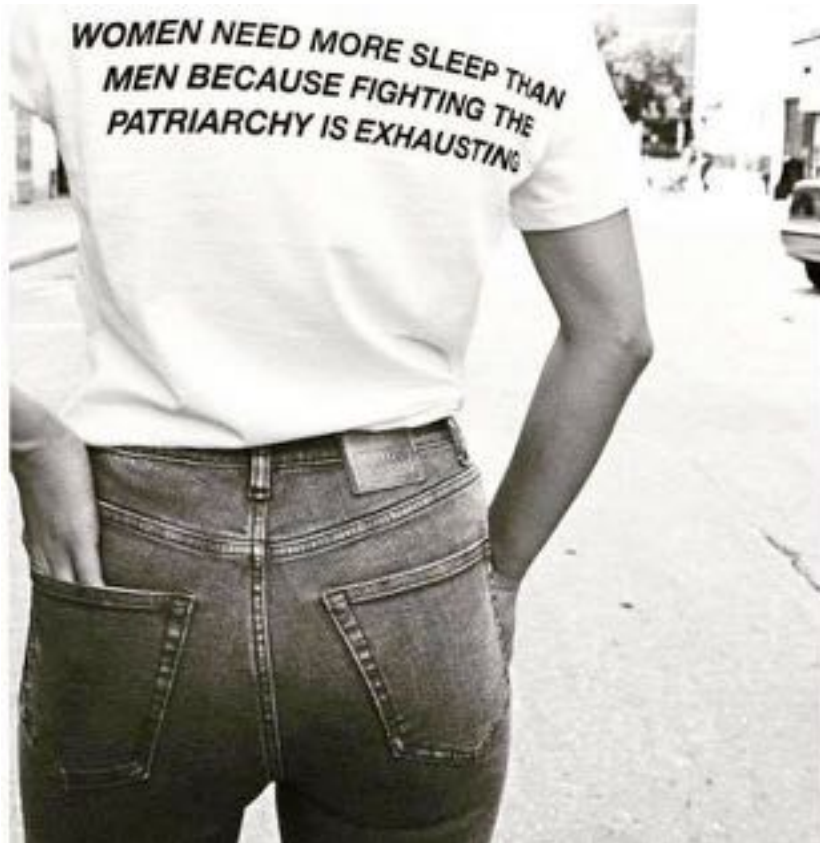
But I want to finish up with something else.

One of *documenta 14*'s main concerns was how to articulate the unsaid and unheard, how to communicate the silenced, the muted. What space is there, however, within an institution that is run by *logos*, to break away from the rational articulation of sound?

My exhausted self flirts with saying “there is none”, but still, I don't think there is an obvious answer to this question.



Let me get back to some vocal health tips. If you consider yourself a feminist cultural worker, my advice is to stay away from large-scale art institutions and focus instead on smaller situations built out of practices of partnering and friendship, that seek stability in relationships of both obligation *and* care. If you find yourself, however, working in structures like the ones I described above, take care of your voice, especially if you cannot find it.



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