

Anna Zett
Text-to-speech

I am reading a text to you.
Your ears, my text, your language, my speech, your time, my reading.

I sometimes have a machine running parallel to my live readings, like a counter balance to the vulnerability of my naked voice: A music machine, a video machine, a fog machine.

So far I have not used a reading machine.
So far I have not outsourced the labour of reading to a machine. I have not yet turned to an Apple Voice Over or to other Text-to-Speech-software to keep my body out of the text.

Those who identify with the digital generation often use digitally generated or manipulated voice-overs in their work. In recent years I saw countless videos that both relied heavily on text and tried to leave the speaking body of the artist out of the work. If the artist didn't turn to a voice simulator, they asked a Native English speaker, preferably a North American Native English speaker to read out the text. Afterwards they applied a few sound effects in order to make this North American voice sound even more superhuman.

Contemporary video artists that hire North American English Native speakers or skilled American English impersonators for their voice-over do so because they are looking for someone who is able to embody the future of capitalism, beyond the contingency of a subject that happened to be born outside of the Empire or in another less universal Empire, or in a some other spot in between the worlds that are officially supposed to be familiar.

One could say this method has already turned into a new standard, something that can hardly be overdone. It has become as normal as a touch screen at the gallery wall. These digitally distorted American English speakers don't belong anywhere; they come to you like Siri, like a free app, like a free U2-Album that is impossible to delete.

Is the Empire a computer or is the Empire an American English voice of human origin that has been subjected to sound editing?

One might reply: who cares? Aren't we all subjects to the same contemporary capitalist junk time now? The Empire speaks to its subjects in a language that is recognizable as language, because it was designed that way and it speaks to no one in particular. It speaks to everyone who has learned to understand this language and it invites them all to take the call personal. This type of language has nothing to do with where you are born, where you grew up, or who told you to speak a language.

In the global art world accents and dialects are considered details, potentially unnecessary details. They add personality and aura, yet this might not be what you are looking for. Articulation exceeds language; it belongs to this postmodern body that inevitably exceeds speech. But this body might not be what is at a stake in your art. What the body of the artist happens to do to the voice of the artist, does not belong to contemporary capitalism, it does not belong to the Internet. It might belong to the past, but it does not belong to the future.

The written form is the ideal state of an imperial language.

Imperial languages consist of words, letters, grammar and code. They are programs that are able to run parallel to the real, separated from human bodies. Since the first monotheists came up with the idea that the name of God cannot be spoken, speech continues to fail the purity of language. It seems there is something vulgar about spoken language, at least if you follow the holy scriptures that keep human bodies in trouble all over the planet.

In my part of the Internet, it is the English language that has turned into a contemporary holy language, a language that offers to describe things in a neutral way, the common way, the main way.

The English language promises universality. But the problem is that it loses this universality when read out loud by a body, randomly specified by a foreign accent or a local dialect or a class marker, watered down by the contingency of individual breath and unusual intonation.

Mechanical voice-overs promised to fix that problem. All these video artists with their digital voice-overs and their digitally distorted American English speakers, they are trying to return to the ideal of a disembodied language, the language of the divine Empire of God that is continuously asked to lend its power to the profane Empire of Capitalism.

To me, using the English language feels a bit like practicing a religion that I don't really believe in. I do it because I want to connect with people beyond the arbitrary borders of national languages. I do it because I have to do it for work, I do it because I am used to it now.

But sometimes I still wonder what it feels like to be at home in the English language, what it feels like to hear this disembodied imperial program take place in the same language that your childhood took place in. When we were first taught English at school, the teacher assigned us all new names, as if our given German names would be unpronounceable in English. For whatever reason, she invited us to leave our old selves behind when speaking English. I was called Sally.

That is the strangest thing with living and working in an imperial language. If you have not grown into it, you keep thinking that there is an exit somewhere, than you can withdraw from it anytime you want. You are tempted to just treat it like a show, some form of language drag. After a while of course, when your closest relationships have started to take place in English, the authenticity you meant to keep safe in the back of your head starts to appear just as fake as your new global ways to act and converse.

I enjoy speaking English, and when I write it, I usually read it out loud as I write. But the more I read and write on the Internet, the more important it becomes for me to reconnect this language to my body and to other bodies.

Computer voices, no matter how specific their profile, will always have more in common with illusions than with human beings. Like the voice of God, they are perfectly incompatible with anybody. They run parallel to all bodies in this world. Do these voices have agency? According to contemporary mythology, they are expected to leave us behind one day, after they have become more intelligent than us. But who cares whether or not these voices have agency, if this agency can only express itself in a final gesture of separation from humanity, like the speaking Operating System in the Spike Jonze Film HER.

No matter whether or not we assign agency to the simulated voices of the future, these voices are stored in bits and pieces of code in the digital library of Babylon and they are brought to you on all kinds of personal devices. They are there for you to copy and paste into any combination, until the end of things, or until they don't mean anything at all anymore in the least threatening, least dangerous, and least probable of all futures.