

How to Do Things with Words:
The Search for the Perfect Sound

Luigi Fassi



Untitled (The Motto of Today. Rise Again), 2011, 31'32"





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1

In *Women and Gender in Islam* (1993) Ahmed's arguments refer to the situation of Muslim women in Egypt. According to her, the veil enables upwardly mobile women to move from the familiar context of rural homes to the public realm of professions, thus offering transition and protection at the same time.

2

The Perfect Sound focuses on a close-up of a Birmingham-based speech therapist while he is engaged in performing phonetic exercises with a client in his studio. The client, whose nationality remains unclear, is an immigrant attending classes to eliminate his accent and so remove the 'foreignness' from his pronunciation of the English language, his hope being that he will thereby attain a degree of integration that will no longer reveal his origin and different cultural background.

During the lesson, every utterance is broken down to its constituent sounds, a practice intended to demonstrate to the student the exact way the muscles must be used in order to generate the sounds of the English language in the most natural and effective way. Language appears here primarily as a matter of phonetics, a struggle of the vocal cords, tongue and lips to produce the correct sounds. While the speech therapist provides instruction in the burden of acquiring a new language, the trainee undergoes a process of rebirth through his efforts to utter the words ever more fluently.

According to the Egyptian-American political theorist Leila Ahmed, the maintenance of personal cultural signifiers in the context of diaspora and migration can perform a progressive function precisely in relation to completing the process of integration. Ahmed argues the case of the veil worn by Muslim women, a cultural signifier that acquires the status of a *transitional object*, protecting the original identity within the new context and therefore stimulating a wider freedom of action in an otherwise dramatic shift from a familiar context to a public or foreign one dominated by different values.

Rather than representing solely a conservative attachment to one's own culture, wearing a veil provides a proactive mode of transition that enables women to securely enter the public realm.¹ So, conversely, the attempt to erase and suppress one's cultural traditions might have the contrary effect, exacerbating the sense of loneliness and displacement, thus causing uneasiness and fear, and inhibiting progressive integration into the new community. Applying Ahmed's terminology, Katarina Zdjelar's *The Perfect Sound* (2009)² can be seen as the scenario of a process of development in which pronunciation is, in both a real and symbolic sense, a transitional goal on the path to complete settlement into the new context of life as an immigrant. This cultural shift requires the learning of foreign English sounds as well as the attendant linguistic skills. Thus, *The Perfect Sound* does not necessarily depict the potential suppression of the roots of individual identity, but instead shows a transitional process that operates through the medium of language, enabling the immigrant to attain a new form of multilingual and diaspora-based identity.

At the same time, the work echoes in a subtle way the heritage of the United Kingdom as a colonial empire

3

Honig (1993: 4) defines remainder as “the ruptures and uncertainties that mark democratic politics”.

built in hegemonic terms, including the export of the English language. In this sense, English pronunciation in the U.K. still exposes not only the non-native speakers but also, more subtly, the traces of a class system identifiable as a result of the cultivation of very different pronunciation models within the same language. One can thus interpret the role of pronunciation in *The Perfect Sound* as a remainder, in the sense given to the term by American political theorist Bonnie Honig in her reflections on citizenship and agonistic democracy. The remainder is what cannot be extinguished in terms of opposition and difference within a democratic context. It is the ineradicable opposition generated by the politics of inclusion and consensus. Every form of politics of consensus and inclusion also generates exclusion, neglected margins doomed by their very diversity to remain present and active. In every democratic context, remainders are thus a test for democracy, which must come to terms with the impossibility of perfect closure and therefore avoid margins of dissent and contrast. In this light, the political space is always one of alternative perspectives, of resistance and struggles that can enrich democracy if they are recognised and credited as such instead of being repressed.³

In *The Perfect Sound* pronunciation appears as a kind of remainder that the student proactively thematises as an obstacle to be overcome in order to further develop his sense of identity and to cease being subjected to the status of an immigrant. Language serves as a remainder and is thus negotiated in an actively democratic process of increased rights and opportunities for social integration, as diversity is transformed into a parallel knowledge of potential richness and multicultural identity. In this sense, the work suggests the logic of the immigrant as a taker (to

See *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Honig, 2001: 99): “The practice of taking rights and privileges rather than waiting for them to be granted by a sovereign power is, I would argue, a quintessentially democratic practice”. For Honig (2001: 101), takers are outsiders, “People that cannot make claims within the existing frames of claim making. They make room for themselves by staging nonexistent rights and by way of such stagings new rights and visions come into being”.

Honig (2011: 135–136) further articulates the theoretical underpinnings of this understanding of the citizen as a taker, with the following words: “Engaging the state is a feature but not the essence of democratic politics. The choice between social movements and a more juridical politics focused on state and transnational institutions is a false one. To focus on institutions of governance without a foot in movement politics and critique is perforce to perform juridical politics differently than would otherwise be the case, without the balancing perspective of a life lived otherwise [...].

Juridical politics is always in need of the support and orientation of life lived in political movement. In addition to engaging state and transnational institutions directly, democratic actors must also, and not as a secondary matter, in some ways begin living now as if we had already succeeded in that first endeavor. [...]

Otherwise we get locked into the eternal agon of small (or even large) institutional victories and never do what we want those institutional changes for and what can and must happen even in advance of those victories – live otherwise or, better, move from mere life to more life.”

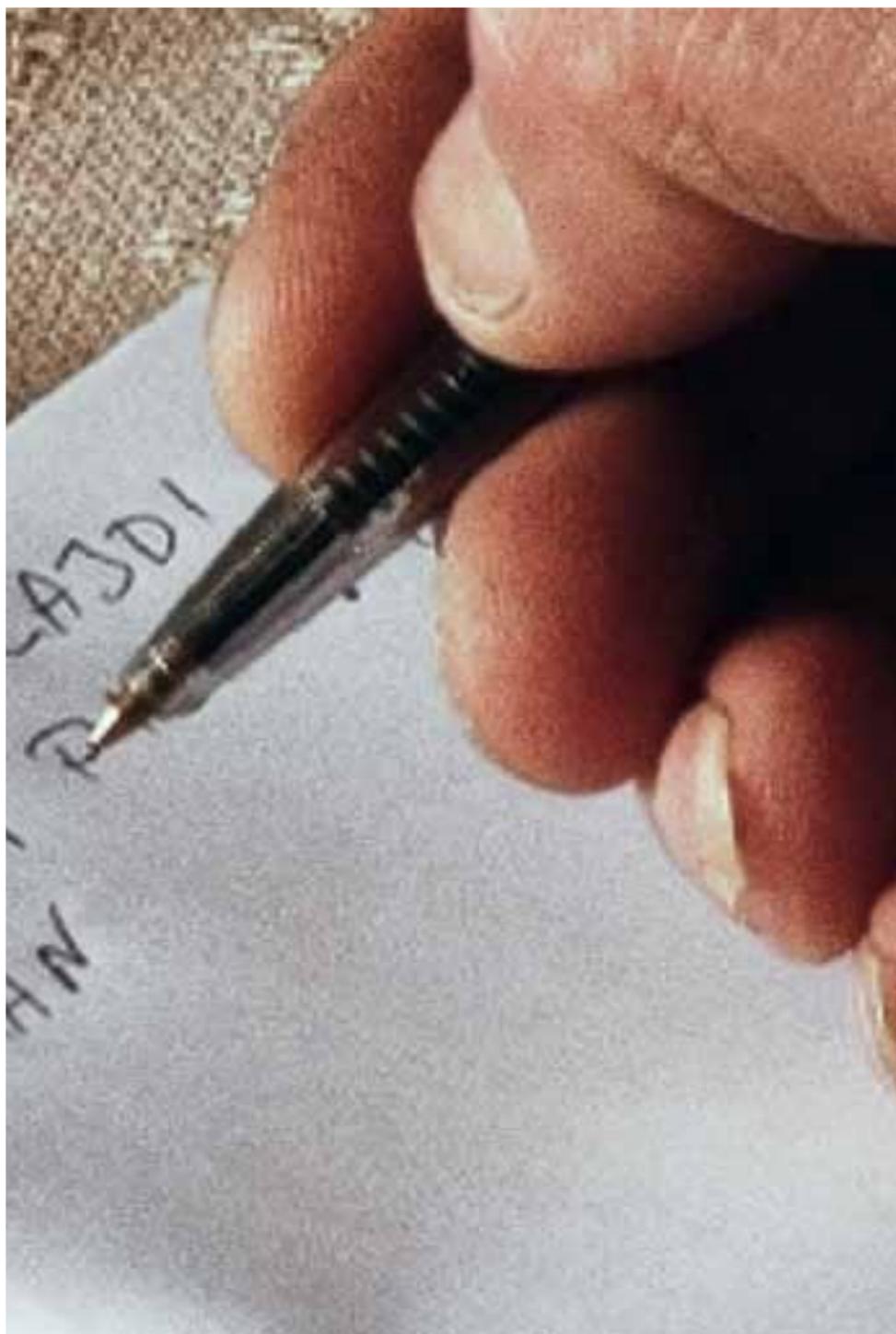
use another term employed by Honig), a citizen who seeks to anticipate in the present a future situation of rights and equality within the social context in which he or she is currently living (in this case through mastery of the language). The citizen as taker thus actively seizes his or her democratic rights before the fact, promoting in a direct way the transformation of both self and the inhabited social context. What is opened up as a result is a space of proactive imagination, able to intervene in the socio-political dynamics of the present time in order to bring about possible change.⁴

At the level of the history of ideas, the title *The Perfect Sound* seems to hint, with its utopian tone, at an obsession that has characterised all of Western culture from the Middle Ages to modernity, that of recovering a language endowed with an original perfection which has been identified for centuries with the language spoken by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The episode of the Tower of Babel recounted in Genesis tells of the loss of the linguistic unity that all human beings still had at that moment by virtue of speaking Adam's original language. In the tradition of the early interpreters of the Bible, the increase in the number of languages opened up a painful wound, occasioned by a divine curse. Human beings were thereafter doomed to no longer understand each other and to wander from country to country, struggling with the confusion of different languages and ever-changing dialects. As Umberto Eco argues in his book *The Search for the Perfect Language in European Culture* (1997), the world after the episode of the Tower of Babel is marked by what in Latin is termed *confusio linguarum*—the multiplication of languages—and the consequent attempt to retrieve the original language of Adam, which was initially identified with Hebrew. At the turn of the year

1000, a multiplicity of new languages emerged in Europe, deriving from the vulgarisation of Latin. The birth of Europe was thus once again a secondary consequence of the catastrophe of Babel, with a patchwork of new languages destined to become the languages of the modern European nation states.

It is precisely this echo of the Biblical and European drama of *confusio linguarum* that seems to be evoked by Zdjelar in another work, *There Is No Is* (2006), in which a Japanese girl is engaged in pronouncing the first and last name of the artist—Katarina Zdjelar—without being able to do it correctly, even if helped along by the artist herself. The “z” sound keeps coming out like an “is” as pronounced by the girl. As in *The Perfect Sound*, but in this case even more evidently, the sound of the Serbian language (Zdjelar is of Serbian descent) in the mouth of the Japanese girl becomes a foreign object, an unpronounceable block, a phonetic enigma doomed to remain unresolved until the end of the video. Every attempt to reach the correct phonetic pronunciation of the Serbian name is thus a failure, performed over and over again in front of the camera and subsequently the viewer, in the reiteration of a linguistic accident that appears to be without resolution. The broken pronunciation of the girl in trying to approximate the sounds of Serbian seems almost like a warning, recalling the wound opened in human history after the events of the Tower of Babel. Language is here again a material object, a sound emitted by the articulation of vocal cords, tongue and lips.

The very attempt to pronounce Zdjelar’s last name modifies the facial mimicry of the Japanese girl, driving her into completely unknown territory. But Zdjelar stages this linguistic drama—the insurmountable phonetic wall between her and the girl—with a touch of sympathetic

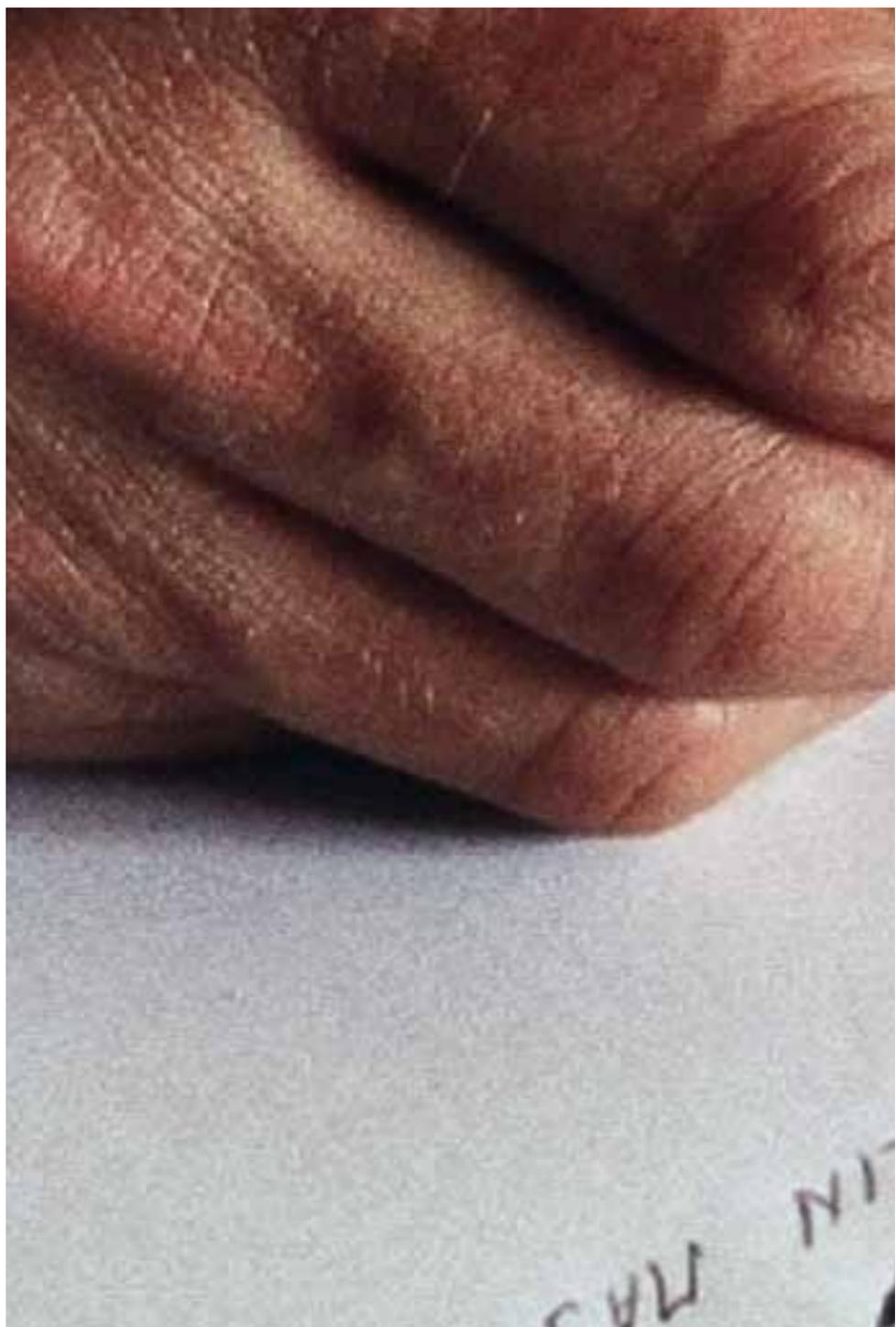


Shoum, 2009, 6'58"

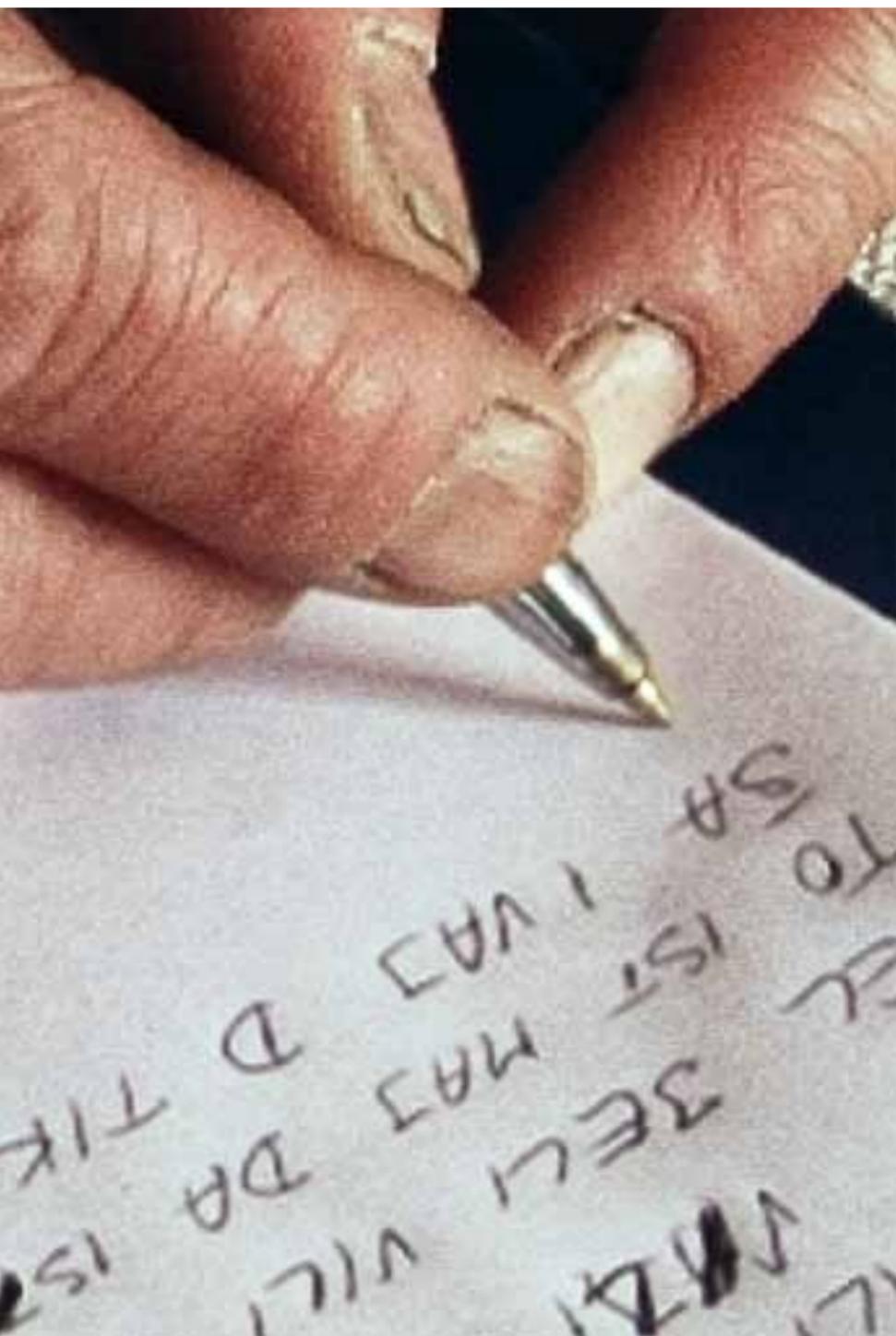




Shoum, 2009, 6'58"



Shoum, 2009, 6'58"



irony. The two linguistic worlds, the Japanese and the Serbian, are destined to remain separate, but this does not imply that the two protagonists are unable to communicate. On the contrary, it is precisely out of the inability to utter the sounds of the Serbian language that Zdjelar and the Japanese girl are able to eventually understand each other and develop a sympathetic relationship over the course of the failed attempts. There is thus a subtle exercise of hermeneutical comprehension at work, a desire to go beyond linguistic barriers that enables them to overcome the objective difficulties in communication. There is no perfect language to reach and be shared between these two young woman, and *confusio linguarum* persists. Yet it is precisely in this context that Zdjelar seems to suggest that a hermeneutical space of emotionality can be the perfect mediator to enable communication to take place.

The connection continuously explored by Zdjelar concerning the relationship between language and migration, residency and diaspora determines an uninterrupted state of negotiation and instability in her work. The artist is focused on a type of political barrier, a border between different worlds, destined never to be entirely overcome. It is in this context that language also reveals its role as the ambiguous keeper of collective memory.

In *A Girl, the Sun and an Airplane* (2007) Zdjelar asked several citizens of the Albanian capital, Tirana, to speak informally in Russian in a recording studio. The artist's objective was to bring out, in terms of linguistic memory, what remained from the times of the Communist dictatorship under Enver Hoxha, when Russian was the language of cultural and political reference in Albania. Hence, the work is an attempt to record the depths

of the collective unconscious, which is investigated by giving space to individual linguistic memory related to a specific period of the recent past. Taken as a basic instrument of communicative mediation, language is analysed in this work by Zdjelar as a material requirement, an ideological vehicle able to establish and transmit a specific certainty of common sense and a pre-determined conception of the world. The older citizens remembered a large variety of words and sentences, even if these were often used inarticulately and incoherently, while younger participants struggled in vain to find access to a form of linguistic and cultural memory which on the one hand still appears obscurely present, but on the other seems today to be inaccessible through its specific codes. The artist shows how, for contemporary Albanians, Russian can often be merely a linguistic fossil, a forgotten remnant, close to the degree zero of complete illiteracy.

In this context it is possible to bring Zdjelar's work close to the intuitions informing the theoretical research on language begun in the 1950s by John L. Austin which would cause a breakthrough in contemporary philosophy and influence both linguistics and the theory of law. In a series of lectures held at Harvard in 1955 and collected in a book in 1962 under the title *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin's arguments move on from the assumption that language is characterised in essence by the presence of performative utterances that do not only describe or state our actions, but rather perform an essential action themselves. What Austin first posited in a coherent and direct way is a new and interpretive paradigm in the linguistic realm, a shift whereby language has to be rethought and no longer seen as a tool of representation and description but as one of the performance of actions. Austin speaks of performative

utterance to indicate a linguistic utterance that directly performs an action rather than just stating something. Austin's analyses further elaborate on this initial model and come to the conclusion that it is impossible to distinguish between the declarative and the performative, between description and action, and that by saying something we always also do something and therefore make something happen.

In this sense, in *A Girl, the Sun and an Airplane Airplane* language and geopolitics are tightly intertwined, and the remnants of Russian appear as speech-acts taken irreparably out of context, incapable any longer of performing the linguistic operative value that was at work under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, when language was meant to be an ideological bridge to sanction brotherhood between Russia and Albania. Utterances become almost aphonic, and far removed from any perfect sound in their hesitant and fragmentary pronunciation—the Russian words articulated by the unknown protagonists of the video are decayed speech-acts, devoid of any sense and detached from their original purpose of embodying the grand hegemonic project of Soviet Communism. The reminiscences of Russian no longer mark identity, but rather the collapse and implosion of an entire geopolitical apparatus, that of real socialism in Eastern Europe. If, according to Austin, you can do things with words, *A Girl, the Sun and an Airplane Airplane* shows from the nonsense of the title how the Russian words voiced by the anonymous speakers are downgraded from proper *speech-acts* to mere ghosts, the empty simulacra of a past reduced to a faded memory.

Zdjelar sees language as a cultural tool subject to ruptures, upheavals and unreadability. Similarly, many of the protagonists of her work are citizens of nation states



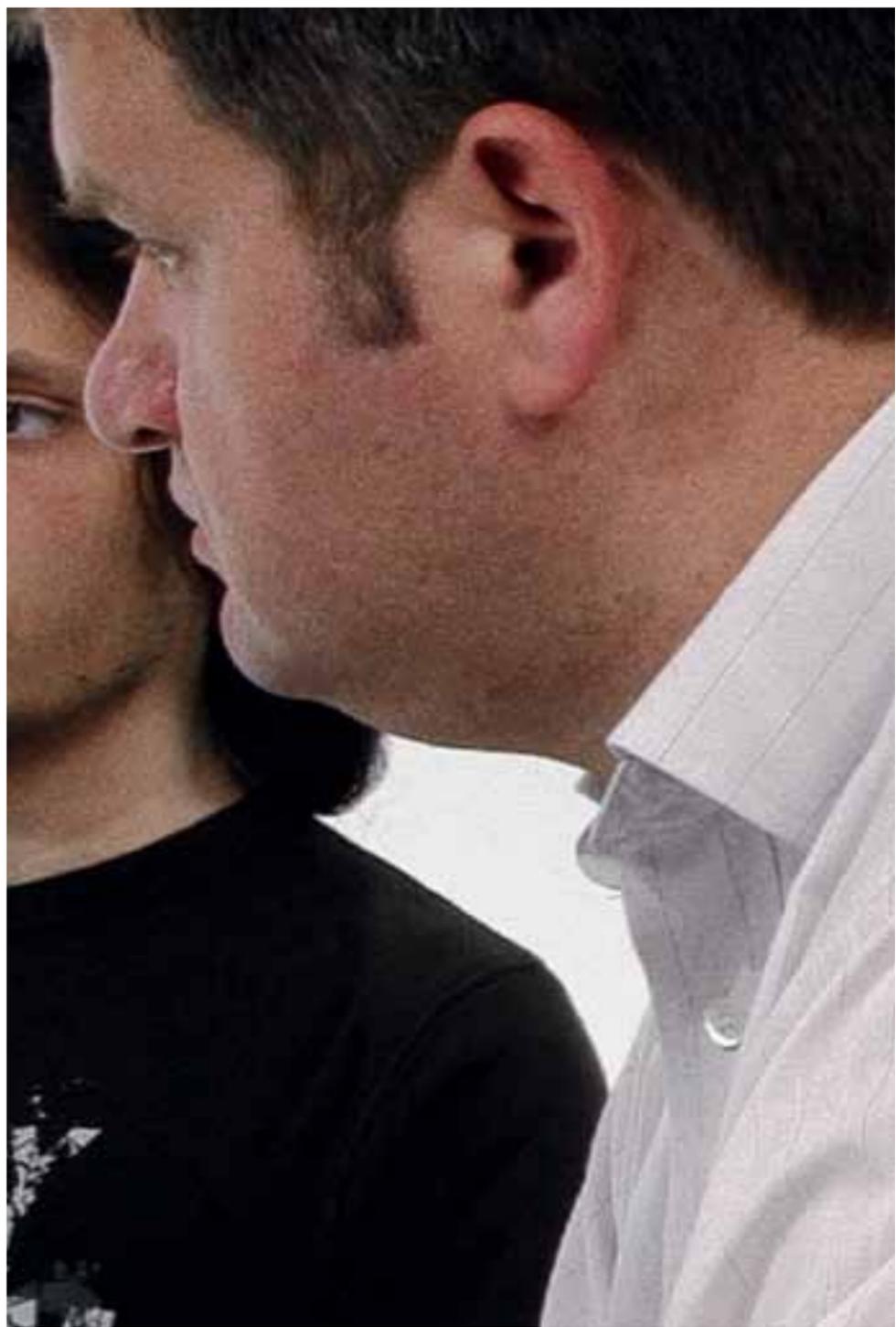
Act I, Act II, 2010, 24'55", 5'





Act I, Act II, 2010, 24'55", 5'





Act I, Act II, 2010, 24'55", 5'



born in countries affected by postcolonial issues and recent historical ruptures; they seem to testify to a potential collective portrait of the painful political fragmentation of a large part of contemporary nation states which, for instance, in a few years of hyper-acceleration moved from socialism to the scenario of globalisation. In this context the sounds of Dutch and English in particular embody for Zdjelar the image of a new world, behind which one can still discern the ghosts of the enormous and diverse political turmoil that has prompted many citizens to migrate to Western European countries over the course of the last twenty years.

Zdjelar returns to the theme of language as a territory of cultural borders in *Too old, too tired and too fucking blind* (2012), which features a Serbian man making an audition recording for a part as a movie actor. In this piece, language once again provides the artist with a vehicle for exploring certain issues, including the field of translation, a territory with great potential but at the same time an epicentre of instability and uncertainty. The audition scene is the famous Al Pacino courtroom monologue from the Hollywood movie *Scout of a Woman*. During the Serb's performance in a Dutch version of the role of the blind Lieutenant Slade, he struggles with the language in order to embody the character.

His determination to enact the postures and the figure of Slade in keeping with the model of Al Pacino's performance is constantly hampered by his need to repeat single sentences and words uttered imperfectly or partly forgotten. The Serb's acting remains clumsy and unresolved, stuck in a space of approximation. The piece thus reveals the contrast between the serious engagement of the actor and the insurmountable obstacle of language.

Everything Is Gonna Be (2008) provides further consolidation of the artist's philosophical analysis of the relationship between language as a basic means of communication and as the cultural manifestation of an uncertain collective identity. This video work was made in Norway and involved a group of middle-aged people who were brought up in the comfort of the Norwegian welfare system, which was set up in the 1960s and which kept pace with the country's subsequent economic and industrial development. The group consisted of an amateur choir made up of a group of friends who, in response to the artist's request, performed the famous song "Revolution" by The Beatles as a dialogue in two parts, focusing on the events of 1968 and the unresolved relationship between revolution and violence, between the desire for social change and political extremism.

Zdjelar focuses here on the expressive interpretation of the participants by underlining the singularity of their faces and emotions, as well as difficulties that emerged during the vocal performance. Within the artist's work, the fluent but imperfect use of the English language by the singers becomes a symbolic representation of the participants' inadequacy in relation to the song's actual content. It provides what almost amounts to a demonstration of the uneasiness and confusion generated by the distance between the singers' own youthful ambitions and the reality of their lives. The work oscillates between form and content, between the actual musical performance and the relevance of its meaning for the Norwegian singers. *Everything Is Gonna Be* simultaneously raises numerous questions about the relationship between social democracy and civil commitment, challenging perceived notions of political activism and social engagement and combining them into

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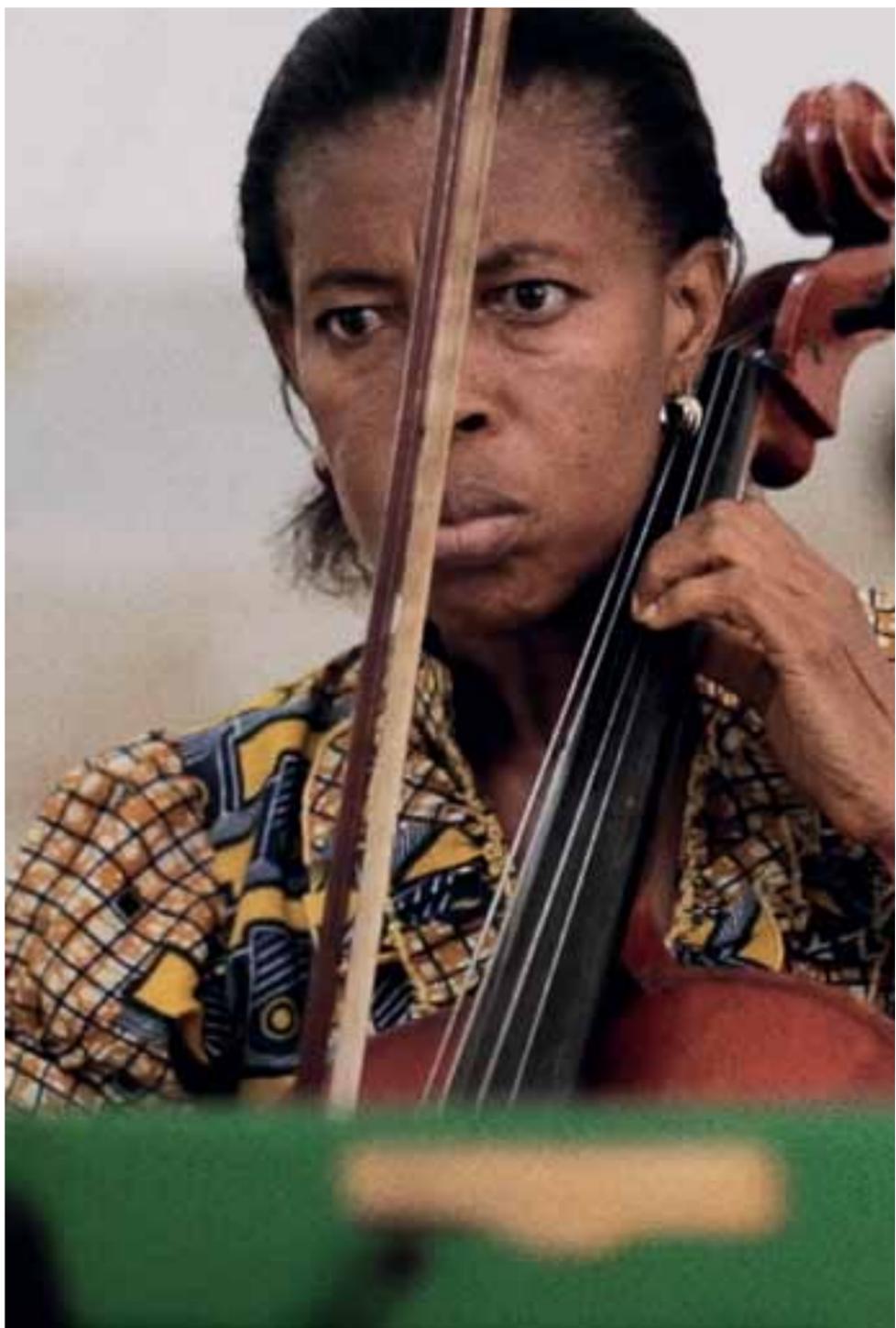
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one dense subject matter. As a consequence, *Everything Is Gonna Be* kindles complex reflection on the political idea of contemporary Europe and the potential of its civic and cultural role within the contemporary world. Testifying to the relations between historical memory and individual conscience through language, the artist once again moves towards a space of essential uneasiness and instability. In doing so, she emphasises what has become displaced and abandoned between the past and the present, between language as a technical mode of communication and its symbolic counterpart as the cultural sedimentation of identity. To paraphrase Austin once again, doing things with words remains a clear warning in the work of the artist, an invitation to embark on responsible reflection on the meaning of language and the resultant consciousness of its infinite and unexplored possibilities for generating change and social progress.



My lifetime (Malaika), 2012, 5'37"





My lifetime (Malaika), 2012, 5'37"





My lifetime (Malaika), 2012, 5'37"





My lifetime (Malaika), 2012, 5'37"

