



Vital Tones

Vital Tones is an echo of four creative works, each seeking to resound a live art performance work to a new audience, in different space, and with another medium. These creative works are a small portion of a long-term and open-ended effort to register the vitality of organic and synthetic materials. Each of the durational and site-responsive performances were scored so as to meet, greet and when appropriate, become familiar, even intimate, with a material in its immediate environment. At the core of this project is the desire to upset age-old assumptions about the inertness of materials and their supposed muteness in everyday life. I have been steadfast in believing that if the agency of non-human materials could be made more widely evident, it is more likely that humans could cast aside anthropocentric values, patriarchy, and binaries and resist and complicate them with love, respect and tolerance towards people and things that are different to themselves.

My early efforts were primarily large and laborious body movements, gestures prodding materials while looking for signs of life in perceivable movement. I came to understand that the life-force is felt less with the eyes and more with the ear that detects a vibration stimulating a spatial field between a material, me and a huge host of other contingent material bodies. I also learned first-hand that it is not just the ear that hears, nor the mouth that speaks. Such understanding posits my human body- my aging, Welsh-Croatian-Swiss-American-New Zealand, female, educated, fragile, fierce, curious, gentle, hungry and fleshy assemblage- to be entangled in a spatio-temporal encounter fraught and zealous with other generative (creative) bodies.

In each successive live art performance, I have attempted to shed language spoken and written as strictly meaning-making expressive exercises. During this project, voice, sound and noise have become the gestures that help me flush out the liveness of things one vibration searching for another, and another, and so on. I believe that this overarching project depends on reclaiming, or better, becoming wildness - unruly, relying less methodically on my habitual cognitive-processes to

guide or frame the practice, to embrace the undisciplined, and to some degree, unknowing.

Recent works have brought me to tears brimming with trepid emotions of what could or might happen when meeting a material, a state that must acknowledge all the history and experience I bring to that encounter, including personal life events. In my quest to affirm life in other materials, I have found myself confronting legal, political, cultural and temporal states of matter, most of them coincidentally, eliciting grief, anxiety, and mourning for things on the verge of being lost to seeming death.

Vital Tones is a performance where I hope to make some semblance of sense of the four works and these concerns for you, my audience, without exhausting them by explanation. To date, all of the works in this project have been site-situated and responsive to the local environs in substantial ways. On the occasion of the Voice and the Unknown Symposium I will be performing these works, not again, but in a kind of transferable likeness in immediate response to its surfaces, volume, acoustics, timbre, light and warmth on the day. From my home in New Zealand I know I have only scraped the surface of what the Red Room is, has been and affords via architectural plans, images and internet searches. As will become clear, this symposium is one of my first forays into a community of sound and voice experts, a space where I will be listening more than sounding.

Julieanna Preston
Voice and the Unknown Symposium
16 January 2019

WEEP

Originally known as *oro awa waha wai*, *Aue* was presented in 2015 as part of a group project focussed on the Waiwhakaiho River's significance to the region. The Waiwhakaiho River is one of many flowing from Mount Taranaki, a relatively young, active yet quiescent volcano that, according to Māori mythology, is shedding tears for a lost love when the mountain is concealed by clouds and displaying himself to her during brilliant sunsets.²

My journey to meet the Waiwhakaiho River began from afar several months prior to the performance. Proposing to float in its current as a human hydrometer, I sought to vocalise its watery voice as a nearly continuous lyrical tone sodden with the cultural history of the land. My embodied research explored the art of circular breathing³, learning vocal toning and reading aloud Tennyson's classic poem, "The Brook"⁴, with its melancholic rhythm of eddies and ripples enabled by alliteration, onomatopoeia, and assonance.⁵ Practicing daily in all kinds of weather to sense the fluctuation of salinity at a river's mouth, I came to understand the craft of elocution where subtle changes in the space of my mouth and throat passage were a credit to the tongue's refined muscularity.

Arriving at the mouth of the Waiwhakaiho River, I found a sign warning that the river was toxic to humans and animals. Do not enter. Danger. The river's mouth was amuck from the foul of untreated dairy farm effluent, blood and guts from freezer works, cheese whey, raw sewage, flood waters and surface run-off from adjacent urban development.⁶ It was horrific to find the river sick with invisible bacteria instead of running red from the sacred kokowhai/red ochre, a pigment made of, according to metaphoric cosmological lore, the blood of the sky father, Tangi and the mother earth, Rangi marking their pain/suffering/sacrifice as parents.⁷

For Māori, environmental health and human well-being are inextricably linked ethically and practically.⁸ It is a "generative relation... between humans and matter"⁹ - an interrelationship based on "Mauri provides life and energy to all living things, and is the binding force that links the

physical to the spiritual worlds (e.g. wairua)."¹⁰ Mauri makes movement, breath, and existence possible; the antidote to ill-health is first sought in rituals of conservation, prayer, and ceremonies.¹¹ At a Māori tangi/funeral, the deceased's loss of mauri is noted in weeping, songs, chants, speeches and calls to remind the community of the importance of life, family and relationships¹² and, at a deeper level, the tragedy of lost land and cultural identity.¹³

Aue is my guttural lament to the river's polluted mouth. Even as a pakeha /New Zealander of European descent, I can rehearse a traditional greeting: "E tangi ana kit e whenua/ I weep for the land."¹⁴ *Aue* shapes a water-land-body relationship concentrated on the throat as an instrument for grieving over the fact that the water is not fit for entering, let alone consumption. Bodily fluids such as water, urine, phlegm, mucus, saliva, semen and tears running, dripping, leaking, and spewing from a river, a mouth, a throat, a tuna (eel), and penis co-exist as a critical, though necessarily ambiguous, visual moving image. The aural score builds on Te Reo Māori as a vitalist language based on metaphors that tell of life forces, metaphysics and cosmic energy.¹⁵ The words the performance repeats, stretches and sometimes mis-speaks are loosely translated to English as oro (to resound, echo), awa (river, stream, creek), waha (mouth, entrance, gate, voice), wai (traditional song, water, liquid) and aue (to cry, howl, groan, bawl, wail).¹⁶ At times, meaning is lost in translation through extended sounding, blending and admittedly, poor pronunciation. The words drown in an affective resonance. The liquidity of the voice, its pitch, its stuttering and gurgling redirects the encounter to a pre-emptive state of mourning for something at the brink of being lost.

WAIL

The video [wwwww](#)¹⁷ remembers my 2017 performance *windwoundweatherwirewovenwoman* at Matui Island, New Zealand.¹⁸ A mountain peak submerged in the middle of Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington Harbour, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Matiu/Somes Island, is a place of historical, cultural and environmental significance. The defensive Māori pa/village, gun embankments, a light house, a WWII degaussing station, an animal and human quarantine station, and bio-secured Department of Conservation scientific and natural reserve are highly valued.¹⁹ It is here that I became an embodied sounding instrument charged by the wind to read a fence as an aural weather forecast.

As a symbol of domestication, the wire metal fence confines and protects what is in and out. I investigated how metal fencing was made and repaired.²⁰ I tied metal knots to memorise the logic and pace of looping. One-syllable words beginning with 'w' emerged while ruminating on 'wound' and 'wire'. In one site visit, blowing and sucking breath through the space of the metal knots revealed the fence's relation to a written text or musical score.

The performance inhabited multiple spatio-temporal interiors: the ferry ploughing through the flat-watered harbour, the biosecurity hut, the mihi whakatau/welcome, the feast in the cottage, the wind turbine's whine, the bird twitter, the low moist clouds, the salt-laden southerly breeze and social media, local and global news. Climatic data gathered from New Zealand's Taihoro Nukurangi/National Institute of Water and Air's archive told of dominant weather patterns nourishing as well as plaguing the island.²¹

I recall moments when conventional notions of islandness posed an island as an isolated, solitary and vulnerable object.²² My experience was quite different; being on the island showed me that it was a fluid space where there was no outside, just all inside, all touching, all connected, all contingent and relational to everything around it. Later I was to hear how

the moans, groans, shrills, and whispers were heard all over the small island as comforting, haunting, disruptive and, above all, a siren recalling, recording and warning. It was my experience that voice was the wind of one's inner self; wind was the voice of an outer world vast in extension, a cosmos. In breath, the inner and outer worlds comingled, and yet, they were always the same air.

During the performance, I lost track of time but I never lost my breath. My body was less a mechanical instrument sounding the wind as it was a diaphragmatic vessel drawing and heaving lyrically while the wind squeezed through the pores of my skin into my blood stream. Just as Steven Connor reflects on the air as part of human self-figuring (a relation he calls vital pathos or suffering), he too recognises that "[a]ir is the body of sound, in the sense that it is the occasion, medium or theatre of sound. But sound is equally the body of air- air gathered into form, given itinerary, intensity and intent."²³ The thought that my breath is the breath of another person or thing in some other time and space will forever captivate me.

As if living out Ruskin's prophesy of a climatic/cultural storm on the horizon,²⁴ the words of *wwwwww* went rogue to ward off icebergs from the south, capitalism from the north, exports from the west, and earthquakes from the east. The video is akin to a siren signalling an social, economic or climatic emergency such as Walter Benjamin writes about an angel of history staring, mouth open, wings spread: "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward."²⁵ The voice of *wwwwww* was the female angel/siren - sad, alarming, grieving, and, when high-pitched and soft, hopeful.

HUM

In *RPM Hums*,²⁶⁺²⁷ groups of people were led to a car park under Te Papa/ National Museum of New Zealand to join in an encounter with the ceiling-mounted air motors, vents and ducts that feed or exhaust the interior space of the museum above. To test the limits of vitality in non-organic matter, I focused on air condensing units due to their prevalence in urban environments, the noise pollution they produce, and the reliance contemporary architectural interiors have on them to be habitable. To generate air or water flow, electric motors induce kinetic movement, which over time, causes brush misalignment, magnet in-balance, and the expansion/contraction of copper wire to generate an audible hum. This 'becoming out of round' is where the phenomenal world does not adhere to Plato's geometrical principles. To reduce these sounds, electrical engineers advise to dampen the noise using absorbent materials, acoustic trap systems, or an "anti-noise" approach that broadcasts a cancelling wave form.²⁸ Each relentless repetition recalls the former one, and yet, it is a new voice in a slightly different cadence, a process that ensues until the power is exhausted. These noises, for me, are a sign of the mechanical unit's own agency. In *RPM hums*, I absorbed, sounded, repeated, emulated and tuned to their vibrations to achieve a state of empathy with the copper and its motor. To hum with them was to be an affirming wave form and humming machine.

The performance achieved a heightened intensity when audience members also toned with me to achieve, a state Steven Connor coins as 'chorality', which does not "require language, and where it does not, it may seem to be more than usually choreographic, or impregnated with space and gesture."²⁹ The performance was entirely refrain, a rhythm-inducing chorus practicing the variable repetitions at the beginning or ending of written figures of speech known as anaphora and epistrophe.³⁰ Like a motor that flips according to alternating currents, *RPM Hums* enunciated a refrain of the now, an extensity of the duration of now, a concept developed by sound philosopher Salome Voeglein.³¹ This is akin to what artist Ella Finer describes as "the way sound keeps happening, continuing through times, spaces and the mediums of its transmission,

while continually composing and recomposing its sonic properties to be heard at distinct distances and locations."³²

When realizing that the museum archives were on the floor directly above, I shuddered to think that we, as an open-mouthed chorus, were ingesting air-borne particles shed from the ancient works of Māori carving and weaving, biological specimens, and contemporary New Zealand artworks. We were infused with their matter, and suddenly, the urge to amplify the toning increased as I imagined our pluralised vocality rousing those national treasures out of a deep slumber, a near-dead still state. Ours was not a voice but a collective of oral cavities not unlike the mouth in artist Christof Migone's work as "the progenitor of the voice...prior to the voice...prior to narrative...before the scene is cast...before the voice ever comes out."³³

Recalling *RPM Hums, Erratic Refrains* redacted the view of me and the other human bodies pressing mouths and ears to vents and gyrating our bodies in rhythm to the motors. Our elocutions resonated liberally within the cavernous carpark, approaching Connor's description of a "sublimated form of the choric voice that lifts humans up into the angelic condition."³⁴ In a melodious, subtle, joyful and yet at times, morose, hum our non-visual presence is still embodied: "...there can be no voice that does not imply and require the possibility of somebody and more particularly some body, to utter it. There can be unassigned voices, but no unassigned ones. There are many different kinds of voice-body and more voice-bodies than one in any voice, or in any body. In the choralised voice, this many-in-one becomes a kind of one-from-many."³⁵ On reflection, this was a fantasy that an angelic chorus of individual voices could collectively traverse nasal and duct passages with the aid of copper wire to waken not-so-dead artifacts.

GASP

In May 2018 Andy Lock and I spent four days in a respiratory ward with two ventilators.³⁶ Our collaboration was born out of a mutual interest in the interval as the space of a gap, pause, stillness or transition. Andy's research at the time was ruminating on framing absence in photographs of uninhabited interiors while my research was experimenting with the suspension between an inhale and an exhale while speaking or toning. The ventilators afforded us to play with those concerns in a performative breath practice. Written from my perspective, this text locates the qualities in the work associated with breath that make it simultaneously frightening and soothing. It is not surprising that Beckett's controversial play "Breath" is one of my touch stones.³⁷

The hospital room consisted of hard and cool material surfaces that lent to acoustic performance. With the door closed, the traumas of everyday hospital care went on without our knowledge, but in that room, two pairs of breathing bodies struggled for their life in syncopation together, multiple times. One of the works we created is named *Tryst*. Normally, the word *tryst* denotes two human lovers in a rendezvous. In this work, two life-support instruments geared to supplement or substitute an ailing body's respiration are entwined in an air-sharing relationship. We were their attendants rather than their subjects. Our machines were positive airway pressure units designed for non-invasive treatment. They appeared archaic with coloured acrylic casings, manual dials, buttons, levers and screw adjustments that manipulate the initial breath (trigger), the flow, pace and pressure of air flow (cycle) and the maximum circuit pressure (limit).³⁸ Ventilators also have a telling feature called mechanical dead space- the volume of gas breathed again by the device,³⁹ the first sign of an interval suggesting that the ventilator's have a life of their own.

Breath is the physical basis of a live organism's sensory apparatus; it serves as a communicative agent as it mediates and is mediated by an individual body and the environment in time.⁴⁰ Beckett scholar Sozita Goudouna notes how breath "operates in-between realities (art and body/biology/life/non-art), in-between the boundaries of artistic media

(theatre and visual arts/installation art), the verbal and the visual, the audible and the scenic (sound as stage presence), in-between visibility and invisibility (light and darkness), in-between presence and absence/emptiness, embodiment and ambiguity of corporeal experience, in-between life and death (movement and stasis) and in-between an inhalation and an exhalation (silence and sound)."⁴¹ In the process of orchestrating this *tryst*, we were astonished to find that our human bodies were slowly assuming the breath pace of the mechanical bodies. Our heart rate and breath volume were in a following mode, an alarm considering how dependent we had become and how close the machines came to the brink of non-breath. These technical apparatuses were, as Sloterdijk professes, "an expansion of the sensorium, a set of elaborate and fascinating ways to make explicit the fragile envelopes inside which tiny bubbles of life sustain their existence."⁴²

In *Tryst*, I recognise similar qualities that Marcin Tereszewski attributes to "Breath" and Beckett's theory of the aesthetics of failure whereby a gradual reduction and paring back of language renders expression impossible, and more so, the inexpressible strives for a kind of silence that maintains a relation of alterity.⁴³ What I felt as being almost without breath, was in fact an amplification, a spatial expansion, a manifestation of being breathless, living, however momentarily, in the interval. I believe that *Tryst* brings its audience to that same feeling via sound, different to Beckett's emphasis on the visual where the "...feeling is something much less direct than this face to face between a sentient being and some object to be felt. Feeling is more roundabout; it's the slow realization that something is missing. It resides, in a way, behind you, behind your back, or maybe even outside of you in an untouchable greenish cloud—something you don't exactly understand..."⁴⁴ Those gasping sounds could be a call for rescue; they may also be a holding space, a hiatal amplitude, disrupting the normative rhythm and calling attention to what is evading representation or failing to be explicit. Not breathless as in out of breath, but full of breath, breath-less because the gasp is exhilarating.

NOTES

¹Julieanna Preston, *Aue* (2015, 4'58"), <https://vimeo.com/239165795>.

²"Maori Legend of Mounts Ruapehu and Taranaki (Egmont)," *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand. Government of New Zealand*, accessed 2014-01-11, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/1966/ruapehu-mount/page-3>.

³Joseph D'Agostina, 2016. "Why is circular breathing used in singing?" accessed 2019-01-12, <https://www.quora.com/Why-is-circular-breathing-used-when-singing>.

⁴Alfred Lord Tennyson (n.d.) "The Brook," accessed 2019-01-12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkYB3kMLaLA>.

⁵"The Sound of Language: Alliteration, Assonance, and Onomatopoeia," accessed 2019-01-12,

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/grammar/usage-and-style/style/v/alliteration-asonance-and-onomatopoeia>.

⁶Sue Dowd, 2014. "Taranaki Rivers are clearly better." *Stuff*, accessed 2019-01-12, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/farming/agribusiness/9822996/Taranaki-rivers-are-clearly-better>.

⁷Kura Puke, 2014. "Kokowai," Sharing the Waiwhakaiho, accessed 2019-01-12, <http://waiwhakaiho.intercreate.org/?p=60>

⁸Garth R. Harmsworth (Te Arawa, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Raukawa) and Shaun Awatere (Ngāti Porou). "Indigenous Māori Knowledge and Perspectives of Ecosystems," in *Ecosystems Services in New Zealand- Conditions and Trends*, ed. J. R. Dymond (Lincoln University, New Zealand: Maanaki Whenua Press, 2013), 274.

⁹Harmsworth and Awatere, 274-276.

¹⁰Anne Salmond, *Between Worlds: Early Exchanges between Māori and Europeans, 1773-1815* (New Zealand: Penguin Books, 1997), 176.

¹¹Harmsworth and Awatere, 276.

¹²Rawinia Higgins, "Tangihanga – death customs," *The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accessed 2019-01-12, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/tangihanga-death-customs/>.

¹³Manuka Henare, "Tapu, Mana, Mauri, Hau, Wairua: A Māori Philosophy of Vitalism and Cosmos," in *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*, ed. John A. Grim (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 205.

¹⁴*Maori Dictionary*, accessed 2019-01-12, <https://maoridictionary.co.nz>.

¹⁵Henare, 200.

¹⁶Henare, 199.

¹⁷Julieanna Preston and Joshua Lewis, *wwwwww* (2017, 9'00") published as part of "four castings". In *Writing & Performance: Performance Research Journal* 23:1, 2018, 21-24. <https://vimeo.com/244252200>.

¹⁸Julieanna Preston, *windwoundweatherwirewovenwoman* (2017) Matiu Island, Wellington, NZ at Performing, Writing: A symposium in four turns, March 2017, www.performingwriting.com.

¹⁹"Department of Conservation/Te Papa Atawai (2009) Matiu/Somes Island Environmental Education Resource, Wellington, New Zealand," accessed 2019-01-11, <https://www.pnbnst.maori.nz/assets/PDFs/Matiu-Island-Educational-Resource-DOC-booklet.pdf>.

²⁰"How it's Made Metal Fence," accessed 2019-01-11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GQfp8RV31A>

²¹"New Zealand's Taihoro Nukurangi/National Institute of Water and Air," accessed 2019-01-11, <https://www.niwa.co.nz/>.

²²For example, see Phillip Vannini and Jonathan Taggart, "Doing Islandness: a non-representational approach to an island's sense of place" in *Islanding Cultural Geographies: Cultural Geographies* 20:2, 2013, 225-242.

²³Steven Connor, 2007, accessed 2019-01-12, <http://stevenconnor.com/pathos.html>.

²⁴John Ruskin, "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century: Two lectures delivered at the London Institution February 4th and 11th, 1884," Project Gutenberg, accessed 2017-12-01, www.gutenberg.org/files/20204/20204-h/20204-h.htm.

²⁵Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," In *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 257-258.

²⁶Julieanna Preston and Joshua Lewis, 2018, *RPM hums* [performance] at Performance Arcade, Wellington, New Zealand. *Erratic Refrains* (2018, 17'20") is a video we created in the process of reflecting on RPM Hums, and one we used as a part of a performance of the same name at Performing Ecologies: Performance of the Real, Allan Hall Theatre, Dunedin, New Zealand. <https://vimeo.com/309595402>

²⁷RPM is a standard abbreviation for revolutions per minute.

²⁸For example, see Marshall Brain, "How Electric Motors Work," accessed 2019-01-12, <https://electronics.howstuffworks.com/motor.htm>

²⁹Steven Connor, "Choralities Voices and Noises," Audiovisualities Lab of the Franklin Humanities Institute, Duke University, 27th March 2015, accessed 2019-01-12, <http://stevenconnor.com/choralities.html>

³⁰For examples, see LitChart, accessed 2019-01-12, <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/epistrophe>.

³¹Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: London: Continuum, 2011), 188.6

³²Ella Finer, "Far stretch- listening to sound happening" In *The Creative Critic: Writing as/about Practice*, ed. Katja Hilevaara and Emily Orley (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 138.

³³Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York and London: Continuum, 2006), 134.

³⁴Connor, Choralities.

³⁵Connor, Choralities.

³⁶Samuel Beckett, "Breath" in *Breath and Other Shorts*, London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 11.

³⁷Julieanna Preston and Andy Lock, *Tryst* (2018, 14'30"), Haukeland University Hospital, Bergen, Norway, <https://vimeo.com/309594894>.

³⁸"Mechanical Ventilation: Physiologic effects of mechanical ventilation," *Critical Care Practitioner*, accessed 2019-01-13, <http://www.jonathandownham.com/mechanical-ventilation-physiologic-effects-mechanical-ventilation/>.

³⁹West, John B. West, *Respiratory Physiology: The Essentials* (9th ed.) (Philadelphia: Wolters Kluwer Health/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2011).

⁴⁰Sozita Goudouna, *Beckett's Breath: Anti-Theatricality and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 15.

⁴¹Goudouna, 11.

⁴²Bruno Latour quoting Peter Sloterdijk, *Air*, 107, accessed 2019-01-13, <http://unit2theory.pbworks.com/f/Bruno%20Latour-Air.pdf>.

⁴³Marcin Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure: Inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 55 and 86.

⁴⁴Latour, 105.