Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise
Edited by Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan and Paul Hegarty
London/New York: Continuum, 2012

# 3

# Floating the social
## An electronic art of noise
### *Brian Massumi*

## Three's a crowd

'**A** message for you is floating in the sky of Yamaguchi.' On 1 November 2003, thousands of people around the world started receiving this alert by cell phone or email. The messages waited and flashed, like the seductive signals used by fireflies to find mates for coupling. At first sight, the light signals that Rafael Lozano-Hemmers' *Amodal Suspension. Relational Architecture No. 8* sends pulsing into the sky are as illegible as the insect variety, although they are many orders of magnitude more visible. Standing in for the insect's abdomen is an array of the world's most powerful robotic searchlights.

In *Amodal Suspension* people send short text messages to each other using a cell phone or web browser. But rather than being sent directly to their intended recipients the messages are encoded as unique sequences of flashes and 'deposited' in the sky, awaiting collection. A searchlight designated by the sender beams the message and rotates. Then a random second searchlight picks up the code, and the two beams intersect, flashing in unison. No sooner do they connect, however, than the first beam extinguishes. A third random searchlight then takes up the message, intersecting with the second. The messages are relayed in this fashion from one pair of searchlights to another, in a dance of lights. This touch-and-go mating of asexual rays is the only coupling that effectively takes place.

A number of processes have been designed into the installation to come between the sender and the receiver of the message. The bipolar transmission usually considered to lie at the heart of human communication is complicated to such a degree that one is forced to say either that what is being made visible here is not human communication (or not only that), or that human communication is not definable by the dual subjective structure – between sender and receiver – that is almost universally assumed to characterize it.

The first complication is that the message appears in an entirely different mode than the code that enables it. It is present in a purely visible way. It is seen before it can be read, and it cannot be read as it is seen. This is because the flashing in the sky is a translation of the digital input into an analogue signal that preserves only selected characteristics of the digitally encoded linguistic meaning. Each letter in the message corresponds to a change in the intensity of the beam. Letter by letter, different light intensities daisy-chain without interruption, in a continuity of variation. There is a moment of near darkness between words, but this interval is in no way comparable to the off-state of the digital code. It is more a punctuation between the conti-nuities of variation on either side than merely one half of the on-off binary. The off-state of the interval makes a threesome: the two series of intensities, with the interval between.

This 'thirdness' (to speak like founding semiotician C. S. Peirce) is the basic articulation of the signal. But three's a crowd. Each of the variations punctuated by the off-state is multiple, consisting of a population of inten-sities. This complexity translates as a pulsation. The result is very different from the strobe effect ordinarily used to transmit code visually. Most if not all of the messages will consist of more than two words. Coming irregu-larly in the midst of a series of changes in intensity, the moment of near darkness will meld into the continuing pulsing, its threeness into the multi-plicity it parses. Rather than an off-state that is the opposite of an on-state, it will come across as the low note on the same scale (brightness). In other words, the compositional principle of the signal, as experienced, is more a continuous modulation of a dimension of perception, than an encoding of separate pieces of data or a sequencing of units of meaning. Modulation is the very definition of the analogue signal – a continuous variation in amplitude and time (that is, a smoothly varying value).

## Something like language

So what value is being analogically varied here? The changes in intensity are based on the frequency with which the corresponding letter occurs in the

---

language of the message. The higher the frequency, the brighter the pulse. Letter frequency is a socio-historical variable. It materializes in statistical form the particularities of a culturally specific linguistic evolution. In Amodal Suspension, this cultural-frequency variable pulses into view as a visual rhythm. The encoding of letter frequency into the beam attaches it genetically to culture-specific rhythms of speech. But the encoding is not visually decodable by the viewer, any more than the meaning of the message can be seen in the pulse and flutter. What comes across is, simply, the rhythm. A language-like rhythm – without the actual language.

Rhythm is the most perceptually salient dimension of language. Phonemes disappear into their meaning. You don't hear them to the exact degree to which you understand them. But their rhythm asserts itself, an experienced something-extra that conveys an emphasis, accent, tone or mood. The rhythm carries the force of the phrase, above and beyond its structure and meaning. *Amodal Suspension* uses encoding to make visible this extra-linguistic effectiveness: the force of language. This is the variable that is being analogically presented. The display conveys the feel of a statement's impact without its meaning. We get the same feel from the firefly's inhuman light show of exoskeletal love. It is impossible to watch them and not get the uncanny feeling that they are 'talking' to each other.

The installation makes human language visible at a rhythmic limit where it shades into a dimension of experience that is necessary to its workings but is not of its mode, since it is also the province of the bug. The work creates a visual analogue of human language, something 'like' it, that reattaches it not only to a particular cultural evolution but also to the biosemiotic background from which it emerged. The meaning and structure of language are 'suspended' in the beam, against the forceful background of their own emergence. What is positively experienced here is a transitional zone where language in its human mode rhythmically returns to the animal fold from which it came, at the same time as its sound mode translates into a visual mode akin to gesture (which beckons to speech, heralding its possibility, in the human as in the animal). What lies transitionally between modes is 'amodal'. Hence the title of the piece.

The force of a statement never fails to make itself felt. But it also always fades, making way for the next utterance. The beams slowly rise into the sky and decrease in intensity while preserving the original rhythm. In the meantime, other messages are received and displayed. With 20 towers, up to 10 messages can beckon at once, each with a signature pulse. The air crowds with the sight of language rising. The properly linguistic dimension is not lost. It is still there, latent as a definite possibility in the code that is never shown, though it enables the display.

To see the latent content, the addressee must 'grab' the message from the beaming crowd as he would pluck a point of light from a summer cloud of fireflies. This is done by clicking on the beam on the real-time website simulation of the event, or on-site by cell phone by entering the number of the tower currently carrying the message. To access the coded content, the participant must perform a digital analogue of gesture, beckoning delivery of the meaning content. And it has to be done fast. As soon as the message is grabbed, the beam abruptly disappears. If someone beats them to it, they receive a message informing them of the name and location of the poacher. The messagemay still be accessed from the public log archived on the server.

# Language to the third power

The base definition of linguistic communication is often considered to be the transmission of a syntactically coded content from a sender to a receiver. The problem with that bipolar transmission model is that it is incapable of distinguishing between insect communication and human language – and not because the model has complexly returned to their transitional zone, but merely because it has oversimplified. There may or may not be a syntax to firefly flashes, but there certainly is to the dance of the bees. The reason commonly given to explain why the bee does not have language even though it is capable of communicating syntactically coded message content is that the message cannot be retransmitted to a third party.

The communicational system found in nature best able to do that is human language. Human communication is defined by this linguistic 'thirdness', by its capacity not for linear transmission but for indirection. This complicates things: with the third party in waiting down the line comes the possibility of that party jumping the line and intercepting the message. Indirect relay and message poaching, or hacking, is the true ground of human communication. With indirect relay comes the inevitability of noise and the accompanying distortion of message content. A fuller model than sender and receiver, with a coded message passing between them, would be a combination of the games of 'telephone' and musical chairs.

'Third' parties never come in ones. Where there's one third, there's bound to be another down the noisy line. Three's a crowd again. But this time the triadic multiplicity separates human language back out, returning it to its proper mode. Lozano-Hemmer's installation also makes visible the re-arising or re-emergence of specifically human communication, in its first flush, or flash, seen for what it is: a nonlinear crowd phenomenon. The rising

community of poachable beams is Lozano-Hemmer's visual analogue of what he calls the chaotic 'social soup' of many-party thirdness: a literal flash mob.

Earlier it was said that a number of mechanisms interjected themselves between the sender and receiver in a way that complicated the linear model of message transmission. Also mentioned was the possibility of message poaching, which interjects between the sender and receiver the potential presence of a third party on the line. There was the further necessity of catching the message with a flick of the thumb or finger. This alloys the verbal dimension of language with the bodily dimension of gesture, bringing into the experience of the installation an experiencing of the limit between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic, human thought and the body, the human and the non-human. It brought what we normally tend to think of as mutually exclusive domains into a proximity, a convergence that is not stated or displayed but rather performed. To participate in the installation, one has to perform this limit of language. Speech and bodily action brush up against one another and relay into one another, in a way that redirects attention at least momentarily away from the message content, to the speech act as performance and as event. Embodied social performance becomes more noticeably, in fact unmissably, a part of the speech act in a way that brings to the fore the accompaniment of the linguistic by the extra-linguistic – in convergence, but not necessarily entirely at peace with one another. The need to interrrupt the understanding of the message content with the effort of the catch produces interference patterns between content and perfor-mance context.

There is a third mechanism of meaning interference built into the instal-lation: translation. Messages could be entered in English or Japanese. If, for example, a message entered in Japanese is poached by a third party using English, the message is automatically translated using an off-the-shelf automatic translating software system widely used on the Web (Systran's Sherlock). As anyone who has used the translating feature on the Web knows, automatic translation is not a very advanced art. Errors inevitably slip in, often to comic effect. Using automatic translation in this context brings interference into the very heart of the message, again frustrating the possibility of transparent communication. The linear transmission of message content is scrambled, in a technologically assisted version of the telephone game.

All of these mechanisms for interrupting transmission and creating inter-ference make *noise* as much a part of the installation's content as the meaning of the messages conveyed.

# Sea of noise, crest of words

There are different ways of thinking about noise. The most widespread is native to information theory and corresponds to our everyday understanding of the term. Noise according to this definition is the opposite of signal. It comes at the signal from outside its structure and disrupts it. On this view, the structure of the signal is clear and self-sufficient. Its meaning is as unambiguous as it can be made by the code used to construct it can make it, unless it is perturbed from without. The extra-linguistic element of noise is cast as the simple opposite of linguistically formed message transmission. It is its negative: the unstructured and unstructuring.

But in *Amodal Suspension*, when we approach the extra-linguistic, we aren't moving into the simple opposite, outside or negative of the linguistic. We are moving into a zone of indistinction where language shades back into what it emerged from – gesture, body, animality, the multiplicity of the population whose collective life gives rise to the need for communication, whose endless reserve of third parties ensures its continuation and plasticity, and whose history is sedimented in the structure of its language and the frequency of its elements. This zone of indistinction is not the negation of language but rather the field of its emergence – not its unstructured opposite, but the event of its coming into being. The installation returns language to its generative or constitutive field, its field of emergence.

There is another way of understanding noise that dovetails with Lozano-Hemmer's use of it in *Amodal Suspension*. It comes from certain philosophies concerned with ontogenesis and emergence, and has also been explored in some avant-garde art of the twentieth century, such as the work of John Cage. In this alternate view, noise is as constitutive of the signal as its code. The following discussion of this conception of noise is based on Aden Evens' analysis in *Sound Ideas*. The book is primarily about music, but its discussion of sound and noise is written to apply as well to language – as it must. For the line between music and language is another of the zones of indistinction belonging to language's field of emergence. Language meets multiplicity in thirdness, it meets body and animality in gesture – and it meets music in sound, and in the fact that it shares sound's own emergent relation to noise.

'It is noise,' Evens writes, 'that binds the signal, that serves as a medium, a baseline, a plane of relief against which signal stands out' (Evens, 2005, 15). He describes noise as a background to signal, but not so much in the visual sense, where the background is in contrast with the form that stands out against it. His use of the word 'relief' suggests a *geological* image. Noise is like the underlayer from which signal, with its message content, rises in

Every string plucked, every throat cleared, vibrates a [background] vibration, modifies an existing difference [and is modified by it]. Sound is a modulation of difference, a difference of difference. […] Noise is the uncontracted, the depth from which these contractions of perception are drawn, and, though sense-less and insensible [in itself], it makes sense or gives sense to sound, by providing sound with its direction and focusing it to a point of clarity. Noise is the reservoir of sense, the depth in which sounds connect to each other, the difference whose modulation is signal. […] Sounds only have sense when what is heard includes not only what is heard clearly, but includes also the implicated in what is heard [the obscurity of the background from which the clear and distinct stands out]. To hear meaningful sound – be it the articulate meaning of speech or the ineffable meaning of music – is to hear sound in motion, heading somewhere. […] Noise draws along with it a residue of obscurity, lines of relaxation which anchor sound to the noise it modulates. Sound implicates these obscure tethers, which connect sound to noise […] implicating worlds of forces not yet unleashed, but whose reservoir powers the music [or linguistic expression], driving it along. […] Implication pushes [language] forward […] and this motion is not created by the [words] but produces them as [the expression] of its force. […] Implication is what connects isolated elements to each other, in a creative synergy.

## Words upon words

V. N. Vološinov echoes this in his formula that 'expression organises experience' (Vološinov, 1986, 85). The organizing centre of any communication, he says, is not within the individual but in a collective outside (93). This is not the kind of outside that stands against, as opposite to or the negative of the inner life attributed to the individual through which it expressively crests. It is the outside constituted by the whole of communication, its sea. In Vološinov, this whole of communication is defined not as bounded but as a boundary region (96): a region of contact, a crossing point (76) between the linguistic structure of the message carried by the signal and the extra-linguistic noise of gesture, body, animality, our perceptions and memories, our habits of attention and learned responses, our tropisms and acquired tendencies, our skills, hopes and desires. The 'whole' of communication is the ensemble of modulations of individual expression, in a churning zone of indistinction.

Like Evens, Vološinov describes this zone of indistinction as a connective current of self-regenerating expression. 'Language,' writes Vološinov, 'cannot be said to be handed down – it endures, but it endures as a continuous

process of becoming. Individuals do not receive a ready-made language at all, rather, they enter upon the stream of communication' (1986, 81). Our individual communications crest like waves from the sea-streams of speech. He goes on to say that there is a reservoir of past communications into which each message dissipates. A message never disappears, especially in this digital age where everything can be recorded and automatically archived. A speech act doesn't disappear; it relaxes into the archive. Every message ever produced subsides in the potential for reported speech – the potential to be taken up again and re-actualized in a third party report of what was said.

Reportable speech is the sea of communication. An archived message is a 'crystallization' of a wave-crest of communication that once broke on its shore (Vološinov, 1986, 118). But an archived message is not exactly inert. Its crystalline structure retains a potential energy: it can be re-expressed and brought into focus again. The archived reservoir of reportable speech is a stilling of communication. But it still retains an organizing force, one that inflects each new expression, giving it an undertone and contributing to its orientation. No utterance, as Derrida argued, is ever entirely original. A speech act is always a 'citation' that regathers the force of the already-said, but with a difference, repeating it with a variation – modulating it (in analogue fashion).

Reported speech, Vološinov reminds us, bears testimony to an 'active relation of one message to another'. That active relation is the condition of emergence or potential ground of communication: 'words reacting upon words', to new but analogous effect, in a continuity of variation (Vološinov, 1986, 116). In the archive, that active relation becalms itself. Words already-said relax back towards the collective sea of communication, settling down again into Lozano-Hemmer's social soup. The archive is a reservoir of what Maurice Blanchot called the anonymous 'murmur' that is both the moving ground of language and its outside limit (Blanchot, 1989, 26, 47, 50; 1993, 159, 242, 329). Archived words are in communicational reserve, poised for reactivation. Upon reactivation, they leave their backwater of repose to re-enter the active stream of language. They come back in citation, undertoning and inflecting the cresting of new events of language. Words regained, reacting again upon words. Language ebbing and flowing, relaxing into stagnant eddies and contracting again into the wave-crest.

The extra-effect or force of language staged in *Amodal Suspension* is the power of language to rhythmically regather its active relation to itself and its modulatory outside, in a pulsed continuation of the always-crossed line of communication. The project includes its own automatically compiled archive. The project archive is in many ways the heart of the installation. It will be very rare that the person to whom a message is addressed manages to catch it out of the air. The mass of messages will settle into the online

archive. The addressee will have to extract it from the archive. Once again, the process is designed to have a strong element of tactility. The messages populate a 3D space that recedes in all directions. The further away they are, the more blurred the words. To bring the words into focus, the participant has to navigate through the space with the mouse. The navigation has the feel of swimming. Using the mouse is like paddling with your hands in a liquid medium. You agitate the cursor to create eddies in the liquid archive of communication. The eddies will catch a message on their swell and flush it towards the front of the screen. When one washes forward, it crests into focus and can be read. The tactility of this eddy-fishing for the message gives the digital archive a turbulently analogue experiential dimension.

The archive also works to return communication to the zone of indisinction between gesture and language in exemplary fashion. Just beginning to access what the archive holds already reactivates the words at the regenerative border zone between the extra-linguistic and the linguistic, before their linguistic meaning reappears. It brings the infra-inhabitation of language by gesture to the fore.

The archive also exemplifies the return of communication to its constitutive 'thirdness', the power of relay that, processually speaking, is more fundamental to its operation than the explicit structure of linguistic forms, or the digital code of the archiving of words. The archive plays a central role in *Amodal Suspension*'s insistent thirding of communication. Messages transmitted directly from a sender to a receiver will almost inevitably reach the wrong party. They will be poached from the sky by an unintended recipient. They will then detour to the archive, where they will rest, in an ever-expanding reservoir of reported speech. The computer becomes the third party through which messages relay indirectly to the addressee. This detour of digitally reported speech gives new technological expression to the indirection that constitutes the force of human language.

## Language caught in the act

What *Amodal Suspension* suspends is precisely the said-and-doneness of the cultural act, its determinate communicational achievement as a particularizable, individually ownable transmission of a message. Refracted into indefinitely prolongable third-party transmission and the indeterminate afterlife of citation, the language act is unmoored from the shores of finalized human communication. *Amodal Suspension* sets the achievement of noise-reduced intersubjective communication as its external limit. It contrives for the language acts it enables to remain on the near side of ownable human

individuation. It also has an immanent limit, one that stirs its potential from within: the force of language as it enters a zone of indistinction with the animal. This side of finalized human communication, gesture remains tied to the emergent force of language. The participant act remains a grab at *words*. It is suspended in this reach for language, performed independently of the content of the words, which may never be known to any given reacher, and is in every case detoured, thirded and sea'd.

Vološinov distinguishes the 'theme' of language from semantic content. The difference is that a theme is singularly marked by the noisy 'whole' to which it emergently belongs (Vološinov, 1986, 99). It marks a speech act's belonging to the ever-changing whole through the particular 'evaluative accent' or affective tone with which it crests (Vološinov, 1986, 103, 105). The evaluative accent is enactive. It is performed, not just signified. It is performed extra-syntactically (in tone or rhythm), and often extra-verbally (in gesture or facial expression) (96, 100). Vološinov's concept of theme asserts that the enactive movement from indistinct potential whole to particular evaluative accent is the meaning of the speech act in its fullest sense. Theme is what effectively makes the speech act an act. It is the force of language as it pertains to content.

What *Amodal Suspension* suspends is the 'as pertains to content' in the semantic sense. The understanding of the semantic content of the messages is refracted and interfered with. The cresting in evaluative accent is deferred, if not lost in the ebb and flow. It is left in suspense. The speech act is suspended in the very act of reaching towards language. Language is caught in the incipience of its own act. What is left is the 'theme' of *language itself*. What participants are primed for is language as such, aside from any particular enaction of its content. Its force is felt, extra-verbally, in gesture, just out of reach of achieved content. The formative implication of language with the extra-verbal is gestured to, in a grabbing at words hanging out of reach at the tip of the thumb and the sweep of a beam. The event-medium of *Amodal Suspension* is reaching towards language, finality of meaning deferred, the event of language compellingly incomplete. This, its event-medium, is performatively one with its content.

# Sociability

What might we call the domain stretching from the immanent limit of the gestural zone of indistinction of human language with the animal, to just shy of effectively performed intersubjective communication? *Social domain* will do. The event-medium of *Amodal Suspension* is *sociability*. An act of

sociability is constitutively open. It doesn't have to be begun again, for the simple reason that it never ends. It undulates across a continuous rhythm of words reacting upon reservoired words, in rippling waves. A social act doesn't perish; it subsides into the background noise of the sea of sociality. Sociability ebbs and flows with the vagueness of a continuous background murmur.

## The social death of the personal

'Personality, from the standpoint of its inner, subjective content,' Vološinov writes, 'is a theme of language […] *a word is not an expression of an inner personality; rather, inner personality is an expressed or inwardly impelled word.* […] The inner personality is generated along with language' (Vološinov, 1986, 153). Human personality is a turning-inward of the generative 'thematic' movement stretching between the fusional whole of enactive potential and the determination of the particular act. Inwardly impelled, the word continues to eddy, but in the restricted confines of an identified coordinate position on the cultural map. Individually owned speech is a localized 'impletion' (94) of a recognized position on the cultural map by the generative process of culturability and sociability, in their overlap. At a certain point in the history of culture, mechanisms are invented to 'abstractly segregate' the individuality of cultural acts from their impletion (70–1). The result is the invention of the 'sovereign' bourgeois individual. A partition is instituted between the 'private' sphere, dedicated to the subjective manifestation of the 'inner personality', and a 'public' sphere of intersubjective communication subject to rules of objectivity. The social is reconstituted, opposite the individual, as an externality. Theme in Vološinov's sense, with its immanently formative connection to extra-verbal levels, is segregated on the private side. Only the semantic meaning of language, as embedded in its formal structure, is left for the public sphere.

There is only one word for language segregated from theme and reduced to its semantic content and formal structure: 'dead' (Vološinov, 1986, 73, 81). Society, understood as a public sphere at a decorous remove from the 'inner personality', is the death of sociability as enacted in 'Amodal Suspension'.

## The quasi-public

The partition between public and private expression organizes a regime of mediation. Manifestations of the 'inner personality' must be formated for

public expression by mechanisms of 'socialization' that interpose themselves between the individual 'in itself' and the intersubjective sphere of external self-representation, holding them at a remove from each other. In the public sphere, other mediating mechanisms maintain a dignified intersubjective distance between individuals' expression. Among these are legal and informal measures against unauthorized or unacknowledged citation. Third-party communicational drift becomes criminalized as plagiarism or theft of 'intellectual property', in an attempt to pin expression to clearly individualized acts, recognized as carrying incumbent responsibilities and entitled to the due rewards of ownership. By contrast to this regulation, the comparatively unregulated private sphere appears as an arena of 'direct' personal expression, experienced as more 'true' and 'authentic'. True life is only authentically found, it is felt, on the side of the personal. By Vološinovian standards, this 'life' is but a half-reflection of death by social partition.

'Life'. Vološinov insists, 'begins only at the point where utterance crosses utterance' (1986, 145). The life of the social is where words react co-generatively upon words. The mutual reaction of words upon each other survives in trace form even in the public sphere, in the way in which every expression 'constitutes a germ of a response' (102). If the present act of expression constitutes the germ of a response that may come next, then it stands to reason that it was itself a response which a preceding expression likewise contained in the germ. But might not that preceding expression very well have germinated into more than one response? There is, after all, a whole population of individuals cohabiting the public sphere. Could not that ancestor expression have contained two germs? Or three? Or four? Or *n* …? Each expression is an infectious forking of the paths of sociality into a potential infinity of lines of transmission. In all that complexity, how could the lines not get tangled? How could each act of expression not resonate with any number of others? Is it not undeniable that every romantic pop song lyric is filled with the echoes of any number of other love songs, as if it were citing them *en masse* in its specific difference, as an individual variation on their never-ending, ever-branching collective theme? Is it possible to hear an individual political position-taking without a ring of the déjà-heard? The regulation of the public sphere is designed to background this endemic third-party noise on the line as much as possible, holding it to a residual minimum in order to safeguard the private/public split, its accompanying forms of individual recognition, responsibility and ownership, and their historic deadening of expression.

There is a kind of speech that from time immemorial has stealthily re-insinuated the tangled web of third-party lines into whatever sphere or technology of communication was available: gossip. Every piece of gossip purports to be

a direct report of something specific said by a particular other. Its citational practice, however, is sloppy, to say the least. You never quite know if the 'he said x' is in fact a 'she said he said x'. Or even a 'he said she said he said x'. You never know how far down the line the utterance has actually come. The 'owner' of the speech reported is essentially vague. Because of this, what is ostensibly a 'private' exchange between two parties is on a party-line. Not only is there is a cited third speaker necessarily involved, because the statement presents itself as a report of another's utterance, there is the distinct possibility of a fourth person in line, behind what the reported-upon third person is reported to have said. Gossip is actually in the *fourth-person singular*.

And there is more. The receiver of the titbit of reported speech is not involved in the exchange with a clearly individual status. He or she is equally present as the representative of what 'people will think'. Where there is gossip, there is a teeming crowd of 'he saids' and 'he said she saids' and 'what people thinks' and 'theys'. In gossip, two's a crowd. The crowding is such that the distinction between social type ('they': people of an interested ilk, however ill-defined) and self-representing individual 'I' is expressively blurred. The vagueness of the subject of speech is compounded by the fact that the evaluative accent with which the speech is reported does not distinguish between the present speaker's individual accent and the implied evaluation of the third- and fourth-party speakers whose potential voices echo on the line, or between the present listener and the virtually overhearing 'they' that overpopulates the exchange. The 'theme' of the language act is collectively owned in its speaking and no sooner emitted than already recognized by a virtually listening multitude, pregnant (in the sense that a significant pause is said to be 'pregnant') with an oversupply of implied response.

Gossip is much maligned. It is commonly denounced both as threat to privacy and as a degradation of public discourse. But who are 'they' who can convincingly say they viscerally prefer a well-sourced news report to the latest gossip? Despite the tendency to stereotyping inherent in gossip's collapse of type and individual into each other and in the normative accent that often accompanies the gossipy evaluations of the virtual they, gossip is simply more socially alive. It brings us back to the sociable place where 'utterance crosses utterance' and words react with gleefully irresponsible abandon on other words. What is so threatening about gossip to defenders of privacy and regulatory watchdogs of public speech is that it is neither: neither private exactly, nor public. Its crossing of the lines between individual and type, its blurring of the lines between 'I' as this speaker and the third-person other, its collectivizing of the individual ear and socializing of evaluative accent, all of these things enable it to slip into the space between the two.

Gossip inhabits the zone of indistinction between the private and the public. It has special status. It is *quasi-public*. Which is much the same as saying 'quasi-private'.

Gossip is a machine for bringing expression a step back from the external limit of regulated intersubjective interaction towards that indistinctly poten-tiated fusional relation marking the immanence of the social domain (and of the sociability to culturability). Gossip backsteps the historic achievement of culture that is the speaking bourgeois subject into the ever-rolling, sometimes rollicking, movement of unregulated sociability. It brings the off-set between the cultural act and the social act back into their region of overlap.

# A quasi-directness of expression

Vološinov saw something similar happening in the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel. A new mode of reported speech came into prominence. The conventional markers that formally separate the reported speech of a character from the author's reporting speech in traditional indirect discourse (he said *that* …; she said, '…') are eliminated. The character's speech is directly inserted into the author's expression. This creates a 'paratactic' connection between the two utterances: a direct contiguity without any marked subordination, as if 'both the author and the character were speaking at the same time' (Vološinov, 1986, 144). 'The boundaries of reported speech become extremely weak', as if the two activities of speech generation were 'breaking into each other' (134–5). Each retains its own evaluative accents to some extent. These 'collide and interfere' (154). 'Two intonations, two points of view, two speech acts converge and clash' (135). The result is a single 'varidirectional' (80) stream of language which envelops within itself a social 'interorientation' (119–20, 125). This 'merging of differently oriented speech acts is *quasi-direct discourse*': 'speech *interference'* (137). Expressive social noise.

The literary use of quasi-direct discourse is one thing. What worries Vološinov is 'the social tendency it expresses' (158). He saw quasi-direct discourse gaining ground outside literature. It was clear to him that 'quasi-direct discourse lines on the main road of development of modern European languages, that it signalizes some crucial turning point in the social vicissi-tudes of utterance' (158). Without giving specific examples, he laments that in this tide of quasi-direct discourse, 'typifying and individualizing coatings of the utterance' become 'intensely' differentiated, hypertrophied to the point that they undermine the 'responsible social position implemented in it' (158). In other words, the extreme of typicality and the extreme of

individuality converge and clash. Not unlike in gossip. The two extremes combine, without mediation, in a single interorientation, a vari-directional stream of de-positioned – deterritorialized – language from which 'serious ideational consideration' has been quasied out (158). What is left is the 'expression of an adventitous, subjective state' of indeterminate personhood, as intensely typical as it is hypertrophically individual.

Vološinov is attached enough to traditional notions of authenticity and truth in speech to see this development as a 'depression in the thematic value of the word' (159). He calls the tendency of quasi-direct discourse taken to this extreme the 'contrived word' (159). It might have been more in keeping with his own philosophy to see it, on the contrary, as a coming to performative expression of the theme of the sociability of language itself, in an exemplification of language's essentially contrived social nature: a surfacing of sociability for itself, in all its noisy inauthentic glory.

## Sociability giganticus

Today we live out the far side of the social tendency which made Vološinov cringe. From this vantage point it appears much less frightening: as banal as Facebook. How more 'contrived' could the word get than when it is digitized and refracted through a technological apparatus of immense complexity and tentacular reach? The same clash and convergence between extreme typicality and the hypertrophied assertion of individuality is to be found on the 'personal' pages of social media. But the posts are not 'personal' in anything approaching the nineteenth-century sense, when there was a clearly contrasting 'public' for individual speech to be set against. Social media are the reign of the quasi-public. Facebook friends exist to interlink. The 'personal' connection is made to drift across the propagating links, rippling into expanding social circles, to the point where mutual 'friends' will often not know who each other are. Facebook posts are designed to relay, propagating indefinitely across the rippling sea of digital sociality. The relay function is taken even further with Twitter. Citations proliferate in paratactic contiguity with each other, merging at the limit into a single varidirectional stream of social expression. Evaluative accents clash and converge in multitudinous interorientation. As of April 2011, it was estimated that one billion tweets were being emitted each week. *Sociability giganticus*. Peer-to-peer sharing, for its part, has weakened the ownership of expression, sparking often draconian rearguard actions in defence of 'intellectual property'. Hacking even more so. This, as 'personal' expression on social media sites falls under the proprietary control of corporations (content posted by individuals on Facebook

belongs not to them but to Facebook, Inc). The rules of ownership formerly in place have been scrambled by the predominance of a new operator: 'access' (a shift pre-diagnosed in Rifkin, 2000). In this brave new social world, gossip has attained a new level of prominence, not only in the content of 'private' messages but in dedicated 'public' sites which are among the most visited of all the internet.

The point about gossip is not that the gossipy content has increased. It was always high volume. It is that, with social media, the internet itself has brought to global expression and previously unheard-of prominence (at a level not even 'they' would have suspected) the tendency of which gossip has been the most historically constant and reliable agent: the quasi-directification of social relation. The internet has taken quasi-direct relation to a global scale, and made it unmistakeably the dominant mode of expression. Under the impulsion of social media, the internet has ushered in the reign of the quasi-public. It has massively backstepped the cultural act into the domain of sociability – 'pure sociality' as the 'field of immanence' of expressive variation, 'the intrinsic nature of association' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 87).

The internet-led backstepping of the cultural act into pure sociality has been decried as the death of culture. The internet has also been lamented for undermining the objectivity of public sphere expression. It has been demonized for undermining the responsible social position implemented in speech and the serious ideational content of expression (just a minute, haven't we heard that before? Isn't that Vološinov's intellectual property? Except … who did *he* get it from?). The internet's malevolent effects on the 'inner personality', particularly in its tender childhood shoots, have been voluminously fretted over (not least of all on the internet).

This last worry comes to the heart of the central issue that Vološinov raised in relation to quasi-direct social relation: the replacement of the responsibly self-positioning and seriously ideating socio-cultural subject by a quasi-direct 'adventitious subjective' growth (*Adventitious*: '1: coming from another source and not inherent or innate 2: arising or occurring sporadically or in other than usual location' [*Merriam-Webster*]).

Ultimately, the question which the internet poses for culture and society – or rather, culturability and sociability – is what this adventitious subjectivity, now unleashed, may become. Whatever it becomes, its singular quasi-public/quasi-private status, marked by ultimately disowned, depositioned, irresponsibilized utterances, will ensure that its becoming will be a *collective individuation* (Simondon, 2005). Will it rejig the respective limits of the social and the cultural? Will it refigure their overlap and immanence? Will its monstrous complexity and tentacular stretch take sociability itself to the pseudopodic 'cosmic' limit of culture? How will it redraw the map of

the human territory? Will it rejuggle the zones of indistinction between the human, the animal, the technological and the generative forces for variation that crest from them? There is no paucity of noisy futuristic prognostications on these subjects. This chapter will refrain from adding more.

Jacques Attali famously argued that the evolution of music heralds what Vološinov called 'crucial turning points' in the vicissitudes of the social and the cultural domains. 'Amodal Suspension' raised the issue of the quasi-directness of social relation in 2003, a year before the founding of Facebook. Music is not the only art that heralds vicissitudes. Other arts, including the electronic arts, do so as well. The intensely participatory nature of electronic-art practices such as Lozano-Hemmer's relational architecture give an option that was not open to Vološinov but is to contemporary critics and prognosticators: that of refraining from arguing the points interminably. The option is to experience them. To experiment with them. Rather than forming words with the finality of a personal statement, to make a participatory grab at them at the quasi-public limit of the social. For 'it is undeniably conceivable that a beginningless series of successive utterers should do their work *in a brief interval of time*, and that so should an endless series of interpreters', such that 'before the sign was uttered, it was virtually present' (Peirce, 1998, 403). The option is to save ourselves the prolix embarrassment of futurist argument, and instead live the open-ended futurity virtually present, now, in the event.