

# Review of Building a Voice: Sound, Surface, Skin

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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Voice Tunnel*, *Relational Architecture 21*, 2013. Photo by NYC Department of Transportation.

In her book *Building a Voice: Sound, Surface, Skin*, Zeynep Bulut takes on the voice as a medium that transforms and is transformed by its interaction with bodies, spaces, and technologies. Her approach eschews the conventional narratives of voice as purely sonic or linguistic and carves out a place in which voice is reimagined as a living surface, or an interactive interface she evocatively terms “voice-skin”: a catalytic and semi-material organ that encompasses the sensory dialogue that has been building out from recently developed theoretical notions of embodiment and material agency. Bulut’s ideas move through sound studies, performance theory, psychoanalysis, and ecological aesthetics. That’s just as well since she’s working in a hotly contested and quickly evolving field that at its core agitates the borders between subjectivity and communality.

Bulut's argument is that voice functions not simply as an emission of sound, but rather as a multisensory, malleable entity, a surface analogous to skin—a permeable boundary simultaneously separating beings from and linking them to their environment. Looking to Didier Anzieu's psychoanalytic idea of the "skin-ego," she moves beyond metaphor into an ontological space where voice emerges as fundamentally relational, tactile, and shared. Bulut expands on Anzieu by highlighting the voice's function within a broader sensory landscape that encompasses various environmental interactions and experiences. According to Bulut, Anzieu conceptualizes the skin-ego as "an interface between self and the external world," a sensory envelope primarily composed of internal and external sounds, representing "the very first 'skin' of the baby that mediates the inside and outside worlds."<sup>1</sup> In her own work Bulut suggests multiplicity, articulating the voice as a generative site for encounters between humans and nonhumans.<sup>2</sup>

Bulut emphasizes in particular the role of the nonlinguistic voice as central to her concept of the voice-skin. She argues that experimental practices involving vocal noises, phonemes, bodily sounds, and electronically amplified sounds reflect a profound questioning of the physical, contingent, and political conditions of voice-making. Nonlinguistic explorations, prevalent in avant-garde and experimental music, amplify preverbal and bodily sounds, serving as tangible examples of how voice might act as a shared membrane that connects disparate entities without necessitating explicit meaning. This expanded conception of voice as ontological texture enables an understanding of voice-making as inherently collective, anonymous, and materially interactive, emphasizing its ethical and ecological dimensions.

Bulut's analysis unfolds across three meticulously detailed sections—"Plastic," "Electric," and "Haptic"—each distinct in thematic focus yet interconnected in their exploration of voice's material and immaterial possibilities. In "Plastic,"<sup>3</sup> voice emerges from environments—literal and imagined—shaped through processes of encounter, transformation, and interrelation. Bulut explores this notion through Catherine Malabou's philosophical understanding of plasticity, which Malabou describes as "a form's ability to be deformed without dissolving and thereby to persist throughout its various mutations, to resist modification, and to be always liable to emerge anew in its initial state."<sup>4</sup> This conceptualization of plasticity mirrors the transformative yet resilient qualities of voice, highlighting its capacity for both adaptation and resistance. Voice embodies characteristics such as endurance and flexibility, continuously shaped by, and shaping, the environments in which it participates.

Bulut introduces the idea of "voicing" to describe nonverbal, non-aural, and performative expressions that are not confined to human actors, as they are equally valid for nonhuman agents. "Voicing prompts a voice, rather than *the* voice," she suggests, indicating voice's emergent, depersonalized, and distributed nature.<sup>5</sup> Voicing allows encounters with moments of silence, cacophony, and unexpected interactions, thereby highlighting its plasticity as it continuously reshapes itself in response to surrounding stimuli. This concept pushes readers to recognize the profound multiplicity and dynamism inherent in the voice, underlining its continuous interplay with ecological and social environments. However, Bulut largely

overlooks the historical exclusivity of voice in relation to citizenship and the ability to participate in public life.<sup>6</sup> There's a logic to this; Bulut advocates for distributed, anonymous, and non-dialogic forms of voice as an emergent relational surface rather than an expression of a coherent self or individual subjectivity. But discussions of voice that disperse personhood might risk focusing on ethical consequences squarely within the realm of material phenomena at a time when voice-as-agency is deeply felt. While Bulut's work (deliberately?) avoids references to personhood, her concepts of "voice-skin" and "avatar" nonetheless reintroduce the superficial notion of the persona-mask,<sup>7</sup> radically transformed. No longer a guarantor of a stable identity, the mask becomes a shared and shifting surface, an ecology of encounter rather than an emblem of selfhood.

The voice's capacity to mold and be molded becomes evident in Bulut's attentive reading of works such as Henry Eliot's 2012 recontextualization of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, John Cage's provocative *Song Books* (1970), and Pauline Oliveros's contemplative practice of environmental listening (1975/1996). Bulut adeptly navigates these practices, carefully mapping how each embodies the plasticity of voice as it shifts, disperses, and resonates beyond the singular body into a collective sphere. Henry Eliot's version of *The Waste Land*, a multimedia walk through decaying and regenerating spaces, serves as an entry point to examine how voice can inhabit and animate physical spaces through performative interactions. Participants reading fragments aloud create a dispersed, collective voicing, highlighting Bulut's idea that voice manifests as a permeable boundary, an ecological interface that activates landscapes as much as it responds to them. Cage's *Song Books* underscores Bulut's point about non-dialogic voice-making, where voice disperses across texts, environments, and bodies, always partial and fragmentary.

While "Plastic" emphasizes voice's properties, "Electric" situates voice within technological mediations, interrogating the ways digital and electric interfaces complicate traditional understandings of voice. Bulut's reading of Christina Kubisch's *Electrical Walks* deftly illustrates how technology does not simply transmit voices but reshapes them entirely, creating networks of audible electromagnetic fields. These installations embody Bulut's vision of voice as an embodied yet distributed form, extending beyond the human sensorium into an interspecies and technological terrain.

Bulut engages directly with embodied experiences of voice-hearing. In the "Haptic" section of the book, she describes several installations by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, an artist for whom sound (including the voice) is often materialized through visual and tactile phenomena like streams of light, waves of water, or currents of air, challenging the assumed primacy of voice as purely sonic. She analyzes Lozano Hemmer's *Voice Tunnel* (2013) and *Atmospheric Memory* (2023), two participatory artworks that enact a visual chorus for collective sound-making, demonstrating the interconnected nature of anonymity and togetherness. In these works, writes Bulut, "The multiplicity sustains a shared unknown not in a mystified but precisely in a material sense. It generates affinities among strangers. It highlights the acts and processes involved in responding with others. It thus renders each of us responsible for

others.”<sup>8</sup> The interactive pieces illustrate Bulut’s theoretical claims about the voice’s capacity to exist materially, spatially, and communally beyond the constraints of individual identity, while also revealing the relational and material conditions of anonymity.

The idea of the voice-skin not only reveals but also represses and masks society’s unconscious aspects, and there are potent connections between psychological repression, voice performance, and legal systems yet to be explored. (Jacques Attali reinforces this by describing voice as a mediated political force.<sup>9</sup>) This is something we need to do in order to move beyond the field of ethics-aesthetics and into a more active mode.

There are many good moments in *Building a Voice*: for example, Bulut’s adept negotiation of an expansive scholarly terrain, synthesizing insights from phenomenology, ecopsychology, and sound studies with considerable precision. The book demands familiarity with multiple intellectual traditions, and the richness of argumentation, though rewarding, occasionally meanders into self-defined spaces that emerge within a cultural moment increasingly dominated by digital mediation. As voice technologies proliferate and interactions become more virtual and mediated, they expand our scope of communication, not only with each other but with constructed selves—the skin, the mask, the avatar. Bulut’s work thrives on this potentiality and contingency, and it is this openness that marks the most provocative and enduring contribution of her book. Her theoretical frameworks never isolate the voice from its contexts; instead, they underscore its fundamental relationality.<sup>10</sup> The voice, as Bulut demonstrates, is always dialogic in its most expansive, ecological, and uncertain sense.

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