MANGLED MANTRA: GROTESQUE SOUND IN THE VISUAL ARTS

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 3
List of Illustrations .................................................................................................................. 4
Abstract ................................................................................................................................... 5
Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 6
Chapter 1: Flux ......................................................................................................................... 8
Chapter 2: The Grotesque Voice ............................................................................................. 15
Chapter 3: Ventriloquised ....................................................................................................... 23
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 37
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................ 39
Acknowledgements

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Tony Oursler, *Purplite*, 2006, video projection with audio on fibreglass ........................................... 26

Figure 2: Tony Oursler, *Alien Acid*, 2007, video projection with audio on fibreglass ........................................... 26

Figure 3: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Belly Speaker*, 2012, video projection with sound, 5:49 min .............................. 28

Figure 4: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Belly Speaker*, installation view, Tin Sheds Gallery, 2013 ..................................... 28

Figure 5: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Pipe Smoker #2*, 2012, pencil on paper, 20 X 20cm ............................................. 30

Figure 6: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Pipe Smoker #3*, 2012, pencil on paper, 20 X 20cm ............................................. 30

Figure 7: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Exhaler*, 2012, acrylic, impasto and gel medium on canvas, 40 X 40cm ........... 32

Figure 7: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Brown Pipe*, 2013, acrylic on linen, 75 X 80cm ................................................. 33

Figure 8: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Severed Head #1*, 2012, acrylic, impasto and gel medium on canvas, 90 X 90cm...... 35
Abstract

Research Paper

This research paper examines how sound, namely the sound of the voice, functions as grotesque within the visual arts. The paper explores a number of ideas that frame the grotesque as a distorting, liminal force that works upon threshold areas to merge and combine unlikely forms. My research considers how vocal sounds might be viewed in relation to such a framework, by looking at my own and others work that use abstracted, non-linguistic vocalisations that have been altered through audio processing to produce a grotesque mode of voice. The project explores how this grotesque vocal sound can be incorporated into musical composition, and how these compositions can then be used as the basis to inform a range of visual work such as painting, drawing, objects, and video. In doing this, the research uses the metaphor of ventriloquism to examine how the grotesque voice might be seen to ‘speak’ through various visual art works.

Creative Work

The creative work produced for the project had two main outcomes. The first was a recorded electro-acoustic sound composition titled ‘Vent’, which was self-published and released on cassette, CD, and digital formats. This recording incorporates a number of vocal experiments with a range musical, and non-musical sounds, using an approach to composition that draws influence from areas such as sound poetry, field recording, experimental electronics, ambient and noise based music. This recording is intended to function as a sound work in its own right designed for home listening; it does not form part of the exhibited final work. ‘Vent’ does however, have a strong relationship to the body of creative work produced for the final exhibition, as all of this work was directly informed by this sound recording. The final exhibition of creative work consisted of paintings, pencil drawings, objects, and projected video/sound works presented in the form of a mixed media installation.
Introduction

This research stems from an interest in how sound, namely processed human voice, might be considered grotesque, and how this kind of sound functions within visual art practice. My interest in this area of research is reflected in the nature of my practice, which incorporates various solo and collaborative sound/music projects, as well as a visual art practice that incorporates elements of painting, drawing, video/sound, objects, and performance. Within the context of this MFA research I will make a direct connection between these two areas of practice, exploring what might run as an underlying thread between my sound and visual work.

What I perceived as a commonality between the two different areas of my practice was a grotesque treatment of the figure. I felt that there was a connection between the comically grotesque head/face forms which feature as a recurring motif in my visual work, and the use of processed, abstracted vocal sounds that I use in my sound/music work, both of which create a strong sense of the grotesque in relation to the figure. I wondered if the strange vocalisations in my sound work might be thought of as the 'voice' of the absurd figures that populate the visual work. The link I decided to investigate was the sound of voice, and the question that arose for this MFA research became – how is the voice grotesque, and how does the grotesque voice act as a binding force across both areas of my practice?

In answering this question Chapter 1 firstly develops a framework for the grotesque in relation to my art practice, which explores the grotesque as a structural principle that performs a particular operation in a work of art. In doing this I aim to outline a set of essential features based around a core aspect of how I have come to think about the grotesque as a distorting force, one which works upon boundaries of the known and conventional, upsetting and rearranging these expectations in metamorphic ways. This situates the grotesque as a thing that is born as a result of conventional boundaries being distorted. This deformation casts the grotesque as a liminal being; a borderland creature which dwells in an in-between space on the threshold of the boundaries it upsets.

Chapter 2 then takes this structural account of the grotesque and considers how sound, specifically the sound of the voice, might function as grotesque. This chapter looks at a number of ideas that consider the relationship voice has with language and meaning, and how this relationship can become destabilised when the voice is subjected to a grotesque treatment. This chapter explores how I distort the voice to make it grotesque which is reliant on two things; firstly the use of non linguistic vocal sounds, and secondly the processing of these sounds via a range of audio technologies. This process of deforming the voice through audio technologies is
discussed in relation to the sound poetry of Henri Chopin, and tape recorder experiments of William S. Burroughs, examining how these artists’ distortion and transformation of voice informs my recorded sound work.

Chapter 3 explores how my sound work, specifically the sound recording ‘Vent’ that I produced as part of this project functioned as a basis for a body of visual work that includes videos, paintings, drawings, and objects. This chapter revolves around the idea that the grotesque voice 'speaks' through this visual work as a kind of ventriloquist’s voice. The metaphor of ventriloquism has been used to consider how the grotesque voice speaks differently through the various visual works produced for the project; how the creation of the sound recording produced a self ventriloquism or talking to myself, how the grotesque voice literally speaks through my video work as an audio element, and how the grotesque voice, as an invisible sound, is captured in silent painted and drawn forms.

This research aims to expand upon ideas of the grotesque within a visual arts context, to consider how sound/music, which is largely absent from this discourse, might function as deforming ventriloquial force across a range of different art forms. This moves away from the ocular-centric history of the grotesque in the visual arts by placing sound at the centre, as a driving force within my own work that shapes the creation of not only aural forms, but visual forms as well. In doing this I hope to reconcile the separate areas of music/sound making and visual art making within my practice and explore how both these different areas might be unified by a foundational element; the sound of the grotesque voice.
Chapter 1: Flux

In this opening chapter I will develop a conceptual framework for this project that is based on the grotesque in visual art. I will discuss how the grotesque might be seen to operate as a structural principle that is built around a deforming essence that works upon known boundaries to distort, merge, and render them unstable. In doing this I will examine how the grotesque comes into being on the threshold of the boundaries it ruptures, and how this process defines the grotesque as liminal in nature. The correlation between the grotesque and the concept of liminality is examined by looking at the theme of hypnagogic experience that I explore in my work which serves as an example of an experience that presents an uncertain conflicted relationship with notions of the beyond and other realities.

The first thing to note when dealing with the grotesque in any capacity is the enormity and fluid nature of the subject. From its beginning as a decorative, ornamental style in late 15th century, onto associations with the fantastic and carnivalesque during 18th and 19th centuries, and connections with horror and the monstrous in the 20th century, the grotesque has featured prominently in the vocabularies of a number of movements during this vast span of time. It continues to flourish in contemporary art practice in which the grotesque is consistently shifting and being re imagined in a multitude of ways. This presents a real challenge for research especially due to the fact that in the modern and post-modern period the grotesque has splintered off into a number of related sub categories such as the uncanny, the abject, and the formless. Curator Robert Storr notes that even though these related categories have built their own histories, ‘the relations among these terms and the far-reaching matrix of possibilities they encompass are difficult to map and are likely to remain so.’

What might be a defining link between different categories of work we label as 'grotesque' remains elusive, a problem which Storr suggests is due to the fact that ‘the concept that might hold them together is by its nature or rather by its propensity to denature, vast, detailed, and yet somehow amorphous.’

Many major studies on the grotesque note this problem and seek to resolve some sort of clarity on the subject by exploring certain types or styles such as the carnivalesque, or hybrid animal/human forms. However, this research does not look at particular styles of grotesques to resolve the

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2 Storr, Disparities & Deformations, 29.
problem, instead I aim to identify certain core structural elements that are consistent amongst the amorphous and disorderly nature of the grotesque. In doing this I aim to locate some defining features of the concept which might be seen as essential amongst all types of grotesques.

Writing on the grotesque in modern art, theorist Noel Carroll notes the instability of the grotesque and asks, 'Is there any way to find unity in such an unruly concept? Or is the concept of the grotesque so heterogeneous that it is itself grotesque?' Carroll’s solution to finding some sort of intelligibility in the grotesque is to shift focus from the various styles, or aspects of what the grotesque is, towards a consideration of how the grotesque operates; what the grotesque does. This approach might seem elementary, but makes sense if we consider the myriad, often contradictory associations of what the grotesque 'is' – fantastic, ugly, monstrous, hybrid, absurd, caricatural, fragmented, surreal, satiric, horrific, abject, and so on. What the grotesque ‘is’ can vary radically from one instance to another, and to further problematise this, single works of art often have the ability to embody multiple instances of grotesques simultaneously. My research does not attend to the grotesque in terms of what it ‘is’, instead it directs attention towards a particular operation that occurs within works of art considered grotesque, the procedure of what it ‘does’.

What does the grotesque do? Carroll suggests that there is a common core component within all kinds of grotesques, a genus that can be characterised structurally, and in identifying this we can then see how different functions of the grotesque are made possible. Carroll identifies a key structural principle of what the grotesque does which is that it ‘violates our standing or common biological and ontological concepts and norms. That is, the grotesque subverts our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order. Fusion, disproportion, formlessness, and gigantism are the most frequently recurring ways of realising this structural principle’.5

What the grotesque does might then be broadly thought of as putting a distorting force to work to exaggerate and deform familiar, known, and rational expectations. This destabilisation of order and rationalism operates to various degrees in all types of grotesques whether they be satiric and humorous, horrific and frightening, or at varying levels in between. The way this distorting tendency that Carroll identifies works is by setting in motion deformation, not towards a single thing, but towards disparate things that are fused into bizarre combinations. Far from a simple destructive action, the distorting force of the grotesque disrupts a sense of hybrid

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normality through a complex process of mixing and morphing opposing categories to form new hybrid creations.

This distorting force central to a grotesque operation in a work of art doesn't blend related things together; it must fuse unlikely elements to produce new forms to be considered grotesque. It works to 'combine unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones; those that deform or decompose things; and those that are metamorphic.' The distorting essence of the grotesque is unique in that the disfiguration that it facilitates makes new realities possible. In this sense the grotesque is deconstructive/constructive, not simply an oppositional ruinous force, it functions as transformational and metamorphic to merge unlikely combinations of incongruous elements; human/non human, fantasy/reality, high/low, ugliness/beauty, and multiple variations beyond these few examples. Just as the grotesque does not work by blending related things, it does not work by simply situating two clashing opposite things side by side within a work either, rather it fuses them into a bizarre new whole. The distorting force might be seen to play out, not in the extremity or severity of contrast between two opposing elements, but instead in the area where the parts meet and merge. This boundary in-between area is where the grotesque thrives, in the merging of the unlikely parts, where confusion, nonsense, and absurdities blend with a semblance of familiar normal reality.

Another important element of the grotesque is that it does not really present itself as a fixed recognisable thing, but rather as something that is evolving and changing within the metamorphic unlikely combinations being formed. This is seen in 'what it does to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilising them. Put more bluntly, the grotesque is a boundary creature and does not exist except in relation to a boundary, convention, or expectation.' It might be said that the grotesque is governed by the need for a boundary, rule, or limit in order for its constructive deformation to occur. What the grotesque does is to arise from the merging, mutation, and blurring of the boundaries themselves; it is a threshold entity that is activated as a result of the limits themselves becoming ruptured. The borderland is the habitat in which the grotesque dwells, a zone that it creates for itself by throwing boundaries into flux, which becomes a place that it cannot move outside of. The reality of such a place is that it is suspended in a constant state of transition, hovering between the familiar and the unknown, a transitional liminal space. What the grotesque does, or rather what it needs to function, is a liminal environment in which the desirable conditions are uncertainty, ambiguity, and confusion. The concept of liminality, coming from the latin 'limen', meaning 'threshold', is a term that was developed by anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and, later, Victor Turner. The term was coined in relation to the transitional in between stage of rites of passage that occur in a

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6 Connelly, Modern Art and the Grotesque, 2.
7 Connelly, Modern Art and the Grotesque, 4.
variety of societies, in the case of Turner specifically about initiation rituals. As a transitional state, the liminal period is marked by transformation through dissolution, and decomposition of the self and its environment into an uncertain fluid state of being. With this research I want to situate this concept of the liminal in direct relation to what the grotesque ‘does’ in art, defining the grotesque operation in a work of art as essentially liminal in nature through the way it engages the viewer.

Writing on the grotesque in relation to the liminal, Frances S. Connelly states that the grotesque can be understood as a being in 'a state of change, breaking open what we know and merging it with the unknown....grotesques are all in a transitional, in between state of being. Blurring categories, the grotesque pulls us into a liminal state of multiple possibilities.' A remarkable feature of the grotesque is that possibilities manage to exist in the unresolved liminal space that it opens up, and that the bizarre concoctions it comes up with resonate within us somehow. The way in which the grotesque manages to function in such chaos can be understood though if we consider that it is a product of boundaries in turmoil, inseparable from the conflict it creates as it is born from the conflict itself. How the grotesque grabs hold of us is in the way that this ‘conflict must in some fashion exist within the mind of the beholder such that the confusion stems not only from the anomaly to which we bear witness in the world, but the anomaly that is revealed within us.’ Therefore, the way the amorphous pull of the grotesque works is through its revelatory powers, which encourage uncertainties, confusion, and conflicts that rise up within the viewer. What the grotesque does when it manifests in works of art might then be further understood as engaging the audience in a process where they are asked to reconcile some sort of meaning from the dissimilar, conflicting fragments the grotesque produces in rupturing boundaries.

This process of reassembling the fragmented parts to find some sort of resolution requires the audience to make inventive, strange leaps in logic. This might be seen as a process of filling in gaps whereby the audience

'forge new possibilities from the fragments put into play...if we understand that the grotesque ruptures the boundaries of disparate realities, then the contested space created between the two is where the grotesque creates meaning. This is the “gap” that the viewer must bridge, the circuit he or she must complete.'

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9 Connelly, The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture, 11.
10 Storr, Disparities & Deformations, 16.
11 Connelly, The Grotesque in Western art and culture, 12.
Acknowledging that a number of cultural and contextual issues will come into play in influencing exactly how a person will bridge this gap, and reconfigure the fragments, what might be seen as consistent about what the grotesque does is the reliance and responsibility it puts upon the viewer to fill in these liminal gaps it opens up. Theorist Geoffrey Harpham describes this process of filling in the gaps as an 'interval', which he frames as an interpretive action from the audience that is focussed on ‘the degree to which we perceive the principle of unity that binds together the antagonistic parts. The perception of the grotesque is never a fixed or stable thing, but always a process, a progression.’ The grotesque might then be viewed as implicating the audience in a process that plunges them into a fluid state of confusion with no fixed meaning, asking them to find their own meaningfulness in the seemingly meaninglessness the grotesque produces.

In asking the audience to complete the picture and fill in the gaps to form their own conclusions, the grotesque seems to operate with a unique ability to suggest possibility in the seemingly unresolvable liminal spaces it opens up. This possibility is due to the fact that the grotesque never breaks down boundaries completely beyond recognition or transgresses beyond the confusion it creates to reach clarity; it's meaning is found in the flux it perpetuates. Further to this, what is carried along with the distorting liminal force that gives rise to this flux, through the deformation of categorical boundaries and our known world, is an echo of our own uncertainties and confusion about existence. The uncertain liminal space that the grotesque opens up and asks us to resolve, plays upon our own existential unease that is already there within us. Ultimately, I see the grotesque engaging the audience in an exchange whereby the experiencing of categorical distortions within a grotesque work triggers a similar self-reflective mental process within the individual. The distortion of familiar reality and known boundaries in the work resonates to make us question our own categorical certainties and notions of reality, giving rise to levels of instability we might perceive within these ideas.

An ongoing theme within my own work is the grotesque, liminal experience of waking dreams, specifically my own experiences within the hypnagogic state. Hypnagogic experiences refer to pre-sleep or sleep onset phenomena, which includes a range of auditory, visual, and in some cases tactile and olfactory phenomena. This half dream, borderland state can produce very vivid, often distressingly real sensory hallucinations such as fragmented speech and warped noises coming from inside and outside an individual, visual forms such as menacing figures, mysterious symbology and abstracted floating patterns, along with an acute awareness of invisible forces. This mental state is experienced on the borderland of sleep; an uncertain location in which the person is neither awake nor asleep, but suspended in the transitional space

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Harpham, On the Grotesque: strategies of contradiction in art and literature, 14.

For an in depth study on Hypnagogic phenomena see Andreas Mavromatis, Hypnagogia: the unique state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).
in between. In relation to the conceptual framework outlined above, hypnagogic experiences interest me due to the grotesquely distorted liminal space that they open up and the clashing, conflicted logic that manages these experiences. Some people induce this state through sleep deprivation, but most experience the hypnagogic state involuntarily, seemingly in the familiar surroundings of their bedroom or place of sleep, feeling as though they are conscious and awake. Believing that they are still awake, the nature of these experiences is that incredibly vivid hallucinatory phenomena seeps into the surrounding reality of the actual room the person is in. The seemingly 'real', waking world merges with bizarre surreal elements of the dream world forming a new place that is constructed from the opposing rational and surreal mental states merging into a new undefined state in between.

We usually approach the dream world with hindsight, or a degree of distance when reflecting upon waking. But what makes the hypnagogic experience truly grotesque is the fact that this distance has been eliminated, and one has not been asleep and is not aware they have slipped into a partial dream state that has somehow forcefully encroached into their reality. Due to its involuntary nature and the ultra-realistic hallucinatory phenomena, the hypnagogic state intensifies a feeling that it is coming from somewhere else, the result of some sort of unseen or outside force and that there is some sort of meaning or esoteric knowledge to decipher through these experiences. This aspect accounts for many associations of the hypnagogic state with the occult, the paranormal, psychical research, and various belief systems, all of which have their own mandate on what hypnagogic phenomena means or symbolises. With this project I am not concerned with certain explanations of what these experiences might mean as the basis for art making, instead I am concerned with hypnagogic experience as a poignant example of the conceptual framework of the grotesque outlined above. This is not to say that I am not interested in the conflicted, uncertain nature of meaning in relation to these experiences though, I'm just not concerned with engaging in any definitive ideas of what these experiences are or where they come from. What is important to me is that these experiences embody a potent sense of the grotesque to present a more generalised disruption of notions about what we know, or think we know about reality and our own existence.

The grotesque liminal nature of Hypnagogic experience influences my work in that it presents an interesting example of a threshold state that produces a conflicted uncertain connection to notions of other worlds or some kind of beyond realm outside known reality. In the text 'On the Beyond', which is wide reaching conversation between artists Jim Shaw, Mike Kelley, and art historian John C. Welchman, artistic practice in relation to experiential and speculative forms of transcendence such as ufology, dreams, and hallucination is discussed. The conversation

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focuses on the way in which divine and paranormal states are discovered or invented in contemporary culture and how this informs the practice of Kelley and Shaw. This text touches upon a number of key works by both artists such as Kelley’s opus *Day is Done* and Shaw’s ongoing body of work based on his invented religion ‘Oism’, as well as a broad range of ideas relating to areas such as architecture, pop art, and sub cultural aesthetics, philosophy, and hallucinogenic drugs. In this free flowing conversation they reach a broad consensus on how they all consider art practice to entertain notions of the beyond which Welchman sums up when he states ‘I’m less interested in what the beyond actually is, than in the persistently extraordinary ways that people have sought it out, lived their lives for it in religious and spiritual, even in economic and aesthetic ways’.

This way of thinking about a beyondness or other realm reflects my way of thinking about how hypnagogic experiences inform my art practice. As noted earlier, resolution or speculation about what the hypnagogic state is or means in definitive terms is not of interest, but what is of interest might be seen as the grotesquely distorted logic that operates in the liminal zone that this threshold state creates. I’m interested in how the uncertain liminality of this state of consciousness acts as a bizarre and potent force in raising doubts and confusion within an individual about themselves and their own outlook on existence whatever that may be. The way in which these experiences occur unexpectedly as though fully conscious creates a particularly unsettling feeling making them seem very mystical and significant due to this fact, which I think places these experiences as ripe source material for art making.

Discussing the occult Mike Kelley states that ‘occult rituals interest me because they are akin to art making. The manipulation of physical materials, that operates symbolically, affects the world. In Western culture art is very low on the totem pole while religion is at the top. If metaphysics were taken out of the picture that relationship would be reversed – as it should be’. In removing the metaphysics from hypnagogic experience and treating it as a secular event free from spiritual, paranormal, or religious associations, hypnagogia might then be seen to function as analogous to various forms of art we label as grotesque. Many parallels seem to exist between hypnagogic experiences and grotesque forms of art in the way they both have the ability to rearrange and deform a sense of reality with an absurd logic that sends the individual into a liminal spiral of uncertainty. Further to this my own hypnagogic experiences bear a strong similarity to many different kinds of art works and modes of art practice, where certain hallucinations have taken on Kafkaesque and Magritte style proportions, objects seem to function with a Dada or Surrealist sense of logic, shadowy figures lurk around the room as though in a David Lynch film, and sounds seem stuck somewhere between minimalist compositions, avant-garde sound poetry, and psychedelic noise music.

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Chapter 2: The Grotesque Voice

In this chapter I will look at how the conceptual framework developed in chapter 1 relates to the use of sound in my practice, particularly the sound of voice and how it might function as grotesque. In doing this I will look at ideas that examine the intersection of sound, language, and meaning, focusing on the unique ability of voice to destabilise the relationship between these elements. I will discuss the sound recording ‘Vent’ that I produced for the project, examining a number of ideas that informed my approach to what I consider a grotesque treatment of vocal sounds within this recorded work. I will discuss the work of sound poet Henri Chopin and the tape recorder experiments of William Burroughs, considering the importance of audio technologies in their work, and also my own sound work, examining how certain approaches to the use of audio technology are essential in realising what I have come to term as the 'grotesque voice.'

My motivation for focusing on sound in this project stems from the nature of my practice which often involves working simultaneously on various sound/music projects, and gallery based visual art exhibitions. Before starting this research the link between these two separate areas of practice was not obvious, and even though many ideas and concepts are shared between the two areas of output, I had previously considered them somewhat divided. That changed during the course of this research project as I decided to bring these separate areas of practice into direct relation with each other by producing a body of visual work that was directly informed by a specific sound recording. In doing this I identified what I perceived as a connection between the two separate areas - the voice. I saw a relationship between the reoccurring motifs of comically grotesque figures in my visual work that often appear engaged in vocalisations and oral activity, and the use of abstracted vocal elements in my sound work. I wanted to explore how voice might run as a thread between the two seemingly separate areas of my practice, and how the nature of this voice might be defined in relation to the conceptual framework of the grotesque developed in the opening chapter. This chapter focuses on my recorded sound work ‘Vent’ that I produced for the project and the ideas that shaped its development, and the following chapter will address how the sound of voice in this work was translated into visual work such as painting, drawing, objects and video.

In thinking about how the sound of voice might be considered grotesque, my research led me to a number of ideas that identify a dualistic nature of voice in relation to language. As a conveyer of meaning through communicative speech, the voice serves as a medium of intelligibility,

Matthew P. Hopkins, Vent, private press, 2013, cassette, compact disc, and digital. This recording is available online at “Bandcamp: Matthew P. Hopkins”, http://matthewphopkins.bandcamp.com
reason, and logic. But paradoxically the voice also facilitates a range of unintelligible utterances and bodily functions; screams, coughing, burps, grunts, laughter, wheezes, moans, heavy breathing, mumbling and so on. There is an incongruous aspect to voice in that it acts as an acoustic support for clearly delivered words, sentences, and phrases, but also has the ability to amplify states of distress, anxiety, and unease through a range of expressive, non-linguistic gestures. We can see the conflict within the voice if we consider that it ‘completes and complicates the signification of sound by adding and subtracting presence, by overriding the symbolic domain of language with too much signification, too much body, and too much voice’, which points to a kind of self-destructive mechanism within its operation. I’m interested in how a voice can become too much for itself, and in the process annul the codified attributes of language to create a sound that might be heard as grotesque and liminal. A voice that confuses and complicates its usual signifying functions follows the grotesque structural principle outlined in chapter 1, not through the use of particular words, but through a destabilisation of the boundaries between normal syntax, and non-linguistic over-driven signification. As noted earlier, the border or threshold zone is where the grotesque dwells and flourishes, and I see the grotesqueness of voice arising on the threshold of speech, in an acoustic area where recognisable speech and normal language flow becomes blurred with non-semantic, unintelligible vocal sounds.

One such instance of this kind of voice can be found in the aural events that occur during hypnagogic experiences. Speech phenomena in hypnagogic experience is characterised by a variety of internal and external voices for example hearing one’s name being called, nonsensical neologisms emanating from strange figures intersecting with one’s own voices mutating into fragmented, slowed and backwards gibberish and curse like whispers. Research into speech phenomena associated with hypnagogic experiences notes that it is accompanied by other sounds; crackling and snapping noises, loud bangs and crashes, and explosion and static noises inside the skull. My own experiences of speech in the hypnagogic event are characterised by a chorus of mutated unidentifiable other voices, along with white noise static sounds that pan from ear to ear, along with dense layers of warped drone and bubbling sounds – a truly grotesque sonic landscape. Occasionally fragments of words might emerge from this babble, and at other times unintelligible voices are embedded underneath sequences of unidentifiable sounds which situate aurality within these experiences somewhere between speech and noise, sense and nonsense. The effect is of an aural phenomenon that is simultaneously familiar and hallucinatory, an uncertain sound that seems like some sort of scrambled, esoteric code that can’t quite be deciphered. This experience of voice creates a conflicted sense that something is being communicated from somewhere else, resonating from somewhere beyond. Language and

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meaning lose their normal signifying power in hypnagogic experience becoming drenched in nonsense and a process of fragmentation which, due to the feeling that one is fully awake, gives these experiences a kind of skewed mystical significance. The voice bubbles and mutates in these gaps between waking and sleeping, becoming too much for itself seeming to suggest possibilities of another mode of speech that might exist outside our known limits of language, an uncertain grotesque aural matter we cannot quite grasp.

For this project I produced a number of sound recordings that evoked a similar experience to the way vocality occurs in hypnagogic experience. As a deforming force that upsets normal expectations of speech, the grotesque voice uses a distorting principle by working to confuse our anticipation of meaning and sense that the voice is supposed to carry with it. Within the hypnagogic state the dualistic functions of the voice merge to suspend it in an uncertain transitional mode; it is neither clear and functional, or insane and incomprehensible, but heard as an absurd fusion of both sides as a voice in flux between sense and nonsense. Even though speech in these experiences is completely abstracted and unrecognisable, we can't shake the expectations of voice as a sound that is ingrained with meaning, so we try to interpret and find some sort of sense in these grotesque vocalisations. Writing about the interconnected nature of voice and meaning Mladen Dolar notes,

‘what defines the voice as special among the infinite array of acoustic phenomena, is it's inner relationship with meaning. The voice is something which points towards meaning, it is as if there is an arrow in it which raises the expectation of meaning, the voice is an opening toward meaning. No doubt we can ascribe meaning to all kinds of sounds, yet they seem deprived of it “in themselves,” independent of our ascription, while the voice has an intimate connection with meaning, it is a sound which appears to be endowed in itself with the will to “say something”.’

My interest in how to make the voice grotesque in this project, as exemplified in hypnagogic speech phenomena, might be seen as an investigation of the uniquely intimate, yet unstable connection voice has with meaning through the paradoxical nature of voice to deform itself. The sound work ‘Vent’ produced for this project is based on this idea of rupturing the space that voice opens towards meaning, by deforming the implied expectations and embedded will in voice to sound out something meaningful. ‘Vent’ was developed from a number of sound studies that experimented with a range of audio processes and techniques that aimed to capture the voice becoming too much for itself on the margins of language where the voices normative functions merge with expressive, non linguistic utterances. These initial grotesque voice studies took shape as small collages, vocal miniatures which layered together various processed

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recordings of my own voice; tape loops of mumbled chant like clumps, microphone and amplification techniques which created vocal noise imbibed with feedback and distorted throat gargles, playback speed and pitch manipulations to render backwards warped speech and gaseous breath sounds, and various spatial and modulation effects to create textural sounds almost unrecognisable as voice. Some of these studies were light and ambient, others were more harsh and damaged, and many hovered somewhere between these two extremes. These studies evolved through improvising with the various audio processes outlined above, and repetitively recording and playing back the results, then re-recording to build up dense passages of voice in a state of sonic decomposition. What I realised whilst making these recordings was that the process of creating the grotesque voice is heavily reliant on relocating voice from its usual place in the body and funnelling it through a variety of audio technologies, which suggests a grotesque relationship between the recorded technologised voice and the body. Writing on the relationship between the body and audio technology N. Katherine Hayles highlights an interesting point on mutation of voice through the use of tape recorder

‘When voice, historically linked with presence and therefore with the immanence of the body, was displaced onto tape, the body metonymically participated in the transformations voice underwent in this medium. If voice could be transported through time and spliced with different sounds, the body-as-tape-recorder could also undergo time delay and mutation.’

Voice, along with being deeply entwined with meaning, is also unmistakeably a sound connected to the body, therefore the deformations occurring in the grotesque voice experiments I made present an interesting notion of how sound might render the body grotesque. Hayles wonders if the tape recorder can become a ‘surrogate body...does the body become a tape recorder?’ This suggests that sound plays an important role in rupturing boundaries between man and machine through a relocation of voice into audio technologies. In the relocation of voice from its normal acoustic habitat of the mouth and throat, and inscription onto tape or other media, the voice becomes a physical material to be manually handled; cut up, rearranged, repeated, stretched, zoomed in on, and amplified far beyond its usual parameters. The destabilisation of boundaries in the grotesque voice might then be seen as happening in the relocation of voice beyond the biological boundary of the body through various audio processes of deformation and mutation that are only possible in its surrogate technological body.

An influential approach to handling the voice this way can be found in the sound poetry of Henri Chopin. Chopin's work uses highly sensitive microphones to capture layers of barely

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22 Hayles, “Voices Out of Bodies,”
audible sounds located in the buccal space of the mouth onto reel to reel tape machine. These sounds are then physically handled by Chopin through speeding up, slowing down, and interfering with the tape heads and tape path on the reel to reel machine, which is played back at very high volume during performance. Chopin deforms voice by exposing the usually concealed acoustic aspects of the mouth, what he refers to as “vocal micro particles”, and magnifies these otherwise hidden sounds that dwell on the periphery of speech. Our normal expectations of the voice are upset by the possibilities offered by the substitute body of the tape recorder which creates a grotesque transformation of tiny breaths, swallowing sounds, and movements of the tongue and saliva, into a manipulated amplified sonic assault.

Although an in depth look at Chopin in relation to the history of sound poetry is beyond the scope of this paper, his work might be seen to function broadly in relation to this research by ‘releasing sounds from their roles as vehicles for or carriers of linguistic communication and regrouping them in new acoustic structures or systems which are no longer, or not yet, linguistic.’ Chopin takes what are usually insignificant scraps of language, the seemingly useless bits around words, and re-organizes them into a powerful new structure of voice. This underscores the unreliability of voice as a carrier of meaning and sense through a process of deforming language, not through words, but by opening up a liminal space on the threshold of words which distorts the function of the mouth to deliver normal speech.

Taking influence from Chopin's use of areas around and outside words, my recorded sound work 'Vent' uses various non-linguistic abstracted vocal sounds, particularly processed breathing sounds. In reviewing my initial sound studies, I recognised that breath also operates with paradoxical, incongruous nature; in one sense breath is an essential life force that silently keeps the body going, it acts as a base force that propels words out of the mouth, and in deep calm measures is a key technique in a range of relaxation therapies, meditative and spiritual practices. But on the other side of this is erratic rapid breathing in states of delirium and trance, huffing and sucking to ingest substances, and in states of distress breath can encroach upon language and disrupt normal word flow through its gasping, spluttering, wheezing, and hissing capabilities. Writing on modes of voice Norrie Neumark notes that 'the ground zero of voice is breath. Voice begins with the breath, and breath serves as a constant physical reminder of the emphemerality, intimacy, and alteriety of the voice.' I became interested in how breath might

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be seen as an aural axis point, a foundational base for voice from which one direction it's force blows smooth, regulated vocalisations, but in another direction it sends out erratic gusts of nonlinguistic, sub-vocal expressive gestures of damaged breath. ‘Vent’ follows both directions of breath and integrates it's opposing functions in a grotesquely reconfigured new mode of breath; reverberated whispery gaseous wind like textures draw into and out of very harsh, gasping distorted damaged bursts of breath. Modulated phlegmy, bubbling saliva drenched gargles slowly pulse in parts, and dramatically slowed down, delayed inhaling and exhaling forms sustained drones.

In ‘Vent’ a variety of musical and non-musical elements are incorporated with the breathing sounds to further distort the sound of voice; broken, damaged electronics and feedback merge with the harsh breaths, field recordings of boiling steamy household appliances blend into the transitional sections, and subtle drones and ambient instrument washes mix in to the more relaxed passages. These additional sounds give the piece a kind of ritualised feel, particularly during the segments of repetitive garbled, chant like phrases which hover in over the breathing and various ambient sounds at certain points in the recording. My aim was to make this recording reminiscent of a deranged incantation or mangled mantra that is trying to summon or connect with somewhere else, something beyond, but it has gone astray – a compromised, slightly damaged transcendence.

This aspect of the work draws heavily from the grotesque nature of hypnagogic speech phenomena, and ideas relating to the beyond discussed earlier, but also take influence from the use of voice in the tape recorder experiments of William S. Burroughs. Burroughs’s sound experiments relate to his theories on language which consider the word as a virus or invading parasite which Burroughs views in relation to ‘Western culture as ruled by a system of mass ventriloquy in which disembodied voices invade and occupy each individual.' Putting aside Burroughs’s theory of the word virus, what is of particular interest to my research is Burroughs use of the cut up method in his tape recorder experiments as an audio processing technique to produce a grotesque mode of voice. Burroughs’s tapes manifest a fragmented flow of language and other sounds through recordings of his own and other's voices reading texts, radio and television broadcasts, street noise and music fragments, as well as a range of unidentifiable screeching and scrambled electronic noises which all cut, and feed into each other. Burroughs’s sounds, like Chopin's sounds, operate with a conscious attempt to eradicate logic and meaning to invent new sonic structures for the voice by distorting the normal stream of language.

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Burroughs’s achieves aural distortions and fragmented language flow in these tape experiments through an audio based version of his literary cutup up technique29 which ruptures boundaries of the self through a process where ‘vocalisations and body sounds are spliced into someone else's, the effects can feed back into the bodies, setting off a riot of mutations…The taped body can separate the vertical “divide line”, grotesquely becoming half one person and half another, as if it were tape spliced lengthwise30 Burroughs’s surrogate, mutated tape 'self' becomes possible through his handling and manipulation of the recorded sounds as physical material; cutting the magnetic storage material to reconfigure multiple voices and sounds as one, repeatedly moving tape back and forth over the record head to create rhythmic garbled repetitions, and rapid punching in of the record button to create warbled tape transitions between words and other sounds. Voice here undergoes a surgical like procedure where it is severed, transplanted, and reattached into a reconfigured tape self through a process of ‘voice inscription at once permanent and mutable, repeating past moments exactly yet also permitting interventions in the present that radically altered its form and meaning.'31 In Burrough's recordings the tape machine offers a new way to speak that the body cannot through the malleability of the storage media and functions of the machine to 'cut in' and alter its form. Chopin's work discussed earlier relies on revealing hidden aspects of voice through microphone and amplification technologies to render it grotesque, whereas Burrough's uses technology differently to make the voice grotesque through collaging, reordering and fragmented sequencing of multiple voices merged with other sounds.

In the jolting, fractured cut in method used by Burroughs we find 'breathing spaces, gaps between words and broken continuities providing ways out of predetermined patterns of thinking and speaking.'32 These recordings are populated by minute moments where words are suddenly guillotined by the record button, and the burbled tape transitions create rhythmic slippages between sounds. The voice in these crossover points sounds stretched and wobbly, incisions into words abruptly implant moments of static and tape hiss, and voice becomes confused as it merges with unidentifiable noises. These deformations rely on technological interference with voice to present new metamorphic ways of speaking which are made audible via the operation of the tape recorder which manually breaks down conventional, predetermined notions of voice as a clear communicative instrument. The body-as-tape-recorder grotesquely reconfigures new patterns and understandings of voice by fracturing the clear communicative

30 Morris, Sound States, 79.
31 Morris, Sound States, 77.
function of normal speech in order to find new sounds in the liminal scraps between and around words.

In my own sound studies I deliberately isolated mistakes, bits of cut-off words, feedback sounds and other broken audio elements to use as part of my sound work. These audio scraps became important compositional elements in the making of ‘Vent’, creating a disrupted broken feel to the sound and reflect the uneasy, damaged experience of sound found in hypnagogic experiences. Sections of ‘Vent’ contain short passages of breath, noises and warped voices build up slowly only to be suddenly 'reset' by these scraps which break the flow and hypnotic repetition. This aspect of the recording adds to the ritualised, transcendental notions discussed earlier, creating the impression that liminal voices from somewhere else are scrambled and failing to come through properly. This brings us back to the ideas of the beyond discussed earlier, and might be seen to echo the sentiments of Mike Kelley when he notes that 'I've always thought of art as secular ritual, as material ritual. For me art sometimes functions as social critique or social analysis, but at other times I'm simply playing with forms of ritual as pure form.'

‘Vent’ makes the voice grotesque by distorting notions of breathing/relaxation exercises and mantra like chants to create my own invented idiosyncratic, slightly damaged form of secular transcendence through sound. This sound functions like an actual mantra in the project – something to concentrate or meditate upon in order to develop other work such as video, paintings, objects and drawings. In considering how my use of voice is shaped by the conceptual framework of the grotesque outlined in chapter 1, the following chapter will look at how this sound of voice might be seen to 'speak' through the other work created for the project. This looks at how the grotesque voice acts as a foundational source that was translated into video works, paintings, objects and drawings examining the way in which voice 'speaks' through this work using the metaphor of ventriloquism.

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33 Bechtler, On the Beyond, 26.
Chapter 3: Ventriloquised

In this chapter I will look at how the grotesque voice might be seen to ‘speak’ through the various visual works I produced for the project using the metaphor of ventriloquism. In doing this I will explore ventriloquism as a concept that leads us to consider how the artist becomes engaged in a dialogue with themselves, their work, and the audience. In exploring this concept, I will consider how the ‘other’ ventriloquial voices that arise in this dialogue relate to my development of the grotesque voice, and how this sound went on to speak through visual works such as paintings, drawings, and videos. I will look at the work of American artist Tony Oursler, whose sculptural video figures engage the audience in a complex ventriloquial exchange using multiple voices, and also examine how my own video work explores a ventriloquial exchange in another way. I will also examine how the grotesque voice, as a sound, is translated into silent, static forms such as painting and drawing which takes influence from Gilles Deleuze's ideas of painting invisible forces and capturing 'sensations' such as sounds. The recurring motif of the face/head in my paintings and drawings will be examined as a site where the force and sensation of the grotesque voice is captured. This considers the predominance of the face/head in my work in relation to the ideas of Belgian poet/painter Henri Michaux.

Theorist David Goldblatt discusses how ventriloquism might be used as a metaphor in the complex interaction between artist, the work in progress, and the finished object. He suggests that this interaction might be viewed through the model of ventriloquism whereby artists are creating a dialogue with themselves. This self-ventriloquism creates a bizarre situation in action, presenting a voice that emanates from the subject, by way of a voice coming from the outside. Goldblatt notes

'Sometimes, during this period, the artist thinks of the work as the voice of another (while retaining a certain responsibility for the other's voice embodied eventually in an object or projected in an action the way the ventriloquist's voice is embodied in the dummy). Sometimes it is the work saying something to the artist with the artists responding appropriately...At other times, working at art is just the artist talking to himself – but in a different voice.'34

I'm interested in this process outlined by Goldblatt whereby the artist engages them self in a

multi layered altered vocality, creating a situation where they take on the role of both ventriloquist and dummy simultaneously. The artist is speaking in an inner dialogue, which evolves during the work in progress, allowing the artist to speak in 'another' voice from the questions an artist asks in the moment of making – 'Is this working?' 'What is this saying?' 'What am I trying to say?' But in asking these questions the artist does not receive clear decisive answers back, just a sense that the work seems 'right' at certain points. This self ventriloquised exchange does not flow like a normal conversation, as the 'other' voice trickles back in dribs and drabs of mumbled fragments, uncertainties, bits of answers that are constantly revised, erased and reanswered along with the progression of the physical work.

Although it is unlikely that all artists develop a work in progress this way, and that this metaphor of ventriloquism may not be useful in many cases, it is however a very apt metaphor for the way in which I developed the grotesque voice in this project. In projecting my voice into various audio technologies, to deform, re-arrange, and mutate it, the voice returns ventriloquised and estranged with its own questions - 'Is this the sound you were wanting?' 'Is this appropriately grotesque?' Obviously I am somewhat willing or intentionally directing this voice to become grotesque, but I don't consciously know want I want it to 'say'. The ventriloqual exchange in my work might then be seen as speaking and listening simultaneously; scanning the conversation I'm engaging myself in, as it is occurring, attempting to locate an appropriately grotesque sound in my own vocalisations. Goldblatt describes the artist as operating with intentionality towards the creation of this 'other' voice, but relying on opening up the voice to a level of uncertainty and unpredictability as someone that 'directs other voices, but also as one who opens him/herself up to allow non-quotidian voices to be given form and structure.\textsuperscript{35} What might be seen as an essential feature of this ventriloquised exchange that Goldblatt proposes is the reliance on opening up a liminal space where normal quotidian voices are subject to unfamiliar, extraordinary alterations, which encourage it to return estranged; an intentional deformation. This idea draws comparison with the gaps or interval that the grotesque opens up through its distorting force, so as to create a liminal place where the artist invents or constructs ‘another’ voice. In relation to the formation of the grotesque voice, the unfamiliar non-quotidian voices I open myself up to during this process might be seen as the results of my own voice once it has undergone audio deformation. This is my voice, but ‘another’ technologised altered version of it, which forms through the relocation of this sound from the body into various technological processes which shape and structure it in new ways.

The ideas above demonstrate what might be seen as a self-referential process of ventriloquism that the artist engages in, but another kind of ventriloquism might be seen to occur in the exchange between finished object and audience. American artist Tony Ourslers sculptural video

\textsuperscript{35} Goldblatt, \textit{Art and Ventriloquism}, 54.
practice produces a grotesque mode of ventriloquised voice that engages the audience through various types of disembodied, mutated talking heads - quite literally talking dummies. Appearing with a caricatural, deformed facial resemblance – often just big eyes and mouth projected onto biomorphic sculptural forms (fig. 1 & 2), these bizarre video figures engage the audience directly by speaking at them in strange monologues of fragmented recollections, questions, and paranoid musings. Oursler's figures create an uncanny sense that they are being ventriloquised by a confluence of threatening invisible outside forces issued from somewhere else. Writing on the use of sound in Oursler's work Tony Conrad notes that

"Voicecasting, throwing the voice, like a net, over and around an image, is a trademark device of the “puppetry” which has pervaded Oursler's career. Oursler's “puppets” are so visually diverse, often even screwy, insubstantial, or unexpectedly synecdochic, that they draw us into an unexpected dramatic register, one in which the voice itself is the dominant figure."

It is not the appearance of these figures that allows us to empathise with them; it is what they say that resonates with us. A grotesque mode of voice is a key feature in Oursler's work which draws us into a liminal fluid world of multiple deformed voices which speak of indeterminable problems and unspecified concerns which in turn triggers something in the audience that allows them to reflect upon their own confused internal mental babble. They don't narrate events or issues we know or can identify with, but seem to have tapped into a mass of confused, threatening, mutating undefined voices that inhabit the atmosphere all around us, a mass that threatens to seep in and consume us at any moment.

This kind of ventriloquising reflects Oursler's interest in a range of themes that explore instances of split or multiple selves such multiple personality disorder, and the relationship between technology and notions of spiritualism that deal with mediumship and possession. What is grotesque about Oursler's brand of ventriloquism is that it blurs boundaries between who is speaking to who, or through whom, by suggesting these voices build through an accumulative process that is due to 'the phenomena of others words and thoughts imperceptibly invading, imperceptibly wearing away over time, some material leaving a residual, maybe, indelible stain.' The mental markings that are amplified through Oursler's dummies flow like a slipstream of mental confusion that we can slide in and out of, a persistent insensible mass of ventriloquial voices that echo a shared psychological uncertainty. The grotesque power of

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Figure 1: Tony Oursler, *Purplite*, 2006, video projection with audio on fibreglass

Figure 2: Tony Oursler, *Alien Acid*, 2007, video projection with audio on fibreglass
Oursler's work lies in the fact that the concerns these dummies voice seem to be on the verge of coherence, yet they never really get to the point and let us know exactly what is troubling them; they remain in a liminal flux, open enough to force the viewer to bridge the gap by bringing his or her own perplexing existential dread to the surface in resolving the work.

The metaphor of ventriloquism used so far relates to comedic popular forms of entertainment where a performer uses a dummy through which they speak in a different voice, but the origins of ventriloquism date back to medieval times where the other 'voice' of ventriloquism was associated with magical, religious, esoteric practices rather than as entertainment. The word 'ventriloquist' comes from the Latin *ventriloquus* which translates to 'belly speaker', and during the dark ages practitioners of this vocal illusion were 'regarded as demonic conjurers possessed by unclean spirits that lurked in their entrails, whence they gave their utterances.'

I’d like to now discuss a work of my own, the video/sound piece 'Belly Speaker' (fig. 3 & 4) and consider how this was informed by the grotesque voice and the metaphor of ventriloquism.

This work deals with the origins of ventriloquism and presents an absurd caricature of the historical notion of a 'Belly Speaker'. The crudely drawn eyes which reshape the stomach into a facial form present a cartoon like host that has moved out of the bowels, appearing on the surface of the belly as a worn out entity engaged in some sort of defunct breathing ritual. This figure disrupts conventional notions of either an evil highly charged spirit, or divine angelic host, and instead suggests a more defeated, down trodden entity that is perhaps just as fatigued by its own existence as we might be. This video was based on the Vent recording using processed breathes that build, but become interrupted and damaged at points creating a sense that the energy force the ‘Belly Speaker’ is attempting to channel is fading and cannot quite make it through.

The ‘Belly Speaker’ presents an interesting version of the body-as-tape recorder idea discussed earlier in terms of how the voice has been altered, and relocated. The breath, after being removed from the body and altered via various audio processes, has been returned to the body reconfigured in a grotesque way; it has been cast down to the guts where it attempts to animate the figures useless breathing ritual by way of a useless orifice – the belly button, a plugged up orifice that no longer functions. It’s as if there is not enough steam to carry the voice up through the throat and out the mouth, so it is trying to take a short cut straight out through the belly button. This video suggests an inability to summon whatever Belly Speaker is trying to bring forth, in a sense it might be seen as ridiculing notions of possession and mediumship, but this is

Figure 3: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Belly Speaker*, 2012, video projection with sound, 5:49 min

Figure 4: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Belly Speaker*, installation view, Tin Sheds Gallery, 2013
not the intention; belly Speaker has done his job, he has invoked a spirit, it's just that the spirit is a little more pathetic than we expected it to be. This then does not discount notions of spirits, a beyond, or paranormal forces; it simply undermines the associations of power and importance we invest in things that remain completely unknown to us.

This example of my video work reflects a direct ventriloquial process whereby the grotesque voice acts as a vocal element in the work, but my project also considers how the grotesque voice works indirectly through paintings and drawings which contain no sound. The paintings and drawings shift attention away from the actual speaking of the grotesque voice to concentrate on listening, and how the effects of hearing this liminal sound might be rendered in 2-D static form. This became a process of drawing the experience of hearing, or having this voice move through you, which resulted in images where the head/face form seems to be undergoing processes of mutation and deformation effected by the grotesque voice. The movements of these sounds were charted through gestural marks, fragmentation and rearrangement of face and other body parts, and a variety of pipe, inhaler, and exhaust tubes that protrude from the figures as entry/exit points through which the grotesque voice travels. The images aim to render a crossover point suspended between figuration and abstraction; it is unclear if we are seeing abstract areas of sound gaining figurative proportions, or if the figurative attributes are being consumed by the abstract aural forces. These images might be thought of as stuck somewhere between poles of abstraction and figuration which reflects the uncertain nature of the grotesque voice; words forming/deforming, multiple voices moving in and out of each other, and liminal spaces between words where non-linguistic vocal sounds merge with noise.

My paintings and drawings were influenced by a number of ideas in the section titled 'Painting Forces' from the text 'Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation', by Gilles Dleuze. In this text Deleuze presents an idea in which the painter is engaged in an activity that is not so much about recreating or inventing particular forms, but is attempting to harness and capture forces. These forces according to Deleuze might be thought of as 'closely related to sensation: for a sensation to exist, a force must be exerted on a body, on a point of the wave. But if force is the condition of sensation, it is nonetheless not the force that is sensed, since the sensation “gives” something completely different from the forces that condition it.' In the drawings (fig. 5 & 6) the grotesque voice has been recorded through visual markings that freeze the sensation of this morphing voice as it passes through a mental space, a process of trying to transcribe it as it is being heard. This was not a process of trying to draw what the sound 'looks' like in terms of a

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Figure 5: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Pipe Smoker #2*, 2012, pencil on paper, 20 X 20cm

Figure 6: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Pipe Smoker #3*, 2012, pencil on paper, 20 X 20cm
colour or form theory that equates certain tones and shapes to particular sounds, but rather was an attempt to capture the sensation of this voice through an automatic transcription style of drawing. These sketches attempt to capture a momentary freeze frame of this sound as it passes through, and the mental effects of this movement upon the listener. Drawing this way suggests a kind of ventriloquism in that I am using myself like a dummy or conduit through which the grotesque ventriloquised voice is moving and leaving traces, which I am attempting to transcribe at the moment of impact through a kind of seismographic rendering. The sensation of this voice is of a layered multi vocal force of many voices moving together, entangling, mutating, and deforming each other. Deleuze describes Bacon's figures as 'if invisible forces were striking the head from many different angles. The wiped and swept parts of the face here take on new meaning, because they mark the zone where the force is in the process of striking.'\(^{40}\) In the drawing examples included here tube like pipe forms protrude out as though they are entry or exit points through which the sensation of the grotesque voice flows. The ventriloquised grotesque voice carves a path for itself through these forms, which often appear as uncertain objects; are they smoking pipes, exhaust tubes, or some kind of breathing apparatus? With these works my aim was to record the sensation of hearing this liminal sound as a force, mapping it’s movements as it strikes and spreads through these abstracted tubes which issue a grotesquely absurd transformation of the figure.

The paintings produced for the project expand upon this idea of mapping or charting developed through the drawings, taking certain forms and elements of the drawings and reworking them on a different scale and texture. Various materials such as gel mediums and pastes were used to create gooier, phlegm like representations of the grotesque voice’s movements. Paintings such as (fig. 7 & 8) transform the facial area into a compartmentalised vessel that depicts simultaneously the interior mental terrain, and exterior surface markings caused by the aural sensation of the grotesque voice’s movements. As a kind of map or charting of the mental terrain that the grotesque voice carves out, these paintings do not depict a knowable, recognisable territory, it is not a sensible place, it is more like the survey of an unknown landscape inhabited by unnatural forces. Deleuze states that when a force is exerted on a painting ‘it does not give birth to an abstract form, nor does it combine sensible forms dynamically: on the contrary, it turns this zone into a zone of indiscernibility that is common to many forms, irreducible to any of them...’\(^{41}\) What the grotesque voice has done to these figures is imperceptible; are these figures speaking, sucking, or breathing the undefined blob like material trails of these liminal vocalisations? Is this zone showing a cross section of a mutating forms that are growing facial features, or is it the other way around - is the discernible

\(^{40}\) Deleuze, Logic of Sensation, 58.
\(^{41}\) Deleuze, Logic of Sensation, 59.
Figure 7: Matthew P. Hopkins, Exhaler, 2012, acrylic, impasto, and gel medium on canvas, 40 x 40cm
Figure 8: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Brown Pipe*, 2013, acrylic on linen, 75 X 80cm
head/face form becoming indiscernible as a result of the sensation of these voices? My intention was to make it unclear. In many of my paintings there seems to be a system of flow, like a canal that winds its way through a head towards a number of tubes. The flow of the grotesque voice has left faint washy impressions in certain areas, and in other parts there are thick pools of pastes and paint which suggest that the voice has collected and formed a small deposit, imprinting itself permanently on the psyche. Some paintings display the force of this sensation as causing the facial form to become detached from its body and float away, ascending somewhere else (fig. 9). This might be understood to represent a pictorial equivalent of the ventriloquial process of relocating the grotesque voice into a surrogate technological processing device; dislocated from the body, the head floats away for processing and once altered through the sensation of sound, it returns back to the body grotesquely transformed.

As noted earlier these paintings aim to suspend the image between abstraction and figuration by creating an uncertainty about the head/face form in the painting; is the head being built from the inside out through the abstract mental sensation growing into a facial form, or is an existent figure dissolving into the abstracted interior of the mind? Either way some sort of face/head form seems unavoidable in these paintings. Why? I would say that some sort of facial resemblance is necessary to suggest a listener, a subject through which the grotesque voice is being heard. But I also see the face/head as an important form in relation to the grotesque voice in a number of other ways that I will now discuss. Belgian poet and painter Henri Michaux, whose poetry, painting and theoretical writings are very influential on my practice offers an interesting thought on this question when he notes that 'since we lead an excessively facial life, we are in a perpetual fever of faces.' These paintings might then be viewed as an attempt to capture a feverish sensation of multifarious faces engaging in this voice, which does not simply depict a listener hearing a single voice, but the sensation of multiple other voices ventriloquising through the listener. In these paintings a mutated multi-vocality of the grotesque voice is reflected through many faces appearing and ‘speaking’ as one; a freeze frame of the flux of this vocal force in which identities are faintly forming, merging, and slowly degrading away simultaneously. Michaux notes the unescapable intrusion of faces in his work ‘as if one were constantly shaping a fluid face in oneself, ideally plastic and malleable, forming and un-forming from ideas and impressions, automatically sculpted into an instantaneous synthesis...’ The grotesque voice, as a ventriloquised force consisting of many different voices and sounds exerts itself on my canvases which acts as containers, empty vessels in which the fluid face fills up with impressions of the forming/deforming sensation of the sound. These paintings were built slowly by adding in washes, scrapes and blobby impressions of the sound at random points,

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43 Michaux, “Phenomenon of Painting,” 312.
Figure 9: Matthew P. Hopkins, *Severed Head #1*, 2012, acrylic, impasto and gel medium on canvas, 90 X 90cm
facial parts formed out of these, and openings/orifices appeared as these layers built up through which the exhaust tubes could then stick out. The paintings were worked on in at variations orientations, repeatedly turned in different directions to find groups of faces in there somewhere. This topsy-turvy aspect to the finished works seemed an appropriate pictorial representation of a fluid, amorphous sound that seems to defy any sort definite linguistic shape or orientation.

In the indiscernible, fluid faces that appear in these paintings a mutating morphing sense of self occurs through the effects of a distorting grotesque vocal sound. But as mentioned earlier this is not a process of merging completely unknown other voices with identifiable normal voices of the self. It functions more as a synthesis of echoed hidden selves which represents 'that infinitely plastic and malleable second self which is silently shaped and reshaped at every moment of the day behind a wall of one's actual thoughts and formulated expressions.' This takes us back to the idea discussed earlier of the artist engaging in a self-ventriloquial exchange. In opening up and allowing ones normal voice to be ruptured through a flux of the seemingly unintelligible, a distortion occurs to create a sense that there is no certain subject or individual present, only a fluid multi vocal self that is usually dormant. We will not 'hear' this other voice of ours until we rupture the limits and boundaries of our normal voice that then gives birth to the grotesque voice. The grotesquely liminal, fragmented sense of self echoed in these paintings aims to capture the sensation of the hectic ventriloquised voice that arises to speak to, with, against, and over the top of the host of identities that make up an individual.

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Conclusion

This research began by asking how sound might be considered grotesque, more specifically how the sound of the voice can be made grotesque. This began by firstly discussing the parameters of how I have come to think about the grotesque, contextualising it as a structural principle, a certain operation that unfolds within an artwork. This view of the grotesque frames it as something that arises once the boundaries between opposing or unlikely elements are distorted and merged in metamorphic ways to create new forms. The need for the grotesque to have a boundary or limit to rupture was examined which characterised the grotesque as an in between, liminal category that operates in an unresolved flux. This provided a framework that I used to characterise a certain use of voice in my practice as a grotesque sound.

Chapter 2 then employs this framework to explore how the sound of voice in my work might be seen as grotesque, which centres around an exploration of the relationship voice has with language and meaning. Within this relationship I highlight the paradoxical nature of voice to destabilise itself on the boundaries between normal speech and expressive distorted non-linguistic vocal gestures. I look at how my own sound recording, partially informed by the work of Henri Chopin and William S. Burroughs, presents vocal sounds on the periphery of speech, once processed via various audio technologies, to form what I term the 'grotesque voice.' I discuss how the 'grotesque voice' is at the core of this project and functions as a distorting ventriloquial force that 'speaks' through a range of work such as video, paintings and drawings.

In Chapter 3 the metaphor of ventriloquism is employed to further explore how sound functions within the framework of the grotesque, by examining how the grotesque voice speaks in a number of ways through different kinds of artwork such as video, drawing and painting. This ventriloquial exchange is explored as a multi vocal distorted form of speaking to oneself, but outside of oneself in 'another' voice. This kind of grotesque, liminal vocality is discussed as a complex negotiation of known and unknown voices that travel back and forth between my sound recording, my visual work, and myself. Video work is examined in relation to the metaphor of ventriloquism in terms of dummies, or conduits through which the grotesque voice speaks as an audio element. In regards to the painting and drawings, the ventriloquial exchange is explored in a less direct fashion, by considering how the experience of hearing the grotesque voice, as an invisible sound, might be captured in static 2D forms. This work charts the grotesque voice as a force that produces a liminal sensation, which I attempt to capture a freeze frame of, through painted and drawn images.

The main goal of this research might be thought of as an enquiry into how the grotesque moves
through my work, and how this movement might be understood as a sound; an aural force that spreads and takes shape in many different art forms. This research has defined this movement as it relates to the sound of a grotesque voice, but in listening to what this grotesque voice sounds like as it spreads around, we can hear that it is no normal speaking voice. The conversation that this voice facilitates functions as a multi vocal, fragmented form of ventriloquism whereby the grotesque voice is 'talking' to, through, over the top and outside of a range of visual art forms. This is a nonsensical, mutated speech - no words, no linear progression of ideas, feelings, directions, or questions and answers are communicated by this voice. No recognisable language here, only a seething mass of fractured vocal waste and oral scraps that bubble into an undefined babble. This babble acts as fuel to feed an ongoing mutating sound force that I attempt to tap into and let 'speak' in its own way.
Bibliography

Books


Websites


Matthew Hopkins

_The Buccal Chamber_

MFA graduation exhibition

**List of works**

**video**

bspk.mov - 'Belly Speaker', 2013, video with sound, 5:49 min

**images**

gsh1.jpg – 'Belly Speaker', 2013, installation view
gsh2.jpg – 'Head & Tubes', 2013, oil on linen and acrylic on pine, 30X70cm
gsh3.jpg – 'Buccal Figures', 2013, acrylic on linen and acrylic on pine, 90X160cm
gsh4.jpg – 'The Buccal Chamber', 2013, installation view
gsh5.jpg – 'Silent Sound Sculpture #1 (pedal board), 2013, acrylic on clay and audio cables, 90X25X25cm
gsh6.jpg – 'Silent Sound Sculpture #1(pedal board), 2013, detail
gsh7.jpg – 'Twin Ingestion', 2013, acrylic on linen, 80X80cm

**sound**

ventx1.wav – ‘mangman/chrspk’, 2013, track from the recording 'Vent', cassette, cdr, and digital, 4:10 min
ventx2.wav – ‘stpn.pnjowl', 2013, track from the recording 'Vent', cassette, cdr, and digital, 3:04 min