

Raucous

DIARY OF THE SILENT ONE (MARCH 2005)

I feel the thumping of the sound system punctuated by exuberant bursts of laughter as I thread my way through the early evening pub crowd. All around me people are in animated conversation. I find my friends at a large table near the back.

Everyone tries to include me but as I can only communicate by writing, or whispering hoarsely into someone's ear, I'm soon left behind in the conversation which leaps on without me. I scribble frantically to try and keep up, but by the time I've finished writing, the topic has totally changed and the moment to engage has long gone. I decide I need a drink.

"Can't hear you, speak up." For the third time I try to ask for an Emerson's Pilsner but a raucous group next to the bar kills any hope I have of being heard, so I end up pointing to a beer the guy next to me is drinking, God knows what it is.

Suddenly everything seems unnaturally loud in comparison to my voiceless state and I have an overwhelming urge to thump one of the men at the bar who has a particularly penetrating voice. There is so much noise surrounding me I feel besieged.

I realise I have to leave, now.

I have been reflecting on my year of voice loss which was, without doubt, the most difficult of my life.¹ After a relatively unsuccessful voice operation I had to undergo a period of complete silence. A recovery period followed when I could speak only a few words a day. Before I lost my voice I had never considered the concept of wasting words or that I would have only a daily ration to spend.

My enjoyment of good conversation is something I had taken for granted. I also came to realise how conversation and energy levels are linked. Because I couldn't banter, argue and joke in the way I used to, I felt exhausted after trying to communicate rather than becoming enlivened by conversation as I had in the past.

DIARY OF THE SILENT ONE (APRIL 2005)

It's come to this: I'm standing in my speech therapist's office making tugboat noises. I can now be a tugboat up and down a small scale and surprisingly, it helps. I'm starting to see these visits as a life-line.

At home I practice my tugboats in the bath and hope my partner is getting used to this regression to toddlerhood.

When I was finally released from the constraint of voice rationing my volume was far too low to socialise at all without electronic support.² This was an issue with my family and friends but also with my pets. I couldn't call the cat, for example; my raspy voice only extended as far as the edge of the deck. But it wasn't much better with people. If I was more than a few feet away they couldn't tell I was talking to them. I found myself trotting around like a small terrier, sidling up to people to get their attention. I felt that I was losing my personality as well as my voice, or that my new voice had swallowed up the real me.

DIARY OF THE SILENT ONE (MAY 2005)

The restaurant table is littered with the detritus of a good meal, half-filled wine glasses and the desert menus. In the centre of the table is my 'talking handbag', a rather tatty harakeke kete with a thin black lead trailing out of it to my headset mini-microphone. I feel surprisingly unselfconscious about my sound system despite bad jokes about aerobics class and 80s lycra. What a relief to be out talking with a group of friends.

The volume gets turned up several times to match the escalating background noise. Unfortunately, it blurts out a too loud comment into an unexpected volume drop. I wish I hadn't told the whole room THAT.

The handbag says the most outrageous things, perhaps it's been drinking.



Figure 1: Jane Venis, *Talking Handbag*, 2005, lined kete or bag made with harakeke or flax and incorporating miniature battery-powered amplifier with lapel microphone (image courtesy of the artist).

RAUCOUS PROJECT

My experience in using the *Talking Handbag* prompted me to develop the idea further into *Raucous*, a research project, to develop a voice aid for vocally impaired people. I have been researching the possibilities of a light and powerful amplifying system that is discretely integrated into clothing. There have been some recent developments in wearable mp3 players by a number of companies aimed at specific markets, in particular the youth and sporting market.³ However, it is so much easier to amplify an mp3 file through either head-phones or speakers with a small amplifier than to pick up and amplify a faint voice.

This will be the challenge for the *Raucous* project. The concept is to develop a system that will be light, safe, flexible and affordable and could have applications for the large numbers of people who suffer voice loss. Although this is primarily a design project it will also have a fine arts outcome as I am excited by the possibilities that discrete amplification will have for performance and sound works.

Voice loss affects a large number of people world-wide. This loss can be from a variety of causes, including medical, environmental, and psychological. Medical conditions that cause voice loss include throat cancer, vocal polyp and papilloma, vocal nodules and Parkinson's Disease. Voice overuse also contributes to chronic voice loss. Over-projection is also happening in industry where the health and safety focus has traditionally been on hearing loss due to high workplace decibels. These constant high decibels also promote voice overuse, which is exacerbated when workers in noisy environments wear earmuffs.⁴

The high profile of hearing loss and available technology for support when compared to the lack of technological support for people needing to amplify a faint voice, prompted me to make the satirical *Voice Trumpet*.⁵



Figure 2: Jane Venis, *Voice Trumpet*, 2007, performance rehearsal with Hannah Joynt (image courtesy of the artist and the photographer Liz Bryce).

VALUES SURROUNDING SPEECH AND SILENCE

In my current arts practice I focus on questioning and satirising popular culture with particular emphasis on both local and New Zealand mythologies. A series on the Otago icon *Southern Man*⁶ (2001), and his nemesis *Southern Woman*, signalled my interest in the gendering of voice and silence long before I experienced my voice loss. However, I am now re-reading these works in the light of that experience.



Figure 3: Jane Venis, *Oh Southern Man*, 2001, cartoon series, 30 x 20 cm, acrylic on hardboard (image courtesy of the artist).



Figure 4: Jane Venis, 2001, *Beer-Faced Lies*, 44 gallon six pack (image courtesy of the artist).

The silence of *Southern Man* is legendary; he represents a culture where stoicism and taciturnity are considered virtues. He is as unyielding as the southern landscape he inhabits: cold, dry and hard.⁷

In *Beer-Faced Lies* (2001), I discuss how the iconic silent kiwi male 'opens up' after a few beers. Somehow inebriation with alcohol provides a socially acceptable platform for men to talk. This work incorporates a tear tab whereby the viewer activates a soundtrack of multi-tracked male voices recorded in a sportsman's bar. The small print reads "Brewed in stoic silence in Dunedin."

It appears that the gendering of values placed on voice and silence are reinforced by their stereotyping in popular culture. The paradox of Speight's *Southern Man*'s popularity is that despite the clearly ironical edge displayed by the character, he is all too real and has come to be revered for the very qualities that were being satirised. *Southern Man* has turned the taciturn kiwi bloke into a cult hero, revered for his strong silent masculinity. In his silence there is the implication of control from within.

Conversely, verbosity implies a lack of control. When looking at the common elements in a list of colloquial words and phrases describing wordiness, many of them appear to be words usually associated with women and implying a wasting of words. For example: gossip, tittle-tattle, chit chat, chatter, blather, prattle, gabble, blabber, jabber, babble, flannel, gab, gush, tattle, belittle, cackle, banter, drivel, natter, blether, chinwag, gas, chat, chew the fat, patter, blab, yarn and gos. Silent women, however, are rewarded by the terms tranquil, serene, still, soft, quiescent and calm.

My exterior became tranquil and calm by default. When I lost my voice I no longer had the luxury of wasting words. Every word counted. I had to measure my words very carefully because if I talked too much, by the end of the day my whispering voice would be completely silenced. I started thinking about the huge difference between the dignity of self-imposed silence and the stifling effect of silence imposed by external factors.

I experienced a high level of condescension around my new-found silence. I was tired of comments like "tell me what you are learning by having to always listen" (subtext: what a shock for such a blabbermouth to finally shut up). Serenity is not my natural state; I longed to be so rich with words that I could again spend them on nonsense, word play, meaningless drivel and song.

DIARY OF THE SILENT ONE (SEPTEMBER 2005)

It's now three weeks since my second operation and I can speak!! My voice is a bit husky but I have VOLUME. I feel a huge sense of relief.

I make the decision to apply for funding to get the "Raucous Project" underway.

- 1 I have had major voice loss in the last three years because of papilloma, a viral condition that causes growths on the vocal chords. Fortunately, after two operations my voice has now been restored.
- 2 My feeble whisper was totally powerless against any situation involving more than a one-to-one conversation in a quiet room.
- 3 Kaho Abe's *Seamless Project*, in which he incorporates audio technology into his garments, is one of these. See Kaho Abe, "Seamless", *Sigtronica*, at <<http://seamless.sigtronica.org/projects.html>> last accessed on 15 November 2005. Another high-profile company is Phillips with their Nomad technology incorporating soft user interfaces. See Phillips Nomad, Akibalive, at <<http://www.akibalive.com/archives/000512.html>> last accessed on 15 November 2005.
- 4 Nerys Williams and Paul Carding, *Occupational Voice Loss* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005).
- 5 Although there is technology for people with no larynx – using a system for amplifying vocal vibrations (which produces a robotic sounding voice) – very little help is available for people needing to amplify a faint voice produced from a damaged larynx.
- 6 "Southern Man" represents the stereotypical New Zealand rural white male; he is caricatured by Speight's brewery in their advertising campaign.
- 7 Otago Geographer Robin Law analysed the Speight's Brewery "Southern Man" campaign whereby she discussed links between the iconography of landscape and the cultural politics of masculinity. See Robin Law, "Masculinity, Place and Beer Advertising in New Zealand: The Southern Man Campaign", *NZ Geographer*, 53 (1997): 22-28.

Jane Venis is an artist who works across sculpture, sound, performance and design. She graduated with the Master of Fine Arts Degree from the School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, in 2006; and is currently academic leader for the Creative Studies Programme in the Design Department. Her studio work explores the notion of the 'carnavalesque' and the ways in which it manifests in contemporary popular culture.