

Nina Ross

*Language acquisition;  
learning through conversa-  
tions*

A mouth

filled as much as possible at one time, or something difficult to say

—even abusive

are common understandings of ‘mouthful’. Two functions of the mouth:

to voice,

and to eat.

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Nina Ross dwells into these vital—and social—characteristics of the mouth in her video *Untitled #1* (origins of turn taking) (HD video, 2’42”, 2015).

A tensed interconnectivity between the voice, the self, the body, agency, subjectivity and performativity are at the centre of the artist’s practice. Also seen in *The Foreignness of Language* (HD video, 8’25”, 2013) where the artist is reading out single words in Norwegian, folding post-its (off camera) before

stuffing her mouth full of them

while a male voice-over corrects for pronunciation. This performance is a way for exploring how second

language influences and disrupts identity.

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Our voices are incredibly charged, most likely to give away our gender, nationality, social status as well as our emotions.

Immaterial, the voice is part of our cultural and acoustic environment. Although the politics of the voice are extremely complex, Mladen Dolar identifies the voice as

the most familiar thing, while recognising that

words fail us

to describe the complexities of the voice<sup>1</sup>

In *Untitled #1 (origins of turn taking)* Nina Ross focuses on the formation of infant's voice, by drawing our attention to a sonic relationship

beyond speech.

Brandon Labelle precisely draws on the tensions between voice and body, for him 'the individual is formed by language and in turn forms language through enactment.'<sup>2</sup> He positions the mouth as an

oral cavity as the central channel by which self and surrounding are brought into relation<sup>3</sup>

This is central to Nina Ross's video that mimics instructional documentary played to new mothers, with a voice-over that reads David Chrystal's *How Language Works* (2005) in a



fast and mechanical style

while focusing on the mouth.

Mouth and tongue: beyond words. Then, drawing our attention to sound itself.

Nina Ross refers to the mouth as ‘the psychological interplay between the mind as guided by experiences of the mouth’<sup>4</sup> and stresses in her work the importance of the

very movements and conditions inside the mouth.

The empty mouth of the child leaving the breast is a space to be filled that is replaced by speaking.<sup>5</sup> In other words, language is here positioned as

a mother’s breast in-absentia.

Breastfeeding is the site of a larger learning situation for both baby and mother, seen as

the breast that forms the mouth,

a physical and intimate process.

*Anabelle Lacroix*

1 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, MIT Press, 2006, p13.

2 Brandon Labelle, *Background Noise: Perspective on Sound Art*, Bloomsbury Academic, p133.

3 Brandon Labelle, *The Lexicon of the Mouth*, Bloomsbury, 2014

4 Nina Ross, Artist Talk Critical Animals symposium, 3 October 2015.

5 Nicola Abraham and Maria Torok, “Introjection-Interpretation: Mourning and Melancholia” in *Psychoanalysis in France*, ed. Serge Lebovici and Daniel Widlöcher, New York International Universities Press, 1980, p5-6. Referred to by Nina Ross in her artist talk at *Critical Animals*, 2015.

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*Untitled # 1 (origins of turn taking), 2015* is a response to linguist David Crystal's ideas on the origins of turn-taking in conversation to investigate how humans are socialised through learning a language whether foreign, patriarchal or mother tongue. The video draws on my experiences using and sharing language during pregnancy and with my newborn child. The initial idea was conceived while watching educational videos on a TV monitor in the Royal Women's Hospital appointment waiting room.

Employing self-portraiture performance video, this work seeks to investigate the authority of language at the beginning of an infant's life and how one learns to communicate through interactions with others before any words are spoken. Particular influence in this process and to the work itself includes researching and experiencing the origins of turn taking in language with my infant son.

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