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## Word. Sound. Power

Tate Modern London 12 July to 3 November

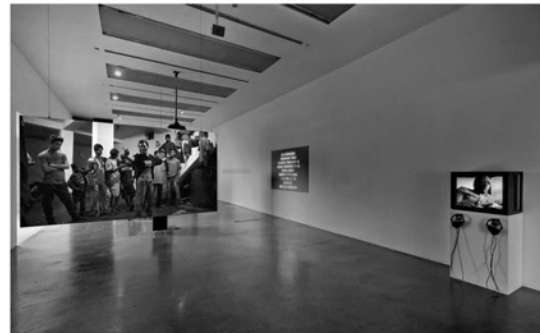
The Project Space at Tate Modern is something of an outlier in the archipelago of spaces and activities that make up Tate, but it has in recent years hosted a series of sharp and topical shows, conceived in collaboration with institutions such as SALT of Istanbul and Museo de Arte Lima. Sadly, the most recent in the series, titled 'Word. Sound. Power' and organised in tandem with Khoj, an artist-run space in New Delhi, is less convincing.

The title suggests a degree of curatorial megalomania. Does the show concern itself primarily with the power of the word, the power of sound, the sound of power, the sound of words? With political oratory, the rhetoric of protest, sound poetry, music as an aid or obstruction to power? As it turns out, the show touches on many of these topics and traditions without consistently plotting connections between them or offering a conceptual architecture that could encompass them all.

There are other signs of curatorial overreach. The total duration of the various videos and sound pieces is just shy of four hours. That would be inadvisable in a much larger venue; in a relatively small gallery that is patronised mainly by visitors who are on their way to headlining displays in other parts of the building it is baffling.

The pieces on display deserve better – and, as it happens, many work effectively in spite of the curatorial context. The engrossing 2001 documentary *Saacha* (*The Loom*) by Anjali Monteiro & KP Jayasankar is an account of the life and work of the Dalit poet Narayan Surve, told largely in his own words. We find out, through poems, chants and extracts from interviews, about his adoption by a textile worker, his precarious existence as a young man in the 1940s and 1950s and his developing political convictions – and in the process we learn about the crises that have affected the Mumbai textile industry, the gentrification of old working-class districts in the city and the central place of culture in Surve's conception of working-class struggle. Surveying the events that shaped his views, the work has a largely retrospective thrust, but the footage of factory workers, street vendors and commuters in contemporary Mumbai hints deftly at the continued relevance of his writing.

Using a looser documentary style, Nicolaj Skyum Bendix Larsen raises similar questions in a firmly contemporary key in *Arise*, 2013, which follows a trio of young rappers as they work on songs, walk through the narrow streets of a working-class neighbourhood in New Delhi, teach breakdancing and perform in front of a shopping mall. Larsen intersperses these scenes with more static and reflective passages in which, one by one, his protagonists reveal their ambitions and disappointments to the camera. Like Surve in *Saacha*, they believe that poetry and song can serve as vehicles of revolt; they also hope one day to earn a secure living. But, without the benefit of retrospection,



they implicitly hedge these hopes with another, more pessimistic view: that their work and friendships may turn out to be, above all, compensations for a social configuration that will not change, or will change too slowly to affect their prospects. While *Saacha* is visually spare and stately in tone, *Arise* is powered by a nervous sympathetic energy. Both are riveting.

Other works fare less well. Caroline Bergvall's *Crop*, 2010, for instance, struggles to hold its own in this setting. In it, multilingual wall texts with missing letters draw a parallel between language and the body, implying that language is in the first place a bodily possession, and posit the loss of both ('s me b dies like languages simply disappear'), while a voice issuing from a speaker in the ceiling also alternates between languages as it expands on the themes of displacement and loss. In another show, the work might come across as a thoughtful meditation on the personal and collective costs of migration. Here, alongside pieces like *Saacha* and *Arise*, it seems to lack historical thickness and specificity; and compared with the work of Surve and the rapping of the trio in Delhi, the spoken text seems flat and its delivery ponderous. Mithu Sen's book of gibberish, *I am a Poet*, 2013, is more seductive but, as Sen writes herself, it 'invite[s] you to embrace "nonsense" as resistance', suggesting that ordinary speech is too compromised by the intentions it routinely carries to serve, as Larsen and Monteiro & Jayasankar assume it does, or at least can, as a tool of dissent. While Bervall and Sen focus on language as a given system, Larsen and Monteiro & Jayasankar examine specific efforts to master and use language. These works do not express opposed positions as much as they face in different directions, building on entirely different concerns and premises.

Similarly, Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *Conflicted Phonemes*, 2012, though powerful in itself, addresses issues that are only superficially related to the questions that animate other works in the show. It looks closely at the voice analysis techniques used by the Dutch immigration authorities to assess the claims of Somali asylum seekers, who are more likely to be accepted if they come from the strife-torn south of the country. Abu Hamdan shows, with an array of densely informative diagrams that disconcertingly resemble decorative designs for rugs or mosaics, that Somalia has seen successive waves of internal migration and that, tragically, the test is therefore founded on flawed premises: few Somalis can be expected to speak in unadulterated regional dialects. So while most of the works in the show take it as read that the voice serves the speaker, Abu Hamdan treats it as a faculty that is (also) expressive independently of his or her will.

Of course, shows are not arguments, but they can delimit their territories and highlight common lines of enquiry, so that even works that draw on wholly different resources can resonate with (or against) one another. This show does none of that. It sets out to consider questions that are too broadly and vaguely defined and, as a result, the various fault lines that emerge seem accidental rather than willed and significant, and the pieces that come off best are the fully immersive ones that isolate themselves from the works around them. ■

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