



The **Linguistic Self** A Conversation with Katarina Zdjelar

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Stills from *Shoum* (2009),
Katarina Zdjelar

Katarina Zdjelar's artistic practice revolves around individuals who simultaneously inhabit different cultures and languages, performing themselves through practicing, remembering, or reinvention. We see immigrants struggling with compulsory acquisition of European languages and sociocultural practices, we watch individuals recalling a smattering of childhood vocabulary that shows the linguistic legacy of a political past, we witness acts of self-reinvention through language. Working mainly with video, as well as occasional sound-based or performance-based works, Zdjelar focuses on the symbolic aspects of having a voice, which, as it becomes evident in her work, embodies history linguistically. She circles around the power relations behind language transfer, in the context of immigrant language acquisition and its implicit relationship to colonialism, or in the traces of cultural reorientations following national shifts of power.



Image from *My lifetime (Malaika)* (2012), Katarina Zdjelar

Zdjelar is a Serbian artist based long-term in the Netherlands. Her video works sketch out a broad spectrum of philosophical and political positions in relationship to language and culture. Many are pertinent to the Irish context. A Serbian man in *Shoum* (2009) transcribes the lyrics of the Tears for Fears hit 'Shout', sung in a language he cannot understand and in doing so creates a kind of minor language, deterritorialized from his mother tongue and *lingua franca* English. In *A Girl, the Sun*, and an *Airplane Airplane* (2007) a sequence of Albanian men and women recall Russian words from the deepest depository of their childhood memories, evoking the ambivalent currency of the Irish language in adulthood. In *The Perfect Sound* (2009), we watch a young immigrant 'having his accent removed' by an English speech therapist. Music becomes a further language in Zdjelar's work as well as producing its own languages or enhancing particular kinds of performativity. *My lifetime (Malaika)* (2012) reflects on the complex political status of Ghana's National Orchestra, which embodies international relations, past and present. In *Aitormena. World jautsitsaitsutsitsaitsuguena* (2012), Zdjelar invites us to experience the phenomenon of Basque Radical Rock and the agency of its Basque lyrics for a generation who do not otherwise speak the language.

While working at the English National Theatre in London in the 1960s, Irish actor Stephen Rea was given the advice: 'Change your accent and you can do anything you want in this theater'. Rea reflected, 'I did not change my accent. If I was doing a Russian play, I did not want to pretend to be English in order to pretend to be Russian. It was an absurdity to me.'¹ It was precisely this kind of linguistic battle that led to the birth of Field Day, whose first endeavor was the staging of Brian Friel's *Translations*, with the leading translator played by Rea, to whom the play had been dedicated. There are parallels with Zdjelar's unpacking of the political agency available in the self-manipulation of language and voice as well as its refusal. She addresses the everyday confrontations of individuals with language with comparable warmth, intelligent critique and openness to creativity. Here I discuss Zdjelar's work with her, teasing out some of the linguistic battles in more detail and coming to grips with her underlying ideas and their sources:

1 Luke Gibbons and Kevin Whelan, 'In Conversation with Stephen Rea', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 15, 1 (2002), 5–21 at 5–7. The conversation took place in Yale University on 2 February 2001. Quoted in Ciaran Deane, 'Brian Friel's *Translations*: The Origins of a Cultural Experiment', in *Field Day Review* 5 (Dublin, 2009), 17.

L.C.: Can you talk about how you first became interested in the relationship between language and subject-formation?

K.Z.: I moved to the Netherlands in the mid 2000s, around the time that Rita Verdonk, the Minister for Integration and Immigration, proposed a new national conduct, according to which no other language but Dutch would be permitted in public space. The proposal wasn't ratified, but integration classes became obligatory, alongside learning the Dutch language, and with some exceptions, non-EU subjects — to use here their handy division between the citizens and subjects — would be trained to learn and recognize characteristics of Dutch culture, sometimes so extensively imagined that many *autochthon* [lit. indigenous] Dutch would themselves fail the integration exam. The production of material for these classes must have been quite a speculative exercise in the first place, but the question for Verdonk was not so much what Dutch identity is, but rather what do we want immigrants to believe in? How can we structure them and tidy them up so that they will merge better into our cultural décor? I found it interesting that such knowledge about a nation seemed to be so difficult to teach and to test based on facts, but instead could be learned intuitively, subjectively, or imaginatively. In imagination, there is already inherent excess, which contains certain aspects of 'self-presence', of a fundamental 'liaison with the world' — the reproductive or representational capacities of imagination addressed by Husserl. These processes are surely part of colonial as well as immigrant strategies.

L.C.: How does language function in the opening up of such strategies in your work? The laboured and painstaking attempts at linguistic acquisition in works like *There Is No Is* (2006) and *The Perfect Sound* (2009) seem to show the unnaturalness and implicit symbolic violence of everyday processes of cultural integration. Works like *Shoum* (2009) also reformulate the construction of self-identifications through language, focusing especially on language use between mother tongue and acquired languages.

K.Z.: *The Perfect Sound* looks at the phenomenon of cultural integration through the erasure of difference in pronunciation and the production of neutrality. It focuses on a speech therapist while he is engaged in performing phonetic exercises to remove the accent of a client in his studio in Birmingham, a city that is paradoxically known for its strong accent. I was trying to expose the relation between two voices; that of the teacher, which instructs and moulds and that of his student, which is informed, directed and moulded. Obtaining a kind of voice mask allows the immigrant misfit to shift between different modes of appearances, which enable him to blend into the environment, to become unnoticeable. I see these normative and assimilative practices developed and imposed by our so-called liberal and developed world as a symbolic 'rite of passage' of the dislodged individual. They facilitate the utterly ambiguous process of the liminal stage, in which one has left one place or state but has not yet entered or joined the next.