Stop Me If You Think You’ve Heard This One Before

By Katrin Mundt

A sound studio: an elderly woman in a white smock, in front of her a cutting-table on which she rewinds and fast-forwards with experienced hand movements a tape recording, cuts it, glues it together and once again listens for flaws. The voice she is listening to, that she lets speak and then fall silent again by cutting it short at irregular intervals, is speaking a familiar Czech tongue-twister in untiring repetition. It involves a Cyclops who rolls a ball from one trapdoor to another – a one-eyed Sisyphus. Images of the archive as a place and institution of both preservation and manipulation, as well as associations of a history of politically motivated censorship impose themselves almost reflexively in light of the cutter’s revisional interventions in a now-obsolete medium.

But then, as the activity continues, something else comes to the fore: in the process of elimination, the continual speeding-up and slowing-down, stopping and starting of the tape, distortions arise that turn the tongue-twister into an apparative sound poetry. In Roman Štětinas video *Tongue Twister* (2014), which we are discussing here, the tongue-twister – a text format that does not serve communication, but instead the self- optimisation (or self-outwitting) of the vocal tract – becomes a symbol of a perfect feedback loop in which speech as sound revolves around itself. Language is having a conversation with itself. The cutter is not only manipulating a carrier medium, she is also orchestrating a performance: a precisely-timed interplay of hand and technical apparatus. The point here is not an edited final version of the spoken text, but instead the poetic slurrings that arise from the physical work with the audio material, to be conceived as an infinite loop of repetitions, discrepancies and revisions. A peculiar side- or special effect of this short-circuiting is that one is also included as observer: one is automatically not only a listener, but also co-speaker, co-performer, in whose memory the ball of the Cyclops will roll on as an acoustic image long after the video has ended.

We encounter the peculiar pull of the serial in *Studio No. 2* (*Slapstick)* (2013) as well, a video which, like *Tongue Twister* arose in a Czech Radio studio. A performer stands in front of a microphone before futuristic-looking, sound-absorbing studio walls and repeatedly strikes a clapper that creates shooting sounds mechanically. What we hear in the video, however, is a sequence of various real gunshots from a sound data bank, whose echo seems to reverberate in the studio. The performer’s gestures trigger an effect that cannot exist in the sound-absorbing studio room. This impossible echo multiplies not only the gunshot noise; the noise itself is a double of the sound that in reality would have to be generated from the visible source. In this sense, the device being operated by the performer, *is* the *Slapstick*, the instrument of a performed joke, a trick that he is playing on our perception. The shots that fall here are aimed at us: they strike at the heart of our medial perception. They reverberate in that space which we populate not only with recorded voices and impossible sounds, but naturally inhabit together with them. The studio is the double (or “evil twin”) of this perceptual space.

The manner in which Štětina stages the studio here and in other video works underscores the specific connection between function and fiction that manifests in its architecture: the design of the studio rooms is not only ideally matched to the requirements of recording and broadcasting situations, but is also massively fictionally charged. His composition reflects a tradition of utopian narrative on the merging of human beings and technology, or of human beings into masses that finds its paradigmatic expression in science fiction as a genre and in the tech utopias of the 20th century. Paradoxically, studios are intersections with the public sphere that themselves as a rule remain invisible – and for that very reason are optimally suited for the production of fakes and fictions. Not for nothing did the critical and emancipatory media initiatives of the 1970’s and 80’s take aim at the disclosure and appropriation of the technical bases of television and radio production. Štětinas stagings of studio settings combine these fictionalising and demystifying tendencies.

*Test Room* (2015) is part of a group of works that arose in the Barrandov Studios in Prague. The silent video shows the performance of a professional Steadicam operator in an interior furnished with graphic, black-and-white test patterns reminiscent of the minimalistic stage-setting of a science fiction film. His movements and interactions with the work tools – Steadicam and film camera – appear practiced and almost dance-like. What we see is based on a 1980’s instruction video on the use of Steadicams that Štětina came upon in the Internet. In a number of repetitions, individual manual steps and more complex motion sequences are presented and explained. This class of instructional videos are copies whose function is to be copied in turn: they offer ideal stylisations of real actions whose purpose is to be imitated by the users, appropriated and ultimately to be translated into real actions once again. In *Test Room* Štětina adds a further turn to this cycle. The Steadicam operator was asked to perform for the camera a preset choreography oriented on the instructional video mentioned above. For this, he had to carry out the familiar movements more slowly than usual, performing the actual work routines in illustrative gestures. Through this de-automatisation, minimal flaws slip in, such as the hint of a stumble, and the enormous weight of the apparatus is also occasionally evident in his movements.

Here, as in *Tongue Twister* as well, Štětina cooperates with professionals in their fields of expertise in order to achieve precisely such realistic effects. True to the sense of what Claire Bisop describes as “delegated performance,” the artist here does not himself perform, but instead acts from the second row: he constructs a situation in which people play themselves.[[1]](#footnote-1) He shows them at work, their performance at work and their work as performance. In her text, Bishop draws a parallel between out-sourcing as an entrepreneurial practice and artistic strategy, whereby she emphasises that this type of delegation minimises risk for entrepreneurs while artists work with representatives because they bank on precisely the incalculability of the real.[[2]](#footnote-2) Chance becomes a kind of “special effect” that intervenes in the artistic process as surplus. What we are seeing in *Test Room* is not an ideal-typical lesson, but instead its “bad” copy, that precisely in the imperfection of its execution highlights the interminable adjustment and readjustment between human beings and machines. Crucial here is the fact that Štětina does not exhibit this imperfection, but suggests it as a process of appropriation and deviation in relation to the preset script. The studio as production site of perfect illusions here becomes the stage for a subtle disillusioning.

In his exhibition *Souvenir* in the Polansky Gallery[[3]](#footnote-3) , *Test Room* was installed in direct proximity to, and literally face-to-face with, a new sculptural work, *Doryforos* (2015). Like scarcely any other sculptural type, the ancient Greek *Doryphoros* embodies the ideals of harmony and proportion and is regarded as a paradigm that has been copied and appropriated by generations of art students to this day. Interestingly, the original ancient Greek bronze statue from which it derives has not survived, but has been transmitted only in the form of several ancient marble copies. In his version, Štětina works with the plaster cast of a *Doryphoros* torso, which is installed on an improvised-looking wood pedestal. The marble painting that enhances some of his efforts derives from the design for the film set of the historical television drama *Borgia: Faith and Fear* in the Barrandov Studios. A bronze-coloured mass, “Silly Putty,” or “Thinking Putty,” oozes slowly down from the head of Štětina’s *Doryforos*, creating opulent folds, strings or lumps. They cover the surface of the plaster torso like a second, sculptural skin that takes on its form in order to distort, liquefy and keep it in motion at the same time, due to its own consistency. In this way, the conceptual boundaries between original and copy and their respective positing as “primary” and “secondary” also become fluid: although the physical original of the bronze sculpture is lost, its form has been transmitted unchanged for centuries. Here it is quoted as a plaster cast and coated by the fake bronze of a flexible mass that in its turn cannot keep any form at all. The form of the *Doryphoros* is therefore eternal not because it embodies a transcendent ideal, but because it opens out into a practically endless chain of copies. The fake bronze of the “Silly Putty” is in turn the exact opposite of an ideal, because it does not congeal into any final form, and for precisely this reason is “timeless.”

With *Doryforos* , Štětina continues his work on the themes of appropriation, copy and repetition in a manner that directly links with his video work. For a long time, video was the “Silly Putty” of the art market: due to its technical character potentially infinitely copyable, transferrable from one medium to another, adaptable to a range of presentation contexts. Historically infected by the film market’s logic of maximal distribution, which stands counter to the art market’s logic of limited accessibility, video art has to this day a relatively minor symbolic and material value. Only with the emergence of the limited-edition and site-specific video installation in the 1990’s was it at all possible to nail down the medium and conjoin it as quasi-original work with the art market’s value-creation cycles. As an author of technically reproducible art works, Štětina acts in this peculiar zone in which originals are always already copies. Inasmuch as he configures this zone with additional twins, fakes and doubles – appropriates forms, delegates performances, provokes echoes, loops and repetitions – he renders that medial space experiential in which we move as if taken for granted: a space with a double bottom.

1. Cf. Claire Bishop, “Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity,” in: October 140, Spring 2012, pp. 91-112; here: p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. ibid. p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Roman Štětina: Souvenir, Polansky Gallery, Prague, 13.6. – 8.8. 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)