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## Abstract

### Toward a Politics of Vocal Expression: Beckett and Video Art

Reviewing a 2003 exhibition of video art at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, critic Richard Dorment of the *Telegraph* writes that ‘the godfather of video art was not an artist but a writer—Samuel Beckett’. In this paper I examine Dorment’s assertion by reading Beckett’s *Not I* (1973) as a work of video art, placing it in the dialogue with temporally adjacent video work by Bruce Nauman, *Lip Synch* (1969), Vito Acconci, *Open Book* (1974), Gary Hill, *Mouth Piece* (1978), Stan Douglas, *Deux Devises, Part 2* (1983), and Mona Hatoum, *So Much I Want to Say* (1983). In each of these works a close-up of a mouth dominates the screen, yet the voice that is uttered is dislocated and disembodied, fractured through frames that estrange the spoken word from its visceral embodiment. Nauman, Hill, and Douglas use asynchronicity to generate a slippage between the voice and the one that utters. Acconci and Hatoum generate an agonistics of articulation by foregrounding awkward and obstructive vocalities that underline the urgency of a message that we can’t quite hear. I draw on two studies by Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), and *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005) to explore how speaking, and speaking up, is related to what she calls ‘the radical contingency of action’ and forms a deeply political act (2005, xxv). The paper then explores the legacy of Beckett’s work in 21<sup>st</sup> century video art, tracing the writer’s influence in video by Agnieszka Polska, *I Am The Mouth* (2014), and Kurdwin Ayub, *Pretty-Pretty* (2019) which, I will argue, negotiate a ‘disfigured, antimetaphysical, material, contextual, relational ontology’ of the voice that responds to key elements of Beckett’s aesthetic form (Cavarero 2005, xxi).