

# Rita McKeough's *My Teeth are in Slivers*

A CALLING FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF TRAUMA

Paula Levine

*To call is not originally to name, but the other way around:  
naming is a kind of calling. . .<sup>1</sup>*

Sharp rhythm of breath, in and out, perforates, punctuates space.

Women's voices, high and loud, wailing, wailing, wailing  
bump into each other without apology.

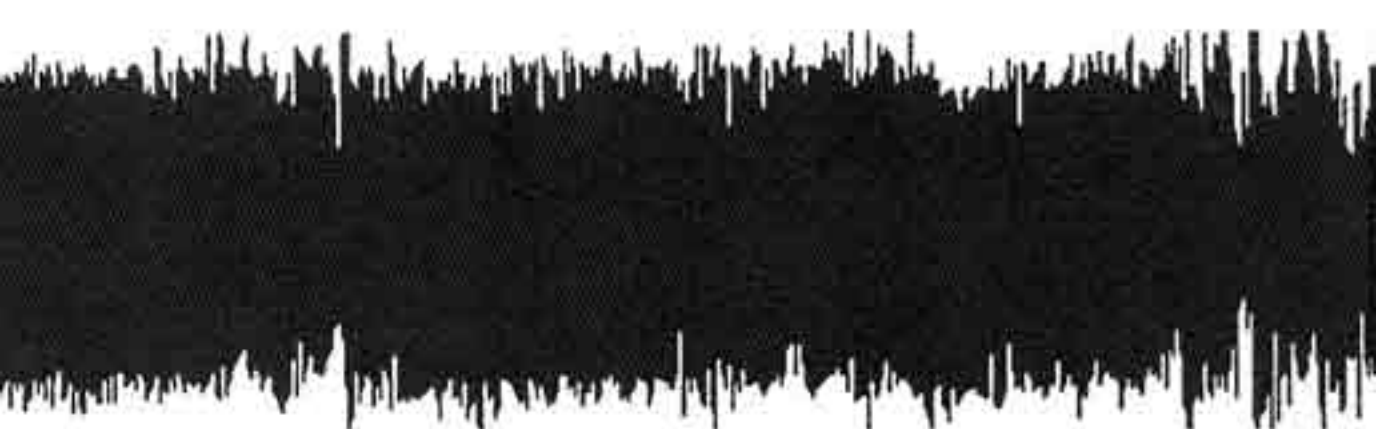
Voices link and stretch, forming chords of dissonance  
that remind of the distance remaining –  
to reach the comfort and safety of harmony,  
or merge into an almost immutable synchronicity.

Vocalizing the traumas which spawned them,  
five notes – three up/two down – and vowels held for a beat of five

*ooooh*

*ooooh*

*abbbb*



slide into each other while breath ripples space.

These voices are back from the battlegrounds,

*I have pulled a fist from my mouth, severed hands lie beside me . . .*  
struggling to reconstitute

*Slowly air returns to my aching lungs . . .*

after the battle.

*Slowly air returns to my aching lungs . . .*

*Slowly air returns to my aching lungs . . .*

*Slowly air returns to my aching lungs . . .<sup>2</sup>*

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*My Teeth are in Slivers* takes place just the other side of trauma. For twenty-four minutes, three female voices, orchestrated in a twelve-part score, are layered one upon the other – breathing, singing, speaking in punctuated rhythms carried by long, sustained vowels that ebb and swell and slide from dissonance into momentary strained/strange harmony, and then out again.

Held together by threads of affect and detail, words describe the observing body in its moments of insight as it moves away from pain and anger after the impact of violence.

Commissioned for radio broadcast as part of the *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission* exhibition and symposium, the work is the first sound piece made by Rita McKeough to exist outside an installation context.

*Imagine a carcass, a body composed of pleasures and pains, bone and flesh. Imagine its smell and the quality of light. It is as though one comes upon one's memory.*

*Pull the guts of the memory out through the voice and rummage through its remains.*

*Gnaw at the residue,  
scrape the flesh from the bone,  
make use of the past but do not preserve the unbearable.*

*The flesh drops away from the bone.*

*Walk around it, view it and leave it.<sup>3</sup>*

In translation of mind to matter, memory is a carcass lying in state – unembalmed, deteriorating, decomposing, unceremoniously exhibited with no attempts made to detain it in time.

We are called upon to listen . . .

*I listened and talked to women who have been silenced by violence and women who worked in shelters and supported friends who have been through it – spent years of looking and thinking and searching this issue. In my work through the sound tapes, my desire was to reconstruct a fictive history using what I had learned. I tried to use the layering of the audio in the sound tracks as a way to grab language and kind of shake it and strangle it, in a sense to force it . . . in a way to communicate the complexity of the experience of having been a victim of violence, specifically, domestic violence.*

to the voices . . .

*The sound tracks . . . layer the information, . . . the language, . . . the sounds of the body . . .*



... as they reconstitute the affective network of the body, recanting sensations of states along the way, moving from what is deeply embodied, outward – resisting, remembering, recalling, retelling, recovering.

*... and communicate in a very specific way the emotional and physical effects and consequences on the body and the individual because of that silencing.*

Silencing does not erase memory. Instead, it drives it deep “within the fastness of the individual so as to create more fear and uncertainty in which dream and reality comingle.”<sup>4</sup> The memories return and when they do they transform space, taking up residency in places they do not belong<sup>5</sup> and changing those places as the result of their presence. Memory changes what is known to be foreign to seem familiar, causing a sense of “disquiet because of its absolute proximity . . . [deforming] space by this experience.”<sup>6</sup>

Expressing the memory of pain makes demands. Expressing physical pain, says Elaine Scarry, eventually opens into the wider frame of invention, for pain (and pleasure) throw the body into unstable states, states which lie outside the order of language. Physical pain “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries of a human being before language is learned.”<sup>7</sup>

The body in pain involves the “making and unmaking of the world”<sup>8</sup> and speaking (the pain) is the making and unmaking of oneself.<sup>9</sup>

*I do not scream with the desire to frighten you away . . .  
but to use my voice to cut a thin slice off of you  
an unredeemable, irreplaceable slice  
unforgettable . . .*

## THE BODY AS ARCHITECTURE . . .

Since 1981, Rita McKeough has reinvested a presence into matters rendered invisible. Her installations have addressed issues of pollution, public housing and homelessness.<sup>10</sup> Earlier work on the politics of urban housing involved the anthropomorphizing of structures, giving voices to construction sites and building materials to speak their historical pasts or call for help in the face of being demolished.<sup>11</sup>

Since 1983, McKeough has worked with the female body, domestic violence and the politics of "home."<sup>12</sup> Her installations, often suggesting domestic spaces within gallery settings, have been designed to "move [violence] into the architecture as a way to . . . make it visible."<sup>13</sup> Walls, standing in for skin, bear the marks of scars and bruises from the violence.<sup>14</sup> Rooms covered with broken furniture bear testimony to the inversion – safety to threat, furnishings to weapons, refuge to prison.<sup>15</sup> This work suggests a kind of empathetic architecture where environments are both filled with and shaped by the affect and senses of those living within.

Sound further transforms these architectural sites into articulating sites. McKeough uses her collections of stories and interviews of women who have come through abuse and violence to create audio texts that act "like a rented apartment . . . [transforming] another person's [experience] into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient."<sup>16</sup> Audiotaped voices of women speak of what was once silenced and buried within the privacy of domesticity, transforming the unforgettable into words and changing the space through language.

No longer private, these sites open up for shared occupancy as viewers walk through the spaces – listening.

*But calling is something else than merely making a sound . . .  
In reality, the calling stems from the place to which the call goes out.  
Calling offers an abode.<sup>17</sup>*

## ARCHITECTURE AS THE FEMALE BODY . . .

In McKeough's operatic performance/installation, *In bocca al lupo* (*In the Mouth of the Wolf*)<sup>18</sup> space itself is corporealized and interior forces are made visible. The gallery becomes body as nine personifications of angers, frustrations and fears take on a visible face. In sound, dress and gesture, each anger is shaped by the ties that bind – religion, academia, social law and conventions; all that haunts, hurts, holds back, forces down and in until the labyrinthian mappings of the body's internal states become a complex network of twists and turns which can no longer be followed, accounted for or understood.

Viewers sit in the seats of privilege. As if possessing x-ray vision, they see inside the body itself, bearing witness to the Gulliver-like play of forces within.<sup>19</sup> The forces call out and cry and gyrate, gesticulate, run into the walls of the body/gallery or up to the faces of the viewers who sit on piles of old books/old knowledge that slip and slide under weight.

And the forces within the body speak – in a language full of rhythm and repetition located somewhere at the intersection between politics and poetry –

*I have waited waited  
for this moment Shake it  
to throw my head back Throw it . . .  
To throw my head  
from side to side . . .  
My voice burns Shake it . . .  
. . . it wasn't being heard  
Behind the flesh walls Shake it  
A mirror in Disarray Throw it<sup>20</sup>*

*What is it that calls on us to think?  
Where does the calling come from?  
How can it make its claim on us?  
How does the calling reach us?*<sup>21</sup>

MAKING WAVES, SO TO SPEAK . . . .

"Bodiless voices are carried by radio waves to the receiving ears of the listeners: from body to body, private to public to private again. Voices, once buried in the domestic architecture, now return to reinhabit private domains."<sup>22</sup>

As in her previous work on domestic violence, the language of *My Teeth are in Slivers* is in the language of the body's interior – private recollections and descriptions of the struggles away from trauma and pain made audible to public ears as a way to make the experience habitable by others.

It is "narrativity in its most delinquent form," this "implantation of memory"<sup>23</sup> for true to the character of sound, its ability to merge with whatever is standing in its way, it simulates an intimacy usually reserved for . . . intimates, creating a bond that no theoretical construction can so easily forge.

This is what sound does best – invade.

Sound is as deep as empathy, invading the body, creating a mimetic presence where there was once none. It penetrates the body, seeps into it, compelling it to resonate, to the extent it is able, in response to the vibrations which enter.

This is what McKeough is working with – the spatial confluences of body to body which takes place through connections of sounds as well as the transformation of space where the unspoken is spoken and the naming takes place.

Michael Taussig speaks of "talking terror" in the face of oppression in South America. The Dirty War, he says, is a war of silencing. There is no officially declared war. No prisoners. No torture. Just silence consuming terror's talk for the main part, scaring people into saying nothing in public that could be construed as critical of the Armed Forces.

It is this presence of the unsaid which makes the simplest of public-space talk arresting . . . the naming by the Mothers of the Disappeared in public spaces of the names of disappeared, together with their photographs, in collective acts acquiring the form of ritual in which what is important is not so much the facts, since they are in their way well known, but the shift in social location in which those facts are placed, filling the public void with private memory.<sup>24</sup>

*What is given words or named is a kind of calling and what is called appears as what is present.<sup>25</sup>*

Listen to what has happened, is happening, as I/you take note of the configurations shaped by the aftershocks. In the aftermath of abuse and repression, a forbidden space is created, a detested space, for in it are the voices of resistance.

*The strange face, the all too familiar face . . .  
I reconstruct the features, disconnected, disintegrating  
powerless  
This is how I forget.*

Memory is a reconnaissance operation.<sup>26</sup> Name the changes in the body as recollection takes place, as memory gathers all that has transpired.

*Having felt unbearable weariness  
The weariness of pain.  
Now I pump my blood hard  
It scrubs my bones  
rinses my mouth  
caresses  
This is how I remember.*

My sincere thanks to those whose ideas, writings and actions influenced the shape and content of this article. In particular, my thanks to Rita McKeough for the valuable discussions about words, rhythms, metaphor and the body; to Mary Anne Moser for her editorial contributions and for making the rendering of the voice graphs possible; and to the Canada Council for their "B" grant support in 1992, which gave me the opportunity to begin researching, writing and pondering many of the ideas on space and the gallery site which appear in this article.

## Notes

Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1954), 123. All text in this typeface is quoted from Heidegger.

All text in this typeface is from Rita McKeough's *My Teeth are in Slivers* (1992), unless otherwise indicated.

From a telephone conversation with Rita McKeough on *My Teeth are in Slivers*.

Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992), 27.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 86.

Psychoanalyst Mahmoud Sami-Ali as quoted by Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), 222.

Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

Ibid.

Julia Kristeva speaks of language "as the signifying system in which the speaking subject *makes and unmakes* himself," *Language The Unknown: An Initiation into Linguistics*, trans. Anne M. Menke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 265.

McKeough's installation work is too voluminous to describe in detail. For the purpose of this article, a few are mentioned along with their primary concerns: *Afterland Plaza*, Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, 1985 (pollution); *The Embrace*,

- Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, 1990 (pollution); *Defunct*, Calgary, 1981, (public housing); *Retrieval*, Plug-In Gallery, Winnipeg, 1985 (homelessness).
- 11 *Skeletal Development*, Walter Phillips Gallery, 1983: A skeleton structure of an apartment block was built using the refuse from homes demolished for urban development. *Destruct*, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, 1983: Viewers watched as a single-family dwelling, built to one-third scale in the gallery, is chased by a backhoe, also built to scale.
- 12 Some examples are: *Retaining Wall*, 1986: the domestic home as prison and the relationship between the architectural structure of the home and family dynamics; *Mimicry*, 1988: two adjacent apartments with a broken wall between the audiotaped voices of a woman in one room speaking of her attempt to leave the relationship while in the other, the voice of a man promising to find her; *Tremor*, 1989: constructed rooms where women's voices spoke of the struggle to integrate the trauma of violence and abuse into their lives.
- 13 From notes by Rita McKeough.
- 14 *Blind Spot*, 1987, Eye Level Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia.
- 15 *Tremor*, 1989, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan. See also Elaine Scarry's discussion in "The Structure of Torture" in *The Body in Pain*, 38-45.
- 16 de Certeau, xxi.
- 17 Heidegger, 124-5.
- 18 *In bocca al lupo (In the Mouth of the Wolf)*, was a ninety-minute operatic production performed in Halifax, Toronto and Vancouver, in 1991 and 1992, written and directed by Rita McKeough.
- 19 *The Gallery as a State of Mind and the Work of Rita McKeough*, by Paula Levine. Unpublished videopaper presented at the Glenbow Museum, January, 1993, as part of *An Excavation*, installation and performance by Rita McKeough, January - April, 1993.
- 20 From *In bocca al lupo* "My Heart Beats Too Fast."
- 21 Heidegger, 124.
- 22 In conversation with Dan Lander on *My Teeth are in Slivers*.
- 23 de Certeau, 86.
- 24 Taussig, 38.
- 25 Heidegger, 120-123.
- 26 Gail Scott, *Spaces Like Stairs* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1989), 24.