

ARTS OF THE WORKING CLASS

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TRYING TO SING, SCREAM

Echoing lung vibrations with Eliana Otta.

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Arts of the Working Class #22

*The Body is,
A Cavernous
Echo Chamber.
Through
which breath travels.*

Hannah O'Shea,
A Brief History of A Litany for Women Artists.

First time I encountered the artist Eliana Otta was through a shared email thread at the beginning of 2020, when, invited to join a residency by Mercedes A ^{DATA} Privacy ,

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space. We were looking for a female voice to capture the multilayers of womanhoods in a messy and opaque city like Athens; Eliana connected us with Xanthoula Ntakovanou, a singer and music therapist that worked with Mediterranean and Byzantine laments. Even though eventually our paths didn't meet at that time, there was a designated set of crossings yet to take place. Funnily enough, Eliana Otta was working around the same time collecting Athenian voices, for her PhD dissertation **Lost and Shared** deals with the inherited and internalised grief that accompanies a collective experience of depression provoked by years of austerity during the severe financial crisis in Greece. There is a precious symmetry and relationality through which I can enter Eliana's work that is rooted on different levels. A complicated relationship with our mother cities, Lima and Athens; a parallel movement towards a Northern European set of art infrastructures, Vienna and Amsterdam; a recollection of old and unprocessed griefs, a search for a song and a scream.

Micro events, friendships and connections finally brought us to the same place two years of pandemic later. A loose plan for a future workshop on mourning to take place in Athens with the aforementioned singer made the circle full again. What I couldn't predict at that time is that I would be actually grieving an end of a long relationship instead of doing the workshop. Months later, while having a phone call between Vienna and Athens, Eliana elaborated on how she came closer to the notion of grief in her troubled relationship with Lima, while working with war survivors. Athens was a way for her to reapproach and process these experiences of crisis, violence and loss by drawing a parallel, although with a different political and sociogeographical context. "I never wanted to live in Europe but Athens made me change my mind".

During our conversations I realise that while searching for the capacity to grieve and to acknowledge loss we come to trace a need for connection to our voices.

How can she respond to grief if she never learnt how to spit her voice out? What if we were all taught to sing (therefore to breathe), not in order to become singers, but to enhance another connecting thread through our throats and lungs.



Eliana Otta, Palabras de Mujeres (Lola), 2017, film still, courtesy the artist

We work hard to create the spaces for voicing, but we face barriers, sound filters and isolations in our vocalising pain, pleasure and joy. We are asked to understand how come, in highly gendered societies such as the Greek and the Peruvian one with femicides hitting red records. Mourning becomes multiple, intersectional, urgent. What to mourn first, our voices, our debts, our sisters, our earthlings, our ocean? And is mourning, only visualising a space of loss within ourselves? As a space of remembrance of missing intimacies, loss is also explored in Eliana's work as a critical space, looking at the conditions that eventually lead to shaping its architecture by starting from the question: who has the right to mourn?

This question is examined through her latest work, the *Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning (2021 - ongoing)* a proposition for a rooted and healing approach to living, where a virtual space is introduced for mourning collaboratively assembled with the Peruvian Amazonian communities Nuevo Amanecer Hawai, Unipacuyacu, Puerto Nuevo and Sinchi Roca whom Eliana has been spending time with. In this process, she sensitively made space for fragility and attentive listening, bringing the attention on the materialisation of processes of mourning through oral storytelling, rituals of burying as processes of transformation (fertilising), complaint (lament) and a denouncement (seeking justice) to the layers of environmental and indigenous violence that the communities are subjected to. The Virtual Sanctuary would then connect to the loss of the above communities, their threatened territories and assassinations, echoing the voice of Linda Hogan: "What happens to people and what happens to land is the same thing".

Eliana Otta's practice is a proposal for a joint venture of exercising breathing exchanges. Deep listening, guided meditations, voice workshops interc

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the one, comes in layers and can have many climaxes, many liberations of force release, similar to tectonic and volcanic activity.

Working with and close to artists and writers whose practice focuses on the affective qualities of voice, like Mercedes Azpilicueta and Ella Finer, I came to realise rather recently a long process of self-censorship that has been slowly but steadily built up during my upbringing. The absence of a voice as self is also an experience of inherited loss on an individual and collective scale. Back to the symmetry, Eliana told me a similar story: that how she never learnt to scream or raise an angry voice or one of despair, as she never heard her mother doing so. This embodied experience unfolds beautifully in the script of the performance lecture *Intentar Cantar (2017)* through a personal narration of subtle containment in singing and screaming, cracking open possibilities of relationalities and identifications, revoking experiences for the witnessing ears.

Eliana's work draws for me multiple connections to what (having and using) a voice can do: "Going back to my mother's voice and the question about the possibility of inheriting it, I remember how I was also surprised noticing that when I heard her speaking in public, it seemed to tremble. [...] I have found [that] happening to me many times, without being able to explain it to myself." [1] Her words bring to mind Hel ne Cixous and the so frequently amplified "Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering (if she hasn't painfully lost her wind). She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare." [2]



Eliana Otta, Palabras de Mujeres (Ysabel), 2017, film still, courtesy the artist

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I read a graffiti on an overheated wall in 36 Celsius degrees: Grita quando te quemes. I was wondering who would write in Spanish on a tiny Athenian street, whether it was a reference to Bukowski while questioning what could be the burning (quemar) in this case. Was it the heat, the oppression, the destruction, the orgasms? I hope I will, I must have answered. Almost a year ago, I took part in a series of breathing sessions guided by artist Georgia Sagri as part of her long-term project IASI - Stage of Recovery, focusing “on physical techniques that use breath as an active agent, movement and voice training”. There I got to reflect on my diaphragm, and its muscular capacity of contracting and expanding our emotional capacities. Through this brief but intense experience I encountered an exhalation not evenly proportioned to my inhaling, which leads to short breath, emotional and physical exhaustion and most evidently obstacles in speaking. That's where my own version of “trembling” would come from. In order for my voice to come out, it has to enter and travel through me first, and the way there is opaque and bumpy.

Eliana is aware of the above asymmetries in agency, and therefore dedicates a lot of time for this voice to travel through. Her relationship with voice and its affects is not explicitly present in her work but it emerges through the voices of others. She calls that “working with the words of others” and I believe it allows her to approach (oral) storytelling through a variety of textures, personal histories, vocal timbres often not following or complementing each other. In her *Palabras de mujeres (2017)* - a feature film and textile installation - she gathers stories from women working with music and politics across different generations in Peru. While voices follow each other, the moving images choose not to synchronise themselves, resulting in an uncanny seriality of alternating domestic spaces who speak, with details and close ups slipping through each other.

The voices detach from the carrying bodies, making it hard to distinguish where each voice is originating from and where it is going towards. I sense a hinted joyfulness in following their lips and getting lost in their affective narrations. “The predisposition to sing has to do with a contagion charged with empathy, like a letting yourself go when we recognize ourselves sustained, when we feel that what surrounds us can be a gentle sounding board for our voices, no matter how confused they may be.” [3]
In this vulnerable state, I let their voices surround me in a warm soft fabric so when I fall, they are there to catch me softly.

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Banner: Eliana Otta, *Palabras de Mujeres (Amandina)*, 2017, film still, courtesy the artist

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FOOTNOTES

1. Excerpt of Intentar Cantar, Eng. translation, Eliana Otta
2. The Laugh of the Medusa, Author(s): Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. Source: Signs, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press
3. Excerpt of Intentar Cantar script, Eng. translation, Eliana Otta
4. Lost & Shared: Approaches to Collective Mourning Towards Affective and Transformative Politics, Eliana Otta, Dissertation written for her PhD project at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts



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