

Zeynep Bulut, **Building a Voice: Sound, Surface, Skin**, London, UK: Goldsmiths Press, 2025, 272 pp., \$39.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Can Cui
Beijing Foreign Studies University

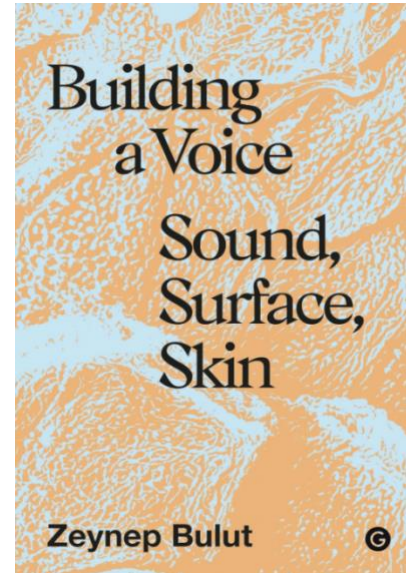
If one were to choose a defining word for our times, it might well be uncertainty. In ***Building a Voice: Sound, Surface, Skin***, Zeynep Bulut confronts that uncertainty upfront, challenging the traditional obsession with the voice as a linguistic phenomenon. The book opens with a deceptively simple proposition: Voice may be thought of as skin. From this premise, Bulut unfolds a world in which voice is neither fixed nor contained within a single body, nor reducible to language alone. It spreads across bodies, environments, and technologies, moving in ways that are sometimes intimate, sometimes errant, always contingent.

Bulut's background as a senior lecturer in music at Queen's University Belfast illuminates this approach. She has long explored nonlinguistic voice in experimental music and media art. The notion of voice-as-skin first appeared in her 2011 doctoral dissertation and here reaches its most vivid and sustained expression. The book does not announce itself as a theoretical intervention; rather, it unfolds as a practice of listening, voicing, and attending to interactions among humans, nonhumans, and environments.

The book is organized into three conceptual fields—Plastic, Electric, and Haptic—each balancing conceptual reflection with real-life examples, showing how voice negotiates material, technological, and environmental surfaces.

In the first section, Plastic, Bulut examines how literary and urban soundscapes intersect with contemporary artistic practice, revealing voice as a mutable surface. A striking example is Henry Eliot's multimedia walk through East London, inspired by T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (pp. 31–32). Participants traced a route from the Northern Outfall Sewer to London Bridge, pausing to read sections of the poem aloud. These readings did not aim at dialogue; rather, they produced a distributed, depersonalized voice, responsive to the city's ambient sounds, shifting spatial contours, and the presence of other participants. Voice here is plastic: It adapts and resists, emerges and fades, moving across individual and collective bodies. The metaphor of skin becomes tangible, a surface that is simultaneously boundary and connector, a site of resonance and friction. This plasticity reminds us that the voice is never pure or original; it is always already conditioned by the architecture of the city and the presence of the other.

Moving into the Electric realm, Bulut extends voice-as-skin into the technological and electromagnetic spectrum. Drawing on Christina Kubisch's Electrical Walks, the author traces how city infrastructures—cellphones, ATMs, security systems, and neon signs—emit hums, pulses, and rhythms that



participants perceive as part of the sonic environment through specialized headphones. Voices mingle with these signals. This section is particularly provocative because it parallels these artistic experiences with clinical contexts such as voice-hearing and avatar therapy, often styled "AVATAR therapy." In AVATAR therapy, individuals who hear distressing voices engage with a digital representation of that voice to regain a sense of agency. Through Bulut's lens, this is seen as an extension of the vocal skin: The internal voice is projected onto a digital surface, becoming a "voice-skin" that can be touched, modified, and negotiated. In all cases, voice negotiates the boundaries of self and other, becoming both a threshold and a connective surface. Here, the skin is extended technologically: Listening and voicing are layered and networked. This challenges the binary of health and pathology, suggesting that the errant voice is not an error but a manifestation of our networked existence.

The Haptic exploration focuses on voice as a tactile and mediated experience. Biosensing musical interfaces, wearable technologies, and tactile speech systems translate bodily gestures, bioelectrical signals, and vocal vibrations into sound, touch, and movement. Bulut analyzes Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Voice Tunnel in depth: Participants speak or sing into a central intercom, and their voices are redistributed through 150 speakers and 300 spotlights. New recordings gradually displace older ones, creating a shifting archive of sound and light that maps presence, memory, and embodiment. Voices appear, fade, and intermingle across temporal and spatial scales. The installation shows voice-as-skin as a shared, living membrane. This haptic quality is vital to Bulut's argument; it suggests that the voice has a weight and a texture that can be felt in the gut or on the skin. It is not just about the message but the vibratory impact of the sound. This section highlights the vulnerability of the voice—it can be recorded, archived, and eventually deleted, mirroring the biological process of skin cells shedding and being replaced. The haptic voice is thus a site of temporary presence, a reminder of our mortality and our interconnectedness within a larger, moving archive of human expression.

Across these sections, Bulut emphasizes the distributed, emergent qualities of voice. She explores acts of voicing that resist conventional dialogue, attending instead to relational, environmental, and cross-species interactions. In the book, these practices are ethical acts: Listening attentively and responding to uncertain, distributed signals cultivates empathy and awareness of interdependencies. Rather than imposing comprehension or reciprocity, voice-as-skin demands acknowledgment of limits, contingency, and mutual vulnerability. Artistic, clinical, and technological examples converge to show how voice negotiates space, attention, and care, revealing possibilities for ethical attunement that are perceptually and socially grounded. This ethical attunement is particularly relevant in our current era of miscommunication, where the inability to hear the internal others of our society leads to the kind of symbolic and physical violence observed in polarized political landscapes. If we view the voice as a shared skin, then the silencing or symbolic annihilation of a group's voice is an injury to the entire social dermis.

In the contemporary landscape, Bulut's insights resonate profoundly with AI-mediated voices. Across the globe, synthetic voices circulate through short videos, gaming, and digital assistants. Detached from a single body, they operate as distributed surfaces—socially legible, emotionally manipulable, and continuously redeployed across platforms. In these contexts, voice-as-skin helps us understand how synthetic voices mediate interaction and identity, forming a networked, relational surface that is both shared and mutable.

Moreover, AI voices raise questions about labor, governance, and trust. Synthetic voices often embody curated affect and social norms, and their deployment implicates human labor, surveillance, and commercial priorities. Bulut's framework highlights that these voices are not merely artifacts but participants in distributed communicative ecologies. There is a uniprogressive tendency in AI development—a drive toward a singular, perfect, and vocal ideal—that threatens to erase the messy, idiosyncratic textures of natural voicing. When AI voices become the standard, we risk losing the plasticity and haptic depth that Bulut champions.

The ethical engagement demanded by Bulut's work also forces us to consider the labor behind the voice. When an actor's voice is skinned to create a synthetic model, who owns that resonance? As these voices are circulated without human presence, questions of responsibility and relationality become paramount. Through Bulut's lens, we can consider how AI voices participate in social networks, prompting attention to the limits of comprehension and the potential for emergent relationality across varied agents. We must ask if we are listening to the other or merely a projection of an algorithmic ideal.

Finally, *Building a Voice* invites readers to dwell in uncertainty. Voice is partial, mobile, and shared. Across performances, installations, and experiments, Bulut shows that voice is never merely a property of a speaker but a medium of interaction. It is a profound call to listen not just for what is said but for the vibration of the skin that binds us all together in an uncertain, noisy, yet deeply resonant world.