

*a global short-circuit of distressed bodies and murky places*

Miguel Wattson, as the staff of the Rivers of the World Aquarium in Chattanooga, Tennessee, call him, is an Amazonian electric eel. His minders have devised a machine that harvests the electricity discharged when the fish experiences distress or hunger. Over the last few years, Miguel has been known for his Twitter/ X feed: the shocks emitted by the eel ‘push’ the send button on a series of tweets, pre-written by the aquarium staff, which move from electric onomatopoeia (Crackle!, Zzapp!), to the comical Sturm und Drang of cartoons (Skadoosh!, Bazinga!), to puns that introduce the idiosyncratic biology of eels, biobatteries that reside in muddy waters which they navigate via electric impulses rather than sight. A sample of Miguel’s humor might include tweets such as “As a young eel, I wanted to be a doctor, but the closest I’ve managed is being used as an impromptu defibrillator,” or “Sorry, I thought that was just going to be a sneeze. I tried to hold it in, but when you’re electric, resistance is both inevitable and futile.”

It is at this point – the conversion into text of signals meant to stun prey, foil attacks or locate potential mates – that Vibeke Mascini’s project intervenes in Miguel’s electric interlocution. These notes think through the nature of her response, the feedback to Miguel’s feedahead – its ‘nature’ both in the sense of the rhetorical charge of those textual and sonic acts, but also in the sense of the abstract/ physical world that is thus shared between Miguel and visitors to this exhibition, of the cloudy or transparent, electrified or soothing Umwelt they cohabit. Signals that emanate from different worlds are woven together in a metaphorical fuse box of transmissions and reciprocities between undefined identities – or defined solely via their temporary symmetries. Miguel and those who overhear and answer, mistranslate and misinterpret his call appear as relays in a series of amplifications, not really selves but knots in an expanding network of resonances and moments of echolocation, seeking the margins of their unknown but shared world. And rather than speak back to Miguel, the project converts his energy into a series of acts of demarcation: of distant heartbeats, quickening pulses, interjections of anguish and whispers that assuage, sometimes cohering in a polyphonic pattern. They are sometimes audible in synch, and then they veer apart, illuminating in the process the vastness of the territory where their disconnection, and their attempts to interlock, unfold. The two sense of the word ‘murmuration’ come to mind here: a flock of starling whose internal coordination is expressed in dazzling aerial choreographies, and, through allegorical misinterpretation or mishearing, the susurrus of a collective voice, alerting itself to an imminent danger and then sighing it away, attempting to reassure itself about its inevitable but delayed impact.

Miguel operates between low-voltage blips and discharges of 800 volts – sometimes greater than the power in a household wall socket: it is these larger events that generate his tweets. For the duration of the project, Vibeke Mascini was given remote access to the computing device that controls the X/ Twitter account: synced with her Raspberry Pi, Miguel’s shocks now elicit interspersed textual and musical responses in the exhibition space, a quasi-abstract opera

whose libretto is sequentially displayed across screens in the gallery, accompanied by fragmentary movements from an ambient score of increasing intensity. I imagine the exhibition, and its multiple metaphoric ramifications to other sites, as the construction of an environment of reverberations, a matrix of voices and vibrations seeking reciprocity and a common cadence, the meanings, words and sounds with which to fill their syncopations. I write these notes before the start of the project and in the knowledge that I will not witness its diaphanous accumulation firsthand, but there seems to be a connection between the sonic space in which this writing happens and the presentation at P/////AKT, allowing me to ‘plug in’ mentally. As a tinnitus sufferer, I cannot work unless the quasi-continuous electric symphony – the frequencies that I have lost and that my brain hallucinates as phantom sounds given back to me at sometimes unbearable volume – is drowned in some form of whirring, such as the ‘deep layered’, ‘smoothed’ and ‘enriched’ brown noise that is playing now from one of the many Youtube channels which cater to my wretched, crazed and exhausted constituency. The pacifier being of course in some sense identical with the cause of the affliction, the fizzy surfeit of sound in the contemporary world as *pharmakon*. I am thinking of tinnitus as model of connecting to or navigating Vibeke Mascini’s work: this endless sequence of “tiny shoves of vertigo” (Steven Connor), threatening with a plunge in some vast, imaginary cavity in the body, partly rectified by steady washes of brown noise, seems to correspond to the ways in which the project induces and dissipates tension, in which its emphases emerge and dwindle, in which a body rumbles from the clamor of its own organs and the sounds scatter in an environment whose edges they evince in the process. Per Connor, “The tantalising, and, for many, tormenting enigma of tinnitus is that its sounds have exteriority to the self without the position or definition that normally accompany such exterior objects. Tinnitus, which seems at once firmly located and unlocatable, palpable and yet indefinable, does not so much arise in this space as give rise to it.” In its worst forms, the experience is of a sound that has all of the powers and qualities of an external force acting upon its powerless listener, who cannot evade it, or put any distance between source and receptor of sound. “Such sounds are a kind of endogenous, indwelling exteriority, an outside that comes at you from the inside.”\*

This – an interiority appearing from the outside – is the unfixed point where, to my mind, the questions of genre are being asked by the artist, her plumbing of the vocalic-electric space resonated by the lullaby, her encounters with those who sing and those who are sung to. In conversation with archaeomusicologists and siblings, Vibeke Mascini has been looking at lullabies as a genre of remarkable longevity and cross-cultural extension, but also as a sonic staple of her own upbringing. She is of course interested in the intimacy and universality of lullabies, but also in their functions, in some cultures, as apotropaic inventories of the cruelty of the world, as imagined by a young mother attempting to soothe her child: she intones in the baby’s ear a list of all the horrors that await them, their poetic potentiality something of a guarantee that they will not in fact occur, that they will magically dissolve in this expression of care. In this call and response, where Miguel’s jolts of distress are promptly countered by

reassuring tonalities, a crisis is indirectly named – it is as if an entire arsenal of solutions were mobilized, only to indicate the indistinct shape of the problem requiring them. The project does not clarify the nature of this crisis, or perhaps dwells in its resistance to description – crises are linguistic, obstacles to speech, absences of the right word, deficits of genre. Yet clues about it might come from looking at the ensemble of the artist's practice, which analyzes the metaphors of energy storage and loss as metonymic compressions of the capitalist ideal of a perpetuum mobile, an ideal which is being quite dramatically rebutted today by the evidence of ecological catastrophe. To say that Miguel is swimming in a devastated world would gravely reduce the complexity of the project, but the genre that the project is getting at is, I believe, elegy, with the lullaby as a small concentric circle amidst its reverberations, as 'elegy for infants', a first relay out of many. Like elegy, lullabies give something back: they fill a lacuna, putting into words the wordless distress experienced by the infant, they compensate perhaps for losses that will come later in life.

In what is sometimes described as the first elegy, a god gets a laurel crown in exchange of the nymph he could not force into submission. When Daphne eludes Apollo by becoming a tree and Ovid's poem can no longer maintain its epic momentum – the omnipotent god has been thwarted, so the poem is looking for a new genre – the laurel wreath, made from a branch broken off Daphne's new body, is the form of turning nothing into something, defeat into an ambiguous triumph, loss into consolation. Elegy issues from that original scene as a poetic lament of a loss which is counterbalanced by the landscape: an insufficiency in the figure is rectified by a surplus in the ground. Animals, trees and rivers echo and redress the suffering of the poet, which is in a sense the ultimate expression of their mimetic relationship, of the fact that the figure is like the ground, its microcosm. What happens, though, in times like ours, when the mimetic bond breaks, and when the loss that is being deplored is precisely that of the landscape where the compensation could have come from? This duality is explored in an essay by Timothy Morton, who writes: "Ecological language might appear to be intrinsically elegiac. In a sense, nature is the ultimate lost object. It is the never-arriving terminus of a metonymic series: birds, flowers, mountains... nature. The ecological threat, however, is quite the reverse of elegy. In elegy, the person departs and the environment echoes our woe. In ecological thinking, the fear is that we will go on living, while the environment disappears around us. Ultimately, imagine the very air we breathe vanishing – we will literally not be able to have any more elegies..."<sup>1</sup> Morton goes on to disentangle, within his general project of a dark ecology, the challenges of ecological discourse: "we cannot mourn for the environment because (...) we *are* it", thus we must invent the forms of an ecological elegy that undermines any sense of closure, holding out "the possibility of a mourning without end." Ecology becomes a melancholy dualism, lamenting the extinction of something we never had, but which we are. Ecology is then the very scene where to discuss the loss of the elegy: the landscape, now vanished, that would have resonated with our mourning, that would have been its objective correlative, becomes a scene for weeping and "undermining weeping," which reasserts and transcends the elegiac mode: a gesture without comfort, a

transaction without something to transact, a vector crossing an abyss. Vibeke Mascini's project forms somewhere along the way between these vertiginously different scales: electric jolt and self-induced doom, sonic micro-monument to a fish and the mausoleum of waste in which we are gradually entombed. It captures in the infinitesimal deflagration of Miguel's jolts the glimpse of cataclysm, a global short-circuit of distressed bodies and murky places, and it defers poetically the latter by responding to the former.

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\* Steven Connor, "Auscultations", 2010, <http://stevenconnor.com/auscultations.html>

\*\* Timothy Morton, "The Dark Ecology of Elegy", in Karen Weisman (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (Oxford & London: Oxford University Press, 2010), 252-253.