

Listening out for the Ambiguity of Unreliable Things

-- Salomé Voegelin --

This essay is a score that invites the performance of works, texts, poems and sounds in a reading and singing out loud. This is an invitation to make sounds, movements and gestures that do not theorise but activate and inhabit, in a phenomenological consideration, the concepts and ideas thus performed.

Before I perform

Normally I would now simply do the performance. I would not say a word. I would sit here silently and then I would get up and perform the material that I brought with me: musical tracks, records, books, texts I have written myself, texts by other people, poems, songs, scores... I would, without explanation, do what I term a *curatorial performance*: a sonic citing of things and thoughts for which I gather my research on the floor in front of me, in patterns of organisation and disorder. I would pull out different elements of this research, pulling it together, putting it on a temporal line: curating the material into something that is neither an exhibition nor a performance, nor is it a lecture. Instead, as a curatorial gesture, it creates an experience that demands we encounter the material between these descriptive frames and in excess of them.

In thinking about this event and in thinking about this as a study day or a study week on phenomenology and art, I became aware of this performative methodology as a methodology of 'bracketing'. The material performed brackets itself out from expected formats

and contexts of reception. It thus brackets itself off from the expected interpretation of what it might mean and reference. And as its referential system is suspended, the material is brought into doubt, demanding re-orientations, re-considerations, to listen and look again to find a contingent sense, which remains insecure and unsecured in the agency of this performed speculation.

This activity of seeing/hearing the work anew all the time introduces and frames the critical rigour of perception as a making sense of fragments in their correlate temporality without achieving a totality or a consensus, but moving continually in speculation. Thus knowledge describes a 'remaining in process' and in co-dependence, which as relational knowing foregrounds not 'this' or 'that' but what things are together in their formless in-between. This knowing does not pursue a reveal or a conclusion, instead it emphasises experience and puts knowledge into a speculative suspense that involves also the suspense of the 'knowing subject' in a speculative subjectivity rather than a certain identity.

It is the same suspense that I am expecting of myself in research: suspending, as much as possible, my preconceptions, my ideas of what the things that I put together are. It is also the suspense that I hope to encourage in an audience, who might have engaged with some of the elements I am presenting before, in a different context, and who thus also have preconceptions that need bracketing off to achieve a different perception.

The *curatorial performance* in this context then is a tool for bracketing, for a phenomenological epoché, not unlike the chopping off of the attack of an instrumental sound in musique concrète, since both serve to interrupt access to a source and its referential clarity, to trigger instead a different perception. This is done not to deny this source, but in appreciation of what its cultural interpretation covers and hides: historically, ideologically, conventionally. Consequently such a bracketing enables a reimagination of what else something might mean and stand for. And so the bracketing off in performance of the material gathered on this floor is not a denial of previous readings. Instead, it is a careful invitation to re-examine, to re-listen and to re-hear what we thought we knew all along, and to reflect on how we knew it and how this knowledge constitutes us.

As a phenomenological curating this bracketing performance foregrounds what else things might mean, and who else we might be, and brings us to knowing on a different route. This route does not neglect rational thought and objectivity, but is aware of the deeply invested and asymmetrical ways in which we relate to knowledge and its authority. Therefore it is motivated by doubt as the source of everything, understood as unreliable things, and revels in the ambiguity of things without a name or a form.

What is left after the performance : an essay score

Stand in your favourite place

Roar like a lion

Recite The punk I scorn and the cutpurse sworn,
 And the roaring boy's bravadoes.
 The meek, the white, the gentle
 Me handle, touch and spare not;
 But those that cross Tom Rynosseross
 Do what the panther dare not.
 Although I sing, etc.

Tom o' Bedlam, sixteenth-century poem by an anonymous author.⁵

Sit on a chair

Text 1 Listen without certainty to your own voice
 reading the following text out loud:

This listening is about doubt. About admitting that we do not really know what we hear. And rather than searching for a real knowable that could confirm what things are, we make up for what we are not sure about through guesses and invention, with a contingent imagination as well as through desire and fear. In this way we participate and are complicit in what is known. Therefore, how it

is known cannot find legitimacy in a lexicon of a priori words and truths, but is contingent, generated in the encounter, and necessitating a discussion at least about who is listening.

However, that does not mean things heard are a lie.⁶ Rather, it suggests that reality is plural and that the line between the real and what seems imagined and invented is much thinner and slighter than we would like to admit. The sonic is threadbare and ragged, its boundaries porous and pliable. It is ineffective in holding off other realities that sound from the invisibility, at the margins: that have no name, no classification and no clear shape, but resonate within the expanse of the real their marginality and formlessness. This doubtful elasticity of the heard makes us question the certainty and formedness of the supposedly real, even of the visual.

When listening, the unknown and fabulations seep into what we trust to be real, what we thought we have seen, expanding it, darkening it, filling it with the flesh of invisible bodies, shapes and things, coming nearer and touching the flesh of our ears: sinister, erotic and unsettling, questioning the infrastructure of the actual, its knowledge pathways and those of its communication; and demanding we re-perform and re-think what we think we see and hear. In this way we glean a 'certainty' that is based not on language but in the encounter and on the flesh, and that constitutes the real in its possibility, again and again.

To this sense, this score unperforms language through the sounding voice that seems arbitrary and unreliable in relation to its visual and lexical articulation, but not in relation to its body and breath. Language as grammar, as the infrastructure of meaning that underpins, orders and explains sense, tries to take back from this uncertain expanse a recognisable shape. It tries to make a space between ears and sound for objectivity and unambiguous thought. It hopes to apply lexica and criteria, to create an order of meaning and sense that give the heard the perspective of the seen, where things have a place and a form. The sound of the voice sounding and listening by contrast resists this clarity and organisation. Instead, it collapses the distance of knowledge, and brings the unbelievable into the real. It opens facts to the invented, the unreliable and its sonic fictions, and destabilises maps, lexica, language and plans.

Thus it demands another way to understand what might be real, not from the certainty of things by themselves, ‘this’ or ‘that’, ‘you’ or ‘me’, but from the unstable contact between them and between us, into which the possible slips to infect actuality with its experiential doubt and sensorial truth.

Stand up

Perform

Light Song

stand underneath a light source

tilt your head up and stare into its glare

imagine its sound

tune into it and sustain its pitch as long as possible.⁷

Sit down

Text 2 Read this text in a whisper.

Listen for unstable contacts between breathed words:

This pitch creates an unstable contact that is wavering and stands in the way of science and philosophy’s desire, to quote Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude* (2009): “to carve out a path towards the outside for itself”.⁸ To be able to think the world beyond human thought and experience, in mathematics and the ancestral. For Meillassoux, this relative outside is the outside of the correlationist, the phenomenologist, for whom reality is an intersubjective mode of being in the world, and of the idealist, for whom reality is transcendental, a matter of reason and necessity, bound to general laws of nature. Accusing them of religious fanaticism and ideological dogmatism, Meillassoux suggests that both produce a fideist obscurantism of a proper truth by relating knowledge to the body as flesh and the rational mind respectively. In response, he proposes that the stability [of the laws of nature] must be established as a “mind-independent fact”, “which is to say, from a property of time which is indifferent to our existence”, which is not thought or experienced within our actuality, but as the absolute possibility of a

mathematical reality, calculated without human interference.⁹ Thus his aim is to reach the unthought via ancestry, the exploration of the pre-human world, without referring it to human experience or theorisation through mathematical computations, not tampered with by human “corrections”, to get to an “irremediable realism”: where “either this statement has a realist sense, and *only* a realist sense, or no sense at all”.¹⁰

By contrast, staring into the flickering light and catching its unsteady pitch, I see a radical realist sense in the unreason of sound, in its wavering unreliability and its consequent demand for a contact that remains unstable. From there I pursue a reality that includes the impossible and the improbable, the invention and the sinister. And so, instead of reaching an unfaltering knowledge we falter the path of knowledge, its hierarchies, methods, tools and language, and enter into deliberate doubt: to practise knowing on the high sea at night, without a compass, a proper vocabulary and grammar to organise and structure what we think we see or which path to go; suspending the infrastructure of knowledge to come to knowing through the responsibility of the encounter and its performance.

It is the phenomenological epoché, the bracketing off of the name and its referent, that provides a method and frame for this abandon. Its practice of suspense and doubt enables the excess and overflow of a structural description while ensuring legitimacy for its experience as knowing, rather than denigrating it to sheer believe and dogmatism. The experiential-knowing thus performed is invested in the present encounter rather than in an a priori meaning or an ancestral objective sense. It has the capacity to include the formless and to create non-sense, the sensate sense of processes and the in-between, from where it purposefully doubts a cultural visibility in order to see more and differently what we thought we knew how to recognise.

And here we close our eyes and go into the depth of seeing itself, to see differently.

Stand up

Read When children ask me, “How does one make a film?” I always say that you have to have freedom to make a film, and to have freedom, you need confidence. I tell them to close their eyes, to look at the stars, and look into their hearts, and then to open their eyes and see if the film they want to make is there, in front of their eyes.

from a conversation with Djibril Diop Mambéty¹¹

Lie down

Listen to *The Glad Circle* (Mollin+Voegelin) 2017, from 16:45- 18:30
<https://soundcloud.com/mollinandvoegelin/the-glad-circle>

“...give me cigarettes the red pack over there, they are expensive,
write it in the book.

Give me two cans of milk, give me two packs of butter, two kilos of
white bread and three of Chinese rice.

Write it down.

Two pots of chocolate spread, make it four.

Give me my cans of milk, I want my milk. Give me my chocolate,
my chocolate.

Write it down, we will pay later.

Write it all down.”

Stand up

Text 3 Read the following text through closed eyelids:

Djibril Diop Mambéty's instructions surprise the optical control exerted by society, neo-liberal capitalism and its sphere of cultural visibility. They catch it off guard and channel it through experience and the relationship with the interior world: the stars, the heart, the cells, the blood, the sensation of heat upon skin and eyelids. They perform the interior that does not look but sees things anew, sees pathways and processes, flows and rhythms and how things relate rather than what things are.

The Glad Circle was composed by David Mollin and Salomé Voegelin for Saout Radio at Dokumenta 14, in response to Mambéty's film *Hyènes* from 1992. It tries Mambéty's instructions, to close the eyes to see, on the radio, and seeks the film's confrontation of capitalism through an interior gaze. Thus the radiophonic piece invites a listening with closed eyes to see whether the film is there in what it shows, catching our sight off guard from the inside rather than projecting on to the seen from the outside. And so we listen and make sounds, to see the same anew, on a wavering track that makes an unstable contact and does not assume but creates.

Mambéty is interpreting and translating or probably rather transforming Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Besuch der Alten Dame*, a play from 1956, from a European setting into an African context. The play is about a woman who was once terribly wronged by one of the men in her hometown, which she subsequently had to leave, destitute and without hope. Now she comes back, a wealthy lady, to seek revenge through the exploitation of the townspeople's greed. Setting it in post-colonial Africa, Mambéty creates a cross-time simultaneity with the original plot through capitalist neocolonialism and consumerism, and constructs a gaze from the depth of the between of things: between technology, culture, language and meaning, seen with closed eyelids, rather than in surface calculations.

In this way he creates a different vista: a looking without an optical mechanism trained outside, but with a different imagination, trained on the inside.

Recite I am the darkness between the suns, one said.
I am nothing, one said.
I am you, one said
You- one said- You-
And breathed, and reached out, and spoke: 'Listen!'
Crying out to the
other, to the others, 'Listen!'

from Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Shobies' Story*¹²

Sit on the floor

Text 4 Read this text in excess of its words
and in abundance of their meaning:

This depth is the 'back' and 'behind' that Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses in the working notes of his book *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). According to him, it is "the dimension of the hidden", which is the place of my looking, my simultaneity with the thing, which therefore I am too close to see but I exist in simultaneity with, and thus I can hear while sounding myself.¹³ I hear this sound of my simultaneity with others not as a horizon

of my being but along vertical lines as the possibility of our encounter, establishing the depth of the in-between where it does not serve language and structural meaning, difference and differentiation, but the movement and configuration of a performative sense.

The visual representation, language, the map and the lexicon, goes around this depth, avoiding its simultaneity; avoiding its openness onto the hidden of the world. It ignores our body and that of things as they stand in its depth, where they are in the way of an absolute view, but sense its excess and perform its abundance.

The visual works on the surface, on the capacity of a *hyper-invisibility*: the invisibility of a normative truth that is so unquestionably accepted as to have become naturalised as the only and singular truth, whose investments we fail to see when we stare at its referent and name, but which we cannot fail to notice when we listen to its expansive sphere. The hyper-invisibility of normative structures

of knowledge and truth are ideological and strategic. They rely for their acceptance on not being seen but pervade the visible. They help us organise and structure knowledge but do not prompt us to query its investment: its ideology and politics, what it leaves out, where its blind spots are and what perspectives it creates. The depth of sound's *actual-invisibility*, the demands and challenges of its unseen and plural existence, by contrast, point directly at these blind spots at the back of and behind the surface measure, and insist we participate in the performance of the unknown instead. Accordingly, phenomenology as I practise it here is a performance of the in-between that works from blind spots and is motivated by doubt in objective certainties and measurables which it unperforms through a simultaneous sense of things. In this way it foregrounds the encounter and does not deny or ignore the impact of human presence on what can be known – it does not describe its fleshly knowing as human 'corrections' that need to be avoided to get to an 'irremediable realism' – but pursues a radical realism that takes responsibility for the impact of human presence and starts from the contingency of our individual experience as an *experience-with*, to grasp ourselves in the simultaneity of a *being-with*. Such a phenomenological practice does not put human perception at the centre but understands it as constituted in an elastic marginality that accounts for difference, our individual life-worlds, without a universal comparison but in contingent negotiations with every other thing. Thus its correlationism does not practise or legitimate an anthropocentric view, but performs knowledge as a *knowing-with* that arises from a *being-with*, in a contingent and doubtful co-laboration with human and nonhuman things. In this way it performs a phenomenological materialism that has the capacity to question the asymmetries of knowledge participation, what counts, what is legitimate, what can be heard and listened to, through intersubjectivity as interbeing in unreliable and ambiguous connections with every other thing. These connections and in-betweens need performing again and again, to know them in knowing rather than in names and referents and to understand also how they are conditioned by particularity: the cultural, economic, ideological as well as physiological and educational circumstance that opens the world to us in different and not entirely symmetrical ways.

Stand up

Recite With an host of furious fancies
Whereof I am commander,
With a burning spear and a horse of air,
To the wilderness I wander.
By a knight of ghosts and shadows
I summoned am to a tourney
Ten legs beyond the wide world's end:
Me think it is no journey.
Yet I will sing, etc.

Tom o' Bedlam, sixteenth-century poem by an anonymous author, last verse.¹⁴

Go on tiptoes

Purr like a cat

Notes

- 1 Published in *Sixteenth-Century Poetry*, Paul Driver, ed. London: Penguin Books, 1996, 51.
- 2 Listening does not perform a lie as simple truth, it does not do the “fake news” of alt-right and populist politics. Instead, it dives into the plurality of the heard to engage with the world through an expanded and reciprocal sense. The lies of populism pursue an agenda of right and wrong, this or that, eschewing process and materiality for simple answers that are not accountable to the world but only to their own agenda. They borrow a rationalist rhetoric and the methods of a measurable and knowable world, to mimic their authority on a reversed message: to deny climate change through fake statistics and to incite race hate through the exploitation of immigration data.
- 3 Thus they speak lies in a language of truth and rationality. By contrast listening unperforms conventional truths by unperforming its authority and pluralising its frame of reference through doubt.
- 3 www.soundwords.tumblr.com March 01, 2017, 8:42 pm
- 4 Quentin Meillassoux. *After Finitude*. New York: Continuum, 2009, 51.
- 5 Ibid. p. 127.
- 6 Ibid. pp. 126–7.
- 7 *The Hyena's Last Laugh*, a conversation with Djibril Diop Mambéty by N. Frank Ukadike, from Transition 78. <http://newsreel.org/articles/mambety.htm> Accessed 14/7/19
- 8 Ursula K. Le Guin. *The Unreal and the Real.*, Selected Stories Volume 2. *Outer Space, Inner Lands*. London: Orion, 2015, 92.

- 9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968, 219.
- 10 Published in *Sixteenth-Century Poetry*, 51.