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GAPS AND SILENCES: CLIMATE ART RESISTING IMMERSION

Heidi Hart

Video,
made out of itself ...

Diana Thater

Diana Thater, *Delphine*, 1999. Installation views of *Diana Thater: The Sympathetic Imagination*, ICA Watershed, Boston, 2018. © Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner. Photo: Kerry McFate.

Immersion has become commonplace in climate art, whether enacted literally, as in Sarah Cameron Sunde's current exhibition *36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea* (Georgia Museum of Art), or figuratively, as in "forest bathing" or "sound bath" experiences, and reaches beyond the landscape frame to focus on embodiment. Grief for lost species, and for the very world as we know it, lends itself to dark-ecological aesthetics, with immersive hauntings in the form of dark ambient sound, slow cinematic meditation, and candle-lit gallery spaces.[1] While sensory saturation can certainly bring climate crisis to life in ways that scientific texts cannot, immersive art, particularly if ambient sound surrounds the visitor,[2] risks a feel-good response to ecological collapse. As antifascist playwright Bertolt Brecht and his musical collaborators understood, lush music or march rhythm can easily be applied in manipulative ways, leading to collective trance states in the body politic.[3] Likewise, environmental art that relies on immersive effects can diminish the criticality that climate care requires, if it fosters comfort with the status quo. How to disrupt narcotic absorption in a multimedia seascape or sound bath? How to create an aesthetically moving experience without bypassing the hard realities of extinction, wildfire, flooding and drought, or else, drowning in a sense of doom? The three case studies profiled here resist immersive effects in favor of exposed devices, unexpected silence or obstacles in navigating an exhibit space: Diana Thater's video-based *Delphine* (1999), exhibited at ICA Boston in 2018; Allison Janae Hamilton's installation *The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm* (Storm King, 2018); and Tomás Saraceno's underground *Event Horizon* (2020-21) at Cisternerne in Copenhagen. In all three works, immersion is suggested but ultimately broken, leaving a space for both vulnerability and critical response.

Thater's 2018 exhibition of *Delphine* brought the artist's "anti-captivity"[4] dolphin installation from 1999 into our time of accelerated climate collapse. After crossing Boston Harbor in a boat to reach the ICA Watershed, a formerly condemned copper pipe facility, visitors might expect an immersive art

experience, with catalogue images of Thater's larger-than-life dolphin projections in mind. Upon entering the warehouse-like space, however, one encounters large-screen moving images of dolphins with no soundtrack, only the sound of the whirring projector. Thater began this work as an improvisation on "fluidity,"[5] and visitors might anticipate a *Blue Planet*-style film score to evoke nonhuman subjectivity, with lilting, pulsing strings. But, however entrancing the silver-purple light in this exhibit, with dolphin reflections spilling onto the black floor, the projector's sound draws attention to itself. The sublime bares its device, to use the Russian formalists' phrase also applied to Brecht's theatre, in which placards tell the audience what is to happen next and actors signal songs as artifice.[6] These are filmed dolphins, two-dimensional images in a former warehouse. They seem to have been recorded as anticipatory relics of loss. They might strike visitors as if already extinct, silent ghosts sliding in the same circuits over and over, captive even in the artist's effort to oppose captivity. Like Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* or distancing effect, Thater's silent-film approach to marine life presents these dolphins at a remove and foregrounds the act of watching them. If this effect is, as Fredric Jameson has noted, "a poetics of reification," it can work homepathically, forcing objecthood, exposing the act of doing so, and thus "dereify[ing]" the creature on the screen.[7] This process encourages visitors to question default modes of watching nature films and enjoying commodified images of ocean life. Without an immersive soundtrack, the act of imagining a future, virtual aquarium of formerly living creatures (however immersive imaginative acts tend to be) is likely more uncomfortable than entertaining. Visitors may be shaken by the artifice of showing what is still alive and still worth saving, because it now appears more fragile and contingent than merely beautiful.

Silence can also work as a distancing strategy when real musical instruments appear in an artwork. Allison Janae Hamilton's installation *The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm* (Storm King, New York, 2018) responds to two twentieth-century climate disasters with a tower of tambourines. Both the 1926 Great Miami Hurricane and the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane—the context for Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—devastated the state of Florida's Black communities. Thousands of migrant workers were killed and buried in mass graves. Though these storms occurred before more recent trends of global warming-induced "super-hurricanes,"[8] their destructive force, leaving environmental racism in its wake, serves as a warning for our time. Hamilton's installation did include a one-time, live grief ritual for those killed in the hurricanes; members of The Dream Unfinished group played brass and percussion instruments to create "a lamentation and a war cry" arranged in collaboration with composer Jeff Scott,[9] but the musical work did not include tambourines. After this performance to mark the installation's opening, the work stood alone as an unexpectedly silent memorial, evoking ghostliness through unplayed, unheard music. Its form, an eighteen-foot-tall, three-in-one sculpture, with the two tallest towers evoking Manhattan's fallen World Trade Center if only by association, works as a multivalent emblem of mourning. One might imagine recorded tambourine sounds projected into Storm King's park-like setting, or the instruments themselves responding to the wind, but these tambourines are painted and mounted on a steel armature, foregrounding the silence of the dead without the pleasure of atmospheric thrumming and jingling. As Fred Moten has put it, on the challenges of disrupting "the circulatory system of an unprecedented cultural imperialism" through Black performance, many of these efforts have moved through that very system and require continued inquiry.[10] To decolonize may mean *not* to entertain, not to immerse visitors in Gospel-inflected sound, but rather to break that expectation. Standing in uneasy silence as Hamilton's tower shimmers in a domesticated pond, one is faced with the environmental and racial violence behind the stacked tambourines, and with the lost sounds they might have made.

A current installation (through November 2021) that plays both with and against immersive aesthetics is Tomás Saraceno's *Event Horizon* at Cisternerne, Copenhagen's underground reservoir turned art space. This experiential artwork, the title referring both to the edge of a black hole and to the Earth's present limit situation,[11] asks visitors to descend stone steps into the underground space, flooded hip-deep for this exhibit. If they have seen publicity for *Event Horizon*, which includes haunting images of transparent globes and fragile webs suspended over dark water, they likely expect to move effortlessly between Cisternerne's stone columns, enthralled by glowing relics of human (and spider!) *poiesis*. They may be surprised to discover that they will not have the luxury of falling under Saraceno's spell. At the bottom of the steps, eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness, they meet a docent who will guide them to a boat that they will have to row themselves. A navigation map and a guide rope are provided to prevent collisions. Visitors must agree to remain silent while rowing. The darkness and the narrow waterway make forward progress difficult. Boats moving in the opposite direction seem to appear out of nowhere as one shifts sides to round a corner. Visitors may think of the impending risks to Denmark, from both sea level rise and flooding from increased rainfall, and how this artificial flood soon might be real. All the while, awkward rowing continues, preventing total sensory absorption. In one's peripheral vision, strands of light whirl and glass globes shimmer. Humming sounds from hydrophones under the water's surface vibrate along stone archways. Now moving in the opposite direction, occasionally catching the guide rope with one hand to keep from drifting under it, each boat passes closely by Saraceno's gleaming spheres, black-and-white projections, and delicately messy webs. These shapes evoke a sense of magic, but tricky navigation keeps sensory trance states oscillating in and out, if not completely at bay.

Visiting *Event Horizon* with a group makes aesthetic thrall even less tempting, with some visitors nervous about rowing and others wanting to break silence. Though the strangeness of this underground otherworld, like the eerie shivers of phytoplankton in sound artist Jana Winderen's 2018 *Spring Bloom in the Marginal Ice Zone*, might create an immersive feeling "in close encounter with strange sounds that we neither understand nor recognize,"[12] the effort of rowing together simulates the difficulty of moving

through a real flood zone without (for most) the skills to do so well. One's own city could become unrecognizable, and escape would be more stress than bliss. For visitors to Saraceno's underground world, collective confrontation with the unknown evokes more than a pleasantly mysterious feeling about spheres and spiderwebs; it shows us our human strangeness in a world that our comfortable lives have compromised beyond repair. The experience recalls a paradoxical statement in a recent study of "weird" fiction responding to climate change: "ecological thought can only proceed if we give up those deep connections we feel to the natural and social world."[13] Awkward rowing in a simulated flood, for all the pleasures of hydrophone humming and delicate shapes gleaming in the dark, makes "nature" seem less knowable and more demanding. In the gap between immersion and somewhat laborious participation, visitors experience not only the planet's fragility but also their own.

As artists responding to climate crisis turn from the landscape frame toward new embodiments of the planet's limit situation, haunting by immersion has become a tempting aesthetic mode. Brechtian criticality helps to illuminate works that resist the thrall-inducing tendency of "sound baths" or corporate nature-film soundtracks. Reconsidering Diana Thater's *Delphine* at ICA Boston reveals what seems at first to be a larger-than-life, nature-film portrayal of dolphins to be a reification of marine species, as if already extinct. Allison Janae Hamilton's installation *The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm* responds to climate disasters with a silent tower of tambourines, evoking ghostliness through sonic absence. A current exhibit, Tomás Saraceno's installation at Cisternerne in Copenhagen, *Event Horizon* presumes immersion in a flooded underground space, with suspended globes and webs, and eerie hydrophone recordings, but as visitors navigate in boats, they participate unexpectedly in the physical challenge of future floods. In all three works, distancing techniques intervene in the aesthetic immersion to foster an oscillating state of critical vulnerability. Such dis-comfort is at least one way of shifting toward what Amitav Ghosh has called "uncanny intimacy"[14] with the myriad species threatened by climate collapse.

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1.
Examples include sound-art duo Silo Portem's "Interitus," a dark-ambient treatment of an underwater scene from *Blue Planet II* (2019), the Dark Mountain Project's immersive performance and workshop "Conversations in the Dark" (2020), and Anna Mikkola's *Ghosts (redux)* currently on view at L'Inconnue Berlin.
2.
For further reading on sound's effects on the body, see Lawrence Kramer, *The Hum of the World: A Philosophy of Listening* (University of California Press, 2018), 115-116, and Mark Reybrouck and Tuomas Eerola, "Music and Its Inductive Power: A Psychobiological and Evolutionary Approach to Musical Emotions," in *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8 (2017), 1-14.
3.
See Hanns Eisler, "Fortschritte in der Arbeitermusikbewegung," *Gesammelte Schriften 1921-1935*, in *Hanns Eisler Gesamtausgabe*, Series IX, Schriften, vol. 1.1. Breitkopf & Härtel (2007): 109. See also Heidi Hart, *Hanns Eisler's Art Songs: Arguing with Beauty*. Camden House (2018).
4.
See *Delphine*: Diana Thater, Art21, October 21, 2016. [Online]: bit.ly/3bmS6wl.
5.
Lisa Gabrielle Mark, "It Begins with Beauty: Ethics and Imagination in the Work of Diana Thater," in Lynne Cook, Lisa Gabrielle Mark, and Christine Y. Kim, eds., *Diana Thater: The Sympathetic Imagination* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/DelMonico Books, 2015), 145.
6.
For background on Brecht's approach to theatre, see Andrew Dickson, "Bertolt Brecht and epic theatre: V is for *Verfremdungseffekt*," in *Discovering Literature: 20th Century*, British Library online, September 7, 2017. [Online]: bit.ly/3ed1zZ3.
7.
See Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (New York and London: Verso Books, 1998), 169.
8.
See Jeff Berardelli, "How climate change is making hurricanes more dangerous," in *Yale Climate Connections*, July 8, 2019. [Online]: bit.ly/3bmpDa0.
9.
Epos: Soundscape for Thousands, Allison Janae Hamilton website, 2018. [Online]: bit.ly/38eagyE.
10.
Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 115.
11.
Tomás Saraceno, *Event Horizon* exhibition catalogue (Copenhagen: The Fredriksberg Museums and Narayana Press, 2020), 4.
12.
Anette Vandsø, "The Sonic Aftermath: The Anthropocene and Interdisciplinarity after the Apocalypse," in Sabine Krogh Groth and Holger Schulze, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 31.
13.
Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 192.
14.
Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 33.

P. 54-55: **Tomás Saraceno**, *Event Horizon*, 2020. "Event Horizon", Cisternerne, Copenhagen (Denmark). Courtesy of the artist and Andersen's Contemporary. Photo: Torben Eskerod, 2020.

P. 58-59: **Allison Janae Hamilton**, *The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm*, 2018. Storm King Art Center. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson.