

On Echolocation: Nocturne

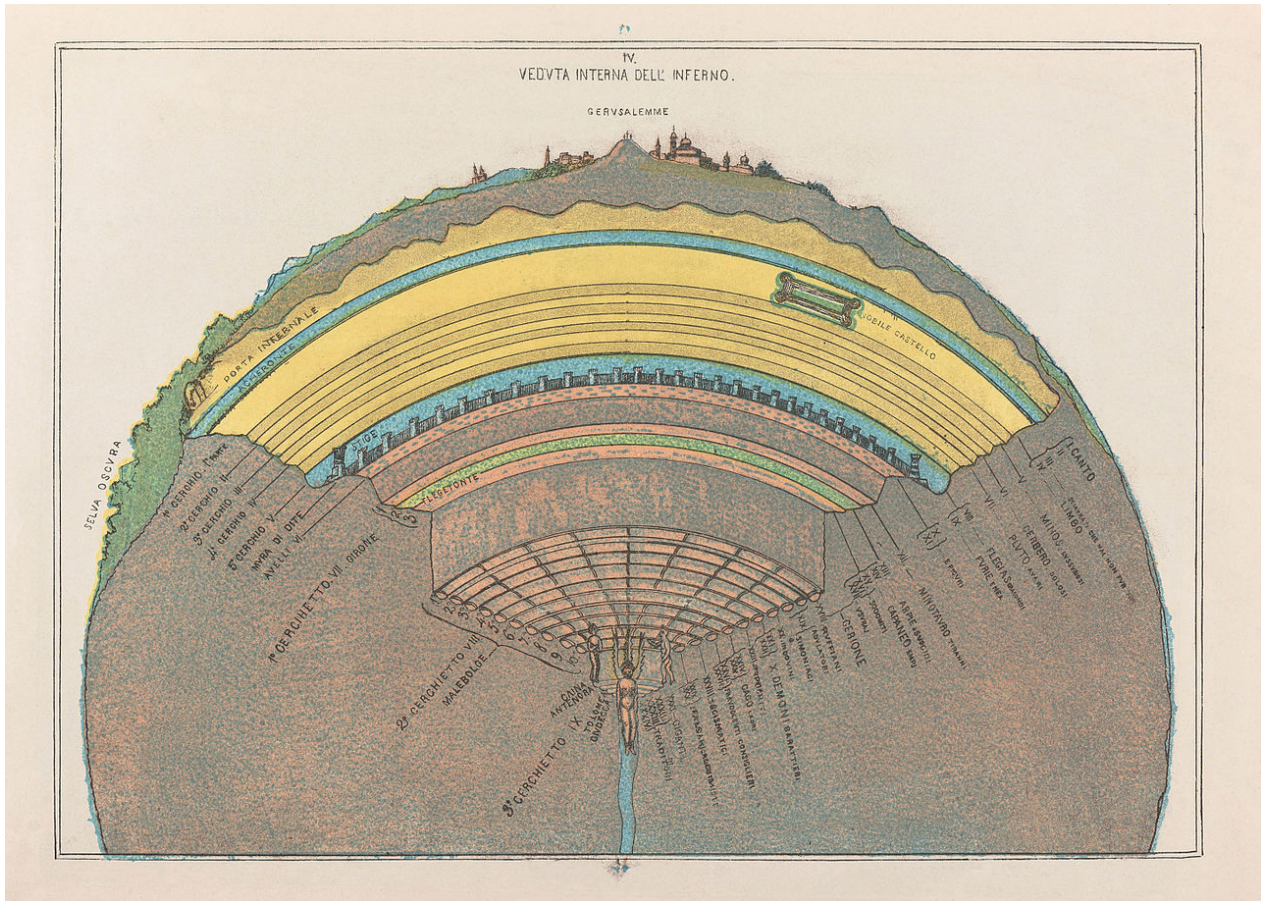
It is still a surprise to me that you have asked me to write the review on *Echolocation: Nocturne*. Not only because I consider myself no expert when it comes to sound installation, but also because, in contrast to your sensibility in generating those sensuous sounds, I find the voices in my head much louder and cruder and more troubling when put next to sounds that are so gentle and subtle. I never understood why, for example, there are harps in gigantic orchestras while they are playing loud pieces. And you know that my mind is anything but a harp solo, if it isn't, at times, an armed conflict.

Perhaps those harps have a function there, but I don't want to be the drums that overshadow their touching sensitive high notes. Nonetheless, the distance I have felt between the way I talk about things, which you one time generously called outspoken rather than loud, with the subtlety of your texts and writing, sounds legitimate to me when I think that this conversation might bring out an otherness. That is always interesting for me when I make art, much as I appreciate it in psychoanalysis or science. An otherness that is outside the systems of mankind and mind, the way that Robert Linsley describes it.¹

We know that humans and human systems aren't the most beautiful things on earth. We know that the beauty that is out there, outside of the systems of humans, is expanded when someone pushes them into our closed systems and opens them up. I'd like to call such recognition and acceptance of otherness a Copernican Revolution, to follow Jean Laplanche. He maintains that, after Copernicus, it was the otherness that decentralized location and subjecthood, something philosophy has neglected to catch up with (Reza Negarestani has tried to overcome this). I guess artists, through their sensibility, are one way or another prone to making that rediscovery every now and then.

In taking up Copernican Revolution in relation to your work, the analogy can be used on multiple planes. One plane could be that despite the fact that we've both lived in Amsterdam East, we have very different takes on it. You have lived there much longer than me, know it much better than me, yet, I have carried the fantasy of Amsterdam much longer than you, without having any access to the reality of it, not until six years ago when I first stepped onto its soil. It is funny also that I mentioned to you the paragraph that I had read by Camus about Amsterdam, and I hesitate to quote it here, since it is so harsh and I don't want to sound arrogant when speaking of Amsterdam. Nonetheless, I don't think it is that far out of orbit when seen from a Copernican point of view: a decentralizing or destabilizing remark when

Camus puts his pen down to write about Amsterdam. He simply mentions that if you have ever paid a close look at the map of Amsterdam, it looks like the map of hell – the hell of the middle class who go round and round and never reach what they want... (And of course his map of hell is from Dante's Ptolemaic map of the universe.)²



Michelangelo Caetani, 1855

But maybe this kind of discourse only makes sense if we insist on the Copernican Revolution analogy. You also mentioned that your partner Gwenneth Boelens had suggested to use the tactile sheets of mesh in the installation, and that you thought you would not have arrived at those materials if it weren't for her.

It all made sense to me when, in our conversation, I mentioned the body. It brought our attention to something that seemed to be counter-intuitive to you regarding what your work is about. And indeed I was inspired by your telling me about Gwenneth's suggestion of those fragile materials for the installation. You walk at night, you record at night, you move to the building that is intimidatingly empty and you sense the echoes; you cycle around, feeling

intimidated by the people you encounter at night, while at the same time intimidating them, and what persists in my imagination of the situation you paint, is the fragility and the precarity that you carry within yourself, and the question of how much of that impacts what you are doing and producing and accumulating from the recordings of your nocturnal drifts in Amsterdam.

It is no surprise if a queer artist, preoccupied with the subject of the body in writing about their work would mention body politics, but it does surprise me when someone who hasn't posited the issue of body politics in his exhibitions and performances would bring it up. I consider it an established fact that the body of one's work is not different from one's body proper, but all the more fascinating to me is to consider your account of bodiliness of your work and how you relate that to your work. My fascination grows more when, despite the clear presence of your sonic sensibility, your drumming, your walking, your recording, it comes as a surprise to you when I introduce the subject of the body.

I don't think the question is about being queer or not, I think it's the problem of the ivory tower of thinking from a man's body that all men can be more prone to forgetting their bodies.

This Copernican Revolution of bodies, of realization of one's own body through the conversation with another body, with some-body else, is not irrelevant to the recognition of the body of Amsterdam for me, which I've known since I was nine years old by copying some paintings, although maybe then I didn't know the name of the country or those landscapes. And you've known it from birth, by walking into it, which became more clear to me, and more vague, in relation to my fantasies when I walked into it, when I lived there, in the Dapperstraat, and when I worked in my studio on Zeeburgerpad. By reading about Dutch art history I also had a sort of a Copernican Revolution, which seductively decentralized my way of thinking about art: from the point of view of Persian culture it seduced me to want to be there, and I eventually managed, and one way or another the seduction of Amsterdam still holds my thoughts together when I want to think of art.

Likewise, it was a Copernican Revolution for me when I found Spinoza, and it was even more of an upending when I realized he had shifted his attention to the Muslim philosophers of Europe, Averroes and Ibn Maymun, in order to criticize Descartes. The discovery of the western world by the east, the discovery of the eastern world by the west – Norman O. Brown calls both a historical Copernican Revolution.³ It has been so refreshing to me, every

time it passes my mind. The sentimentality that I feel from your sound installation in Amsterdam East, reminds me of my own sentimentality walking past the sculpture of Spinoza on the Zwanenburgwal – his honest investment to make sense of the world.

But let me take a step back from the body and go back to the orbits and the decentralization that I think is clear not only in how you have put out your works there, but also in your decision to invite someone to write on what you have produced, knowing that he might have such a different take on approaching the subjects here.⁴

From the details that you've picked up from the fragments of the nocturnal wanderlusts, putting them together, deciding about them, brainstorming with your partner, I think you have achieved a mapping of the Amsterdam night and, indeed, an internal map of yourself. This brings me back to my thoughts on Jan Verwoert's criticism of Contemporary Art. He celebrates the significance of painters by comparing them to domino players, as opposed to the conceptual artists, who are chess players. Together with my close collaborator Mohammad Salemy, I've learned that if you want to talk about a contemporary art that makes sense – immediately and deliberately or directly about the truth-seeking aspects of art, in a not yet nullified art – one should further the analogy and think about the types of art the chess player and the domino player would make.

Chess board versus domino stones: modelling or carving? To me the Ptolemaic version of the world resembles the chess board more than dominoes. In chess, as in the Ptolemaic version of the world, we don't have any maps of the world except models, closed onto themselves with a claim towards explaining how things work. They remain within the systematic thinking of mankind. The domino player, meanwhile, is a carver, a cartographer if you like, who doesn't move from the generality to the details, but vice versa, from the details of what he has seen at his starting point, his encounters and observations and senses.

I find that the Ptolemaic version fits the masculinist world very well. Whereas for the Copernican subjects, there is the otherness out there and within them that they feel, they know, evidently, vividly, they don't see represented within the human systems, neither ontologically nor epistemologically. The revolutionary, or the feminist, or the queer, not only has sensed the otherness in the systems of ontology and epistemology, but pushes for openness to bring in an otherness in those systems. That's why, to me, talking to you and listening to you in your exhibition and the way you associate on the presence of your partner's femininity

or feminine thinking (excuse my poor choice of words), together with my response to what you have been doing and saying, constitutes an act of mapping.

Any map is an open-ended map, it is not a system closed onto itself; a fact that, in the end, doesn't allow one to make a final conclusion either about you or about Amsterdam East.

So far I feel I've been doing nothing but to elaborate my interpretation from my standing point on what Echolocation might mean. Echolocation in itself has this cartographic quality which is not a model, that is to say, it is open to an otherness that is intriguing to me and calls for an urgent recognition in my writing and probably also by you. What remains, is that what I might find and what you might find in different surveys of how these senses echo, nights and days, in Amsterdam.

Freud says every finding is a refinding. The whole psychoanalytic system wishes to find some otherness within the repetitive compulsion that humans are stuck in. During my own nocturnal surveys of Amsterdam East, in the summer mornings of 2015, I used to find the purple mountains of Tehran where the low clouds were hanging. Those Dutch mountains were my refinding.

In what Amsterdammers refer to as the 'shit towers' of Zeeburg⁵, I feel you have recorded an emptiness of those empty silos, in order to refind, to surprise yourself with an otherness, useful for rescuing a long lost spirituality of materialism. And even if you do not find it, it became clear in the course of this writing, that in reflecting on your nuanced nocturnal walks, I find that materialist spirituality that I have been looking for in my fantasies, in Dutch paintings, or in friends that I hoped to find, there at the threshold of the encounter with the realities of Amsterdam.

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¹ Robert Linsley (1952-2017), abstract painter and thinker, extensively contributed to the writings by painters. His piece 'Turning Away' is the inspiration in mind here. <http://tripleampersand.org/turning-away/>

² 'Have you noticed that the concentric canals of Amsterdam are like the circles of hell? A bourgeois hell, inhabited of course by bad dreams. When you come here from outside, as you go through these

circles, life – and its crimes with it – becomes denser and more obscure.’ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, translated by Robin Buss, Penguin Classics, 2006 (French original 1956).

³ ‘To bring Islam into the picture is a Copernican revolution ... it is to recover the prophetic sense of the unity of world history, discredited by its association with Westernizing triumphalism, the idea of progress, and Hegelian teleology. It is to recover in the twentieth century ... the original prophetic realism and radicalism.’ Norman O. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, University of California Press, 1992.

⁴ Vincent van Velsen, who contributed to the *Thinging* series as an independent curator, deserves credit for encouraging Nickel to push this idea forward.

⁵ Colloquial name of the sewage facility’s concrete digestion tanks, which Nickel used as sound chambers in his recordings.