

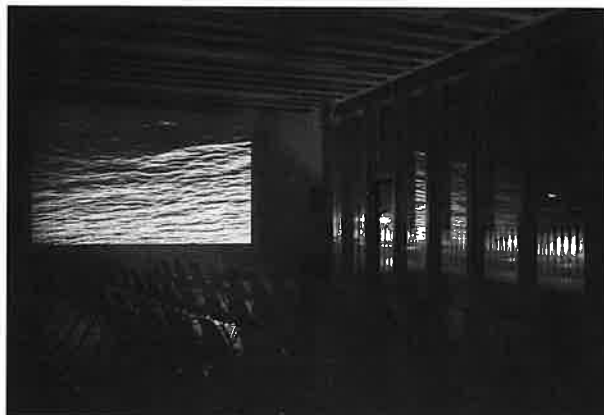
Caroline Bergvall: Nattsong

Nattsong is a multimedia performance by artist and poet Caroline Bergvall which was commissioned by Cement Fields for the 'Estuary 2021' festival (Reviews AM449). The work combines moving images with spoken and sung words, and electronic music and field recordings that are organised into seven parts and played through a multichannel surround sound set-up. The performance begins with *Passengers*, an algorithmic data piece that revolves around numerous translations of the phrase 'Passengers we are passages we are' into ancient and contemporary languages, such as Ladino, Scottish Gaelic, Occitan, Irish, Farsi, Arabic and Punjabi. Consisting of voices that seem to map the gallery space sculpturally, the work is an intriguing audio-visual overture that takes the viewer/listener on a global journey of linguistic cross-pollinations – or, as the artist suggests, 'pollinated pollinating'.

The second piece, *Another Great Unhoming*, is performed by Bergvall and accompanied by a 'shadowing soundscape' composed by sound designer Jamie Hamilton. This piece introduces the theme of 'night' – *Natt* means night in Norwegian (Bergvall's native language). Here, poetic fragments, monosyllabic utterances and broken words eventually cluster around puzzling questions: 'What shelter shelters? How sheltered are you?' Meanwhile, the medieval etymology of the word 'refuge' is traced before it is drowned out by the background noise. In Latin, the word *refugium* means shelter, but it also comes from the verb *refugere*, which means 'to run away from'. The complexity of this push/pull reaches its climax with an overwhelming sound of street protesters, followed by a lament made from a repeated exclamation: 'ohmy ohmy ohmy ohmy'.

Nattsong marks the culmination of 'Sonic Atlas', a cycle of live works by Bergvall built on research titled *Language Stations* that centred on landscapes, time zones, trans-locality and writing in context, and the records of voices of migrant poets, translators, academics and activists, to capture the shifting array of languages in the UK and the EU. First performed in Tilbury and subsequently toured internationally, the sunrise performance *Ragadawn* was the first work that combined these research recordings as well as site-specific projections developed by the filmmaker Andrew Delaney and compositions of elegiac refrains sung by the soprano Peyee Chen and composed by Gavin Bryars.

Bergvall's textual scores are constructed using minimal lines, misspellings, disjointed phonemes, neologisms and lyrical narrative fragments which, when repeated, sung, spoken or whispered, have a profound, incantatory effect on the listener. Close to breathing techniques developed in sonic meditation and yoga practice, Bergvall's chanting brings the tradition of mantra and spiritual singing into the realm of contemporary art. Far from the conceptualism of concrete poetry, her sound poems vibrate outwards. Indeed, *Natt* also calls up *Nótt*, the personification of the powerful dream goddess of Norse mythology which is connected with the story of the creation and destruction of the world, here recalled in the poem *Voluspá*, which is translated homophonically at the heart of the vocal score.



Caroline Bergvall, *Nattsong*, 2021, installation view



soprano Peyee Chan performing Caroline Bergvall's *Nattsong*, 2021

The celebration of the night theme also seems to reflect on moments of vulnerability and the unknown, which Bergvall entangles with the urgent issue of mass migration. In 2020, during lockdown, Bergvall curated the project *Night and Refuge*, an online writing experiment with four other international poets who convened over the internet to write a collaborative poem and discuss themes of migration, self-isolation and our fleeting lives, asking 'what it means to seek refuge and restore our life and art energy for new communal practices at this time of intense global crises'.

The pieces *Listen Hear*, *Lost and Found*, *Conversations* and *Prepare to Cross* (the second part of *Nattsong*) seem to invite the listener to 'listen inside you and all around you'. When we continually see humans having to cross borders and find new homes and refuges, this is where and when it becomes increasingly important to have 'conversations [which] are like hearing ... brightness from the dark' and remember that listening to a voice is different from the involuntary act of simply hearing.

Paul Celan writes in the poem 'The Meridian': 'who hears the speaker / perceives language and form and, at the same time / perceives Breath as well, that is, direction and destiny'. Bergvall's *Nattsong* has developed a similarly poetic thought of breath as a practice of deep listening, as a process of being vigilant and present, and, finally, as a bridge, or a journey that we can't take alone.

Caroline Bergvall's *Nattsong* was performed at Turner Contemporary, Margate, 2 December.

Lucia Farinati is a curator and independent researcher, and co-author of *The Force of Listening*, 2017.