

Jacob Kirkegaard & Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard
Vestindiske Forestillinger

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Photo: Jacob Kirkegaard

The Archipelagic Body

By Tobias R. Kirstein

OVERGADEN.

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Design: Anni's

And it is a dream at sea such as we never dreamt, and it is the Sea in us that will dream it: The Sea, woven in us, to the last weaving of its tangled night, the Sea, in us, weaving its great trails of darkness [...]

Saint-John Perse, *Seamarks* (1957)

Now, let us make the fantastic assumption that Rome is not a place where people live, but a psychical entity with a similarly long, rich past, in which nothing that ever took shape has passed away, and in which all previous phases of development exist beside the more recent. [...] It is clearly pointless to spin out this fantasy any further: the result would be unimaginable [...]. If we wish to represent a historical sequence in spatial terms, we can do so only by juxtaposition in space, for the same space cannot accommodate two different things.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930)

Islands, known and unknown, separated by the sea. An archipelago, the meaning of which flickers depending on the angle from which it is viewed. The sea separates Denmark, the Danish West Indies and the Virgin Islands. A sea that creates a distance between familiar and unfamiliar islands. The Danish West Indies exists as a historical fact and seductive mercantile fantasy. But the Danish West Indies is no longer a geographical locality. The islands are imaginary: their existence grows and changes during the journey across the sea. So Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard and Jacob Kirkegaard's work *Vestindiske Forestillinger* ('West Indian Imaginings') consists of sound recordings from a place that does not exist, yet that it is possible to travel to. The work provides no unequivocal answer as to how we in Denmark can understand the history and reality of the place. Instead, it raises questions that as viewers of the work and participants in history we have to try to relate to.

IMAGININGS

Maybe the Virgin Islands can be seen as the Middle East of the past – as a battleground for the reciprocal power relationships of colonisers of different periods. As a displaced stage for centuries of European interests. The conscience nags. Spain, Holland, England and Denmark have left their mark on the islands. It was here that Columbus established the emblem of centuries of racist imperialism by naming the place and its people on the basis of misplaced confidence in his own navigational skills, inflicting a name and idea on the islands. Later, they were also given a new population. Initially Danish merchants, backed by the state, imported convicts from Denmark. But they soon succumbed to the climate. So thousands of people were shipped to the islands from different parts of Africa. Those that survived the passage were enslaved and became the population of the islands.

LIQUID

There are oceans between then and now. Slavery is banned, and women and prisoners have rights and the right to vote. Morality is a contextual, historical entity that gives rise to insurmountable, complex ethical issues. There are oceans between the critiques of slavery of the past and the prohibitions of today. There are oceans between the cheap clothing we can buy in Denmark, and the people who make it on the other side of the earth that cannot afford it themselves. There are oceans between what we know and what we choose to let remain unknown. And they are in constant dialogue, they influence each other. Copenhagen is full of buildings built with the profits of colonial trade. Plants that are otherwise only found on the coast of West Africa grow on Saint Croix – presumably transported in the necklaces of those shipped here. People who live here now and have been Americans for a century. The journey to and from the islands takes place across these oceans of meaning.

The sea is a central factor, lodged between the known and the unknown. From films we know that liquid is a powerful symbol – a point of no return. A fountain in a park or a pensive bath in a romantic comedy, a drink poured in a film noir, torrential rain in any drama indicating a decisive turn of events. Contours are erased by liquid, new surfaces are created. Liquid connects and transforms.

Water is thus not merely a liquid that can be wiped up and spat out, but a meaning-generating, crucial and not least all-enveloping environment and universe – there is nothing beyond it. We are drenched in history. There is no privileged, objective point of view from which to judge these movements.

THE FAMILIAR AND THE UNFAMILIAR

As individual artists, both Jacob Kirkegaard and Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard have highly developed, conceptual practices that intersect productively in their joint work. The familiar and the unfamiliar are two magnetic forces pulling from separate shores.

Jacob Kirkegaard's in-depth investigations of the creaking sounds made by ice in Greenland and the bubbling underground of Iceland have made myriads of foreign and unfamiliar details available to a wider audience. And his virtually scientific dissection of the sound-generating qualities of the human ear has taken numerous artistic forms, including the cultural institution of the classical string quartet. Kirkegaard renders the inaudible audible. At the same time making concrete phenomena an unwieldy often purely sonic experience

that creates a basis for the generation of new meanings. His practice creates a realm for reflection that makes the unfamiliar familiar.

Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard's work as a composer can be seen as moving in precisely the opposite direction. *SOUND X SOUND* – sound multiplied by sound – is the title of a series of works where familiar instruments like the triangle, hi-hat, recorder and clarinet are investigated with conceptual stringency to sow seeds of new meaning in our traditional perception of instruments and the use of their sound. He gathers a huge ensemble of musicians of every kind, all of whom – under the strict direction of the artist himself – play the same instrument monomaniacally, cancelling out the familiar. The sound of the instrument is multiplied to identify a kind of sonic core. The individual components are broken down and absorbed by a larger, uncharted sonic state. The familiar instrument becomes alien in the cacophony, enabling us to perceive and experience it anew.

Maybe this is how we as viewers can use *Vestindiske Forestillinger*. As an instrument to examine the familiar and the unfamiliar with a parallel, pendular gaze.

THE BODY OF SOUND

Given history, economics and power relationships, it is impossible for a Dane to travel to the Caribbean without carrying the spectre of the West Indies. Something Jacob Kirkegaard and Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard must have had in mind on their journey back and forth across the sea. What they brought home with them are the recordings that constitute *Vestindiske Forestillinger*.

What do we hear? There is no sound of engines, no people. We can hear insects and birds and what sounds like the acoustics of a forest. Is it documentation of a biotope? How staged is the sound? Is it a single recording, or the combination of many? Is the sound looped? We don't know.

But we accept the sound in a split second as an all-enveloping environment. In his short story *Kvinden fra Madagaskar* ('The Woman from Madagascar') from 1986, Per Højholt outlines the genealogy of a painting of a naked woman. The painting has been sold at an auction in London to an enthusiastic amateur painter who is spellbound by the work:

Without knowing the slightest thing about the antecedents of either the woman or the painting, he was entirely absorbed by the enigmatic sheen of her skin. But after some time he became even more absorbed by the fact that the figure seemed to dissolve, to

disintegrate before his eyes, as if the individual parts of this wonderful body consistently pointed in different directions: no centre, no unifying point, no general idea was to be gleaned from this enervating potpourri ...¹

The sound is impossible to separate into individual components, and as a soundtrack impossible to escape as a layer of meaning. The sound transforms the space and our sensory perception. And how can we listen to it as a whole when what we know and our historical wetness divides our thoughts? Can these complex imaginings – apropos Freud's psychical Rome – occupy the same space at the same time in the same place? Can we assemble the parts and keep them together in a single body? What happens when we try?

1. Per Højholt: 'Kvinden fra Madagaskar', 1986. In: *10 Fantastiske Fortællinger*, Bo Hakon Jørgensen (ed.), 1990, Odense Universitetsforlag, p. 227.

Tobias R. Kirstein is a writer, artist and one of the founders of the music venue Mayhem. He is also co-curator of the festival CLICK, and a teacher at the art school Kunsthøjskolen i Holbæk.

Translation: Jane Rowley

CV

Jacob Kirkegaard (b. 1975) is an artist and composer and graduate of the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. He has exhibited at MoMA in New York, Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde, and ARoS Aarhus Art Museum.

Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard (b. 1979) is a sound artist and composer who studied at Denmark's Rhythmic Music Conservatory and the School of Architecture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. He has created a wide range of works and sound releases that operate at the intersection of experimental music and sound art.

EVENTS

Thursday 14 September 6-7.30pm: TALK. This evening, Jacob Kirkegaard and Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard will tell about their journey to the West Indies and the creation of the exhibition. Subsequently, there will be a Q & A session where the audience can ask questions. Moderator: Merete Jankowski, director of Overgaden.

Friday 13 October 7pm: CONCERT. Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard and Jacob Kirkegaard launch a new joint work for cello and clarinet. The work will be centered on overlapping sounds and investigate the relationship between sound, space and body.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: overgaden.org

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