

On the Lookout, 2023

We are no longer obliged to assign an artist's practice to a fixed medium; but, while at first glance Camille Llobet seems to navigate freely between performance, video and language, it is nevertheless useful to consider her full approach through the overarching spectrum of sculpture. A broad conception of sculpture, of the perceptual and cognitive kind, whose raw material appears to be a human body with infinitely flexible skills. A body continually informed and honed by the linguistic, technical or cosmic milieu in which it is immersed, but which it also influences. This interactive loop or reciprocal information between body and environment thus traverses many situations set up by Camille Llobet.

Taking the form of an initial feature-length film and two sound installations created in alpine environments, the title of her latest project, *Pacheû* (2020–2023) is symptomatic of this two-fold movement: derived from a local dialect from the Mont-Blanc ranges, “pacheû” refers to a previously traced route that an individual can follow, but also describes treading on virgin territory, with one's footprints creating a new trail.¹ These two trails, the pre-existing one that we take and the one we feel our way along, are like neuronal connections: they are reinforced by repeated experiences (all forms of training fascinate the artist), but they can also reorganise themselves to circumvent lacuna or lesions, and generate their own deviations. This cartographic duality – the passage that guides us; the guide who opens up the passage – pervades the artist's approach. *Pacheû* thus shows us the extreme acuity and agility that alpine guides develop by dint of practising these pathways, which they are often the first to baptise. With its harsh and restrictive topography, the mountain is their training ground. It teaches them balance, gravity, breathing... But they are more than the product of this territory, they also draw their own maps.

Shot at various sites of the Mont-Blanc ranges, at Col de la Fenêtre, on the Talèfre Glacier and the Combe Maudite, *Pacheû* does away with the habitual imagery of alpine areas: neither sublime, nor touristic, nor sensationalist, the images shot by Camille Llobet shift the gaze away from heroic, crystalline peaks. Aiming for the anti-spectacular, they skim the ground in a lateral framing, occasionally at a high-angle, which scans the rock walls, the granite rockfalls, and is sometimes misted up with fog. The horizon is eclipsed in favour of texture. From this humble perspective (from the Latin *humus*, “soil, earth”), we follow alpine guides, geomorphologists and mountain lovers in their observations and progressions, which are certainly very confident, but not daredevil. Camille Llobet is well aware of the massive visual trap that this grandiose mountain represents, at the foot of which she grew up, and whose iconography remains stalwart within a regime of intensity. How might we liberate ourselves from the “art-ification” of extreme nature by Romantic painting? How do we avoid the trophy of conquest that alpine photography represents? Or how do we counter the more promotional angles of “flybys” with drones or GoPro cameras? By transferring sensorial awareness to the haptic and auditory spheres

¹ Trampling that could recall that left by Richard Long in a field of tall grasses in the Wiltshire countryside, on one of his trajectories between Bristol and London, and its iconic photographic immortalisation *A Line Made by Walking* (1967).

Open-ended and concluded by two sound installations, devised as a complete audio visit, alternating between listening with headphones and within the space, vestibules and acoustic rooms, the exhibition at the Institut d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes, is entitled *Fond d'air* [Atmosphere]. A *fond d'air* is a sound recording taken at the shooting location, capturing the ambient silence or room tone to ensure the acoustic continuity of the edit. It is the background of a soundscape, constituting something of a horizon of expectation, upon which to graft individual themes or sounds. The participants involved in Camille Llobet's works are systematically engaged in acute listening situations; as are the visitors to the exhibition, immersed in a set of listening conditions meticulously prepared by the artist, who is just as attentive to the system of broadcast as she is to the sound-proofing or tone of the spaces. In this way, everything combines to maintain this general state of readiness, to the point of the visitors' potential mimicry, when faced with the people acting in the artworks.

At the entrance to the visit, *Pacheû* (croquis sonore) proposes listening with headphones to recordings made with the help of a binaural head produced by the artist. Invented in the second half of the nineteenth century, then tested in-depth as of the 1930s, this very specific apparatus for sound recording aims to reconstruct our natural listening experience. Two microphones are positioned in the ears of a dummy, whose morphology (the auricle, face and skull) capture the sounds as perceived in our body: spatialised in three dimensions. Attesting to visual hegemony, optical and perspective literature has long analysed our binocular vision, whereas our binaural hearing remains, if not unexamined, at least more confidential. While headphone listening arrangements most often resemble salons designed for relaxation, Camille Llobet instead suggests listening to her binaural recordings while standing, leaning on a railing evoking belvederes, promontories offering beautiful views (from the Italian *bel*, beautiful and *vedere*, to see). The installation nevertheless offers nothing more to look at than an empty wall, bathed in a dawn light slightly tinted with blue. On the other hand, the headphones allow us to perceive a great deal, including snow falling from steep slopes, scree surfing², landslides, underground streams, footsteps in thick snow, ice cracking, a progression along a cascade of ice using crampons and ice axes, a snowy forest melting in the sun, or rocks skimmed across a frozen lake.³

² Controlled sliding on a powder or scree slope, performed in a standing or crouched position, sometimes with support from the ice axe, used as a brake.

³ A passage from John Hull's diary in *Touching the Rock* has enduringly marked Camille Llobet, and inspired several of her artworks. The author explains his journey into blindness and his "continuity of acoustic experience", recovered thanks to the rain in his garden, "bringing out the contours of everything" and the layout of an environment otherwise totally absent from his perception: "[rain] throws a coloured blanket over previously invisible things; instead of an intermittent and thus fragmented world, the steadily falling rain creates continuity of acoustic experience." John Hull, *Touching the Rock* [1990] (London: SPCK, 2013), n.p. [Preview accessed online via Google Books on 20 April 2023].

Preceding the creation of *Pacheû*, these recordings made in spring 2020 resemble the location scouting phase for the film. Entitled *Fond d'air*, the sound installation that concludes the exhibition is broadcast in a small, round, black room. Recorded from the *Tête du Couvercle*, which overlooks the three glacial valleys of Talèfre, Leschaux and the Sea of Ice, and that faces the *Trident du Tacul*, the recording expresses the echo of the landslides and rockfall resonating within this vast topography. The reliefs provide a wonderful sounding board for these noises, a giant version of the ear's pavilion, which conveys the sounds towards the auditory canal, then the cranial cavity, which is also an echo chamber. The film *Pacheû* ends on a chat between two mountaineers and a geomorphologist about mountain sounds. They discuss the "deep sounds" perceived before certain catastrophic landslides, metallic rumbling and subterranean gurgling, responding to the visceral fear felt by the mountaineers. An organic form of continuity between the corpus of the mountain and the human body is traced.

In *Pacheû*, the individuals advance and descend, plough on or side-step, chatting calmly rather than climbing, out of breath, in a conquering ascent. Many static shots capture the mountain on its own, free of any human presence. Camille Llobet adopts a perspective in which humans are not the centre of the world, but rather in the midst of it: "immersed and engaged in the immanence of a complex network of interactions with the terrestrial milieu and the geographic milieus that they transform and that transform them: they are a biological subject and no longer metaphysical or substantial"⁴. *Pacheû* does not approach the mountain as an environment,⁵ or as a landscape,⁶ but instead as a milieu. Geographer-philosopher Augustin Berque describes the milieu as an "eco-techno-symbolic system according to which we ourselves exist as we are and reciprocally, within an interrelation that is reminiscent of what, in Buddhism, the 'Middle Way' has called 'co-susceptibility'."⁷ And it is precisely in sculptural terms that Berque describes this co-determination, this "complex back-and-forth in which nature and culture are mutually constructed within a relationship of matrix-imprint".⁸

While it is easy to think that the mountaineer's body is sculpted by the mountain, both from a physiological and anthropological point of view, the reverse might seem unlikely. However, it is well and truly in alpine regions that climate change is now the fastest and most palpable. Without being named in *Pacheû*, it pervades the mountaineers' observations: regression of snowfall, permafrost and glacier melt, rockfalls and so on. The event to which the mountaineers are alluding at the end of the film is the landslide of the *Trident du Tacul*, in 2018 (42 433 m3).

⁴ Pierre-Henry Frangne, "Au principe de l'esthétique environnementale. Du paysage de montagne à l'esthétique de la montagne", *Nouvelle Revue d'Esthétique*, no. 22 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018): 39. [All translations of quotations from the French are ours, unless otherwise stated.]

⁵ Tangible realities, physical and objective data of the surroundings.

⁶ Motif of a symbolic, picturesque or poetic representation.

⁷ Augustin Berque, "Trajection et réalité", *La mésologie, un autre paradigme pour l'anthropocène ?*, Colloque de Cerisy, dirs. Marie Augendre, Jean-Pierre Llored and Yann Nussaume (Paris: Hermann, 2018), 37.

⁸ Augustin Berque, *Formes empreintes, formes matrices, Asie orientale* (Le Havre: Franciscopolis, 2015), 17.

Pacheû films the physical paths of bodies projected within their field of training, expertise and observation, the readings of the landscape are therefore a central narrative principle. The previous work – *Faire la musique* (2017) – stands in counterpoint to this. Shot in a single static take, in the concrete pier of a bridge in Saint-Gervais, in the Haute-Savoie, this video captures the interior pathways of thirteen high-level athletes, immersed in mental training, eyes closed, standing motionless in space, wholly absorbed by the visualisation of their performance. Practised in a state of relaxation and concentration, mental rehearsal is an optimisation technique in which an athlete plays back in their head the “film” of a perfectly successful training session, adjusting each micro-gesture and reactivating the sensations acquired in the practice. The title of the work is borrowed from “the music” that the pilots from the Patrouille de France play before their aerial stunts. Sitting on their chairs, they press the buttons of an invisible control board, leaning their heads under the effects of imaginary loops. Within their introspective choreographies, akin to trance or self-hypnosis, the sports professionals filmed by Camille Llobet apprehend different environments: a climbing wall, ski ramp, passing under a waterfall in a kayak, a slalom or bobsled course...

A combination of memory and projection, mental rehearsal relies on the very tangible effect of the imagery of our experiences of learning: watching an action done by another person, or representing it mentally to oneself, activates the same mirror neurons in our brain as those invested during the action itself. “The activation of mirror neurons gives rise to an ‘internal motor representation’ of the observed act, on which the possibility of learning by imitation depends,” by recognising and understanding the action of others in reference to one’s own “vocabulary of acts,”⁹ explains Giacomo Rizzolatti, professor of human physiology whose team described mirror neurons in the early 1990s. Camille Llobet is fascinated by the body’s ability to ingrain learning, whether it be in the warm-ups of the three dancers rehearsing their steps, and whose slack mouths she films in close-up (*Chorée*, 2014); or in the pre-linguistic imitation required to learn language, via the prosodic babbling phase that the artist observes in her own daughter, whose “songs” she asked a soprano to reproduce in live performance (Majelich, 2018).¹⁰

Stimulated by the discoveries and approaches of certain scientific disciplines – anthropology and its approach to the field, mesology and its science of milieus, or neurology and its observation of modes of learning – Camille Llobet explores our formative experiences, whether they are physical, linguistic or mental, by systematically tracking the importance of conformation, communication, and co-participation. Always with the Latin prefix *cum* – the “with” that anchors all of her practice within a study of relationships.

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⁹ Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Les neurones miroirs* [2006] (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2011), 110.

¹⁰ Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, *Les neurones miroirs*, 111.