

Finite Eyes



Dani ReStack, *Show & Tell in the land of Milk & Honey*, video, 2007,
shown during *Finite Eyes*, 2023, anorak, Berlin

A conversation between crys cole, Lukas Ludwig,
Johanna Markert, and James Rushford

Finite Eyes, a collaboration between the curatorial collective anorak and the experimental music duo Ora Clementi, brought together live performance, pre-recorded sound, and moving image for an evening to explore the emotive pull and mobilizing force of utopian visions. In this new collaboration with anorak, cole and Rushford return to central questions brought about by this project on interpretation, the function of memory, and sound within both listener and performer, merging curatorial and compositional techniques. A bespoke staging designed by anorak forms the environment for three new musical sets, which are put in dialogue with film and sound works by Basma al-Sharif, Tolia Astakhishvili & James Richards, Charles Bernstein, Ora Clementi, Marguerite Duras, and Dani ReStack, reflecting on how seemingly empirical codes are manipulated and transformed through the interplay of speech, voiceover, and moving image. Teetering on the boundary where the ephemeral realm of the imaginary converges with situated experiences, *Finite Eyes* raises questions about how utopian visions are informed by collective fantasies that in turn shape perceptions, memories, and imagined futures. *Finite Eyes* premiered at anorak, Berlin, in September 2023, and was restaged at Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart in November 2023.

In this conversation, the artists, Ora Clementi (crys cole and James Rushford) and anorak (Lukas Ludwig and Johanna Markert) draw upon the themes and materials that initially influenced their collaboration to come to fruition as well as their experiences within the programmatic framework of *Finite Eyes*.

anorak (Lukas Ludwig and Johanna Markert): The title of the program *Finite Eyes* is taken from Emily Dickinson's 1862 poem »Before I got my eye put out – (336).«¹ While much has been speculated about Dickinson's poor eyesight – »vision« having double meaning – as sensory perception on the one hand and as an animate imaginary space on the other, is a common thread running through the program. The gray area where perceived information, memory, subjective and collective fantasies meet to shape our sense of »place,« became an exploratory space for our collaboration, in both a creative and

eerie way. We keep coming back to conversations we had a year ago, early in the project. At one of our studio sessions, you brought excerpts from literary texts and descriptions of the utopias that inspired Ora Clementi's latest record *Sylva Sylvarum* (Black Truffle, 2023). The record sonically measures, maps, and conjures otherworldly spaces, using field and instrumental recordings, voice, and processed sounds. Can you talk a bit more about the soundscapes on the album (with those descriptions) and how they transformed in the process of working together?

Ora Clementi (crys cole and James Rushford): The album was an opportunity to play freely with various aesthetic and historical tropes of the soundscape, new-age, ambient, field recording, micropolyphonic chamber music, etc., and dislocate them from their usual musical contexts. Moreover, the effect of otherworldliness was compositionally constructed on the record. There is an uncanniness to the combinations of certain materials, such as recordings of natural fauna layered with hunting decoys, 1990s New Age workstations detuned to sound like just harmonic ratios, and chairs dragged on a concrete floor as an accompaniment to a brass ensemble. We also encountered various utopian texts while making the record, which became both audible source material and prompts for constructing certain instrumental tracks on the album.

anorak: One of the most striking things for us, both regarding the album and the texts you brought, such as Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602), is the excessive amount of detail drawn from more mundane and everyday observations. In a way, these details seem to make the very fabric of utopian imaginaries as they're requisite to summon up a world that is paradoxically always yet to come while holding a sense of familiarity, which allows it to establish an emotional pull – a gravity towards its realization.

It seems that dealing with this emotional pull also means dealing with a temporal or experiential double-bind – echoes or memories of a place yet to come. Thinking of Ora Clementi's use of echoes and mirroring sounds, I wondered about the role of sonic memory for performer and listener in relation to your live performances.

Ora Clementi: The album cycles and echoes material throughout its one-hour run. These materials act as revilles (the bells and brass that recur) and refrains (the marimba and synth melodies). Ora loves to work with repetition, not necessarily to create familiarity but rather something *unexpected*. Our abstract and sprawling forms are broken by moments of recurrence. It wasn't intentional, but there seems to be a kind of spatial articulation heard in each sound world on the album. Celestial bird-song gets pulled down to gravelly contact microphones, and certain events in field recordings are augmented and processed as if to suggest a distortion of perspective or dimension. The album's space is constantly being redrawn. The »mirrored« voices are a kind of distillation of this formal porousness. The mirror is never fixed – it

can be a response, an echo, or a distortion. Each time we use this doubling, it changes in process slightly.

We had an ongoing discussion while making the album about the obsessive descriptions of mundane details that you mentioned, which featured in all of the utopian texts that we were exploring. The descriptions of spatial dimensions, architectural details, distances, rules, and regulations seemed almost paradoxical to the visionary intent of these imagined worlds. We found the recurring emphasis on this minutiae fascinating and specifically selected excerpts of these texts for the lyrics and dialogue on the album. We also felt that the relationship between the banal and the fantastic in the texts were connected to the way that we approach Ora's sound world, as we always interplay nonmusical sounds, incidental and raw materials with more obviously »beautiful,« composed, and evocative instrumentation and sounds.

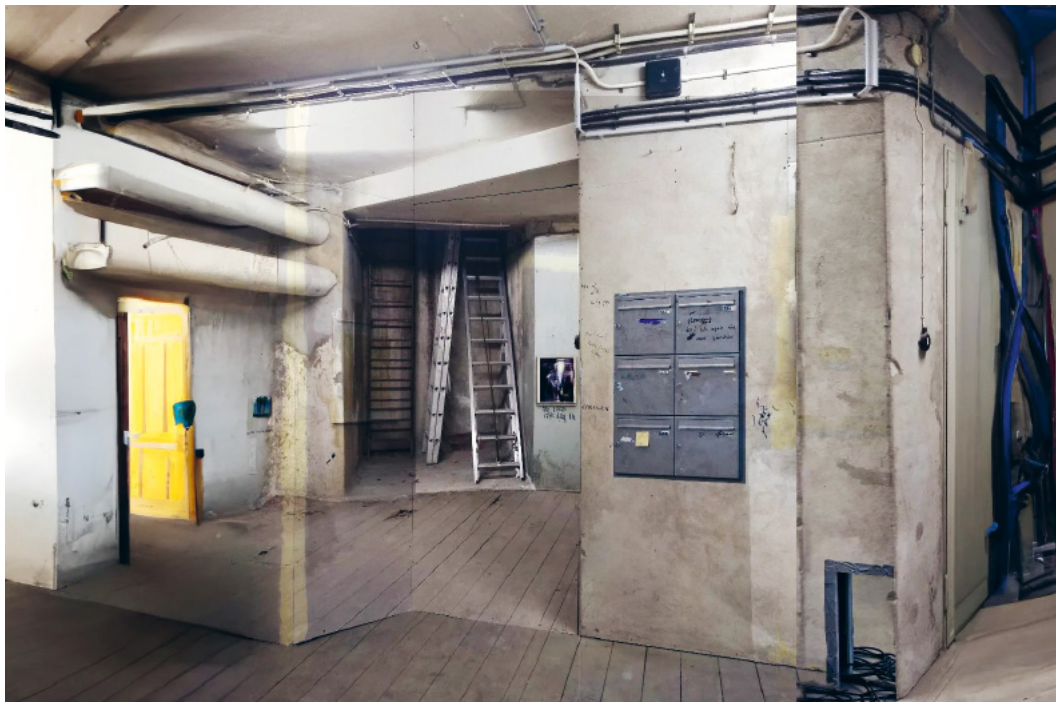
anorak: The way you're describing the echo and repetition as forms creating the unexpected within the familiar became a key curatorial framework for us. We wanted to use it as a structure to perform shifts in scale that allow you to anchor the fantastic in the mundane. When a recorded sound, instrument, or voice is played back at itself and its double remains incomplete, or broken, this shifting creates rifts, disruptions, and openings, which is where I as a listener/viewer can enter.

We tried to emphasize this dramaturgically and worked with spatial, performative, and projected interventions. For example, by dividing the space into two with a screen, the audience chose a side upon entering the space. The semitransparent screen was used both as a room divider and as a projection surface for a shadow play during the first set »O« and a fifty-minute compilation of film and sound works. It created an artificial membrane, which was intended to mirror the instability and porousness of the landscapes we encountered throughout the evening. The screen was lifted after the intermission, then both sides of the audience faced and were exposed to each other for the second half of the evening.

Taking up the sonic inscriptions of mundane sounds, the film and sound work that we added similarly use the lens of the seemingly everyday and banal to point toward larger ideas and contexts. The shifting of scale, also here, became a crucial indicator for the selection. I am thinking of the poet Charles Bernstein's tape-recorded performance *1–100* (1969), in which we hear him counting from 1 to 100, increasingly raising his voice until it turns into desperate shouting.



Ora Clementi, *O*, performance, 2023, Finite Eyes, anorak, Berlin.
Ora Clementi, *Forest of Familiar Materials*, performance, 2023, Finite Eyes, anorak, Berlin.
Photos: Mizuki Kin



Ora Clementi, *Forest of Familiar Materials*, performance, 2023, Finite Eyes, anorak, Berlin.
Tolia Astakhishvili & James Richards, *I Remember (Depth of Flatten Cruelty)*,
video, 2023, shown during Finite Eyes, 2023, anorak, Berlin.
Photos: Mizuki Kin

A simple act of scaling from the objective, predictable succession of numbers to an utterly unpredictable, messy, subjective, emotional escalation. Similarly simple in form, yet referring to a concrete political context, is Basma al-Sharif's flickering frame-by-frame reconstruction of a home in Amman, Jordan, filmed by the inhabitants shortly before they left. *Turkish Delight* (2010) reveals how domestic banality coexists with the violent reality of exile: »a gestural response to the migration of Palestinians to Jordan, to political refugees who settle neighboring countries waiting for the conflict to end, and refugees with nowhere to return to.« Shown alongside Dani ReStack's *Show & Tell in the land of Milk & Honey* (2007), a frantically edited video diary, recounting her time working and living in Israel, coming to terms with how the »promised land« of childhood lessons brutally clashes with lived experience. The program ended with James Richards' and Tolia Astakhishvili's haunting ani-

mation *I Remember (Depth of Flatten Cruelty)* (2023), using digital imaging software to artificially dream up memories. CGI renderings of abandoned hallways, paired with holiday snapshots and paraphernalia, draw a strangely depersonalized, apocalyptic imaginary landscape of emotional human debris and attachment.

The starting point for the film program was, however, *Les mains négatives* (1987), Marguerite Duras's elegiac monologue on the enigmatic 30,000-year-old handprints in the Magdalenian caves, a meditation on love, identity, and the obsessive search for the origins of humankind, spoken over a one-take shot of the streets of Paris in the early morning hours. Through the performative staging of *Finite Eyes*, we tried to conjure up the presence of a decentralized, collective subjectivity that unfolds between the performer, audience, and the work itself – a fourth-person singular that we imagined listening to *Sylva Sylvarum* and wanted to turn into a

Ora Clementi is the duo of Canadian sound artist crys cole and Australian composer/performer James Rushford. Distinct, disorienting, and highly performative, their work examines voice and vocal mirroring through preconscious speech processes and the codified abstraction of found texts, supported by a vast battery of handmade instruments, electronics, and hyper-color processing.

anorak is a curatorial collective and independent art space in Berlin, run by Lukas Ludwig and Johanna Markert. anorak offers a space for sincere and mutual exchange enabling artists to produce, present, and critically discuss their work. Shaped by long-term collaborations with artists and cultural institutions, they develop unique presentation formats with a focus on artists' moving image, sound, and performance.

To listen to the accompanying audio material, please access the online version of *Solitude Journal 5 – A Sound Was Heard!*



You will find the following material:

Ora Clementi, Excerpt of *Forest of Familiar Materials*, live performance, voices, instruments, electronics, 2023, anorak, Berlin

¹ Emily Dickinson: »Before I Got My Eye Put out – (336).« Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52135/before-i-got-my-eye-put-out-336> (accessed February 11, 2024).