



Sounding Lines- Wading Version

STIJN DEMEULENAERE /
KUNSTENWERKPLAATS

Knee-deep in the North Sea



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East Sea Bank, Ostend, in the frame
of TAZ26

Water has an almost unfair advantage in performance. Open water even more so: seas and oceans hold the promise of depth, danger and eternal possibilities. In Stijn Demeulenaere's 'Sounding Lines', the North Sea is both the stage and main protagonist. At Ostend beach, we are given waders, headphones and a bamboo stick, and asked to enter the water and remain there. For around twenty-five minutes, the tide slowly rises around our bodies while a pre-recorded composition plays through our headphones and waves approach from somewhere beyond the horizon.

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The title refers to an old technique for measuring water depth: a weighted rope is lowered until it reaches the seabed. To 'sound' a body of water is to ask what lies beneath its surface. Demeulenaere turns this gesture into an act of listening.

At first, my experience is disarmingly physical. The oversized waders, slowly but surely, begin rubbing a blister into my foot. The water is chilly, although not nearly as cold as expected from a body of water with such an intimidating name. I long to go deeper. Gradually, the tide does the work for us: water that initially reaches only the ankles climbs almost to the knees. Standing still, supported by the bamboo stick, my attention begins to wander. A group of children practises surfing nearby. Foam dissolves around our legs into bubbles and fleeting white patterns. Wind cuts through the body. The sea keeps moving while we remain static.

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me.

The waves strike, retreat and return. Thoughts begin to follow a similar movement: flow, flow, flow, one association replacing another before it can settle. I am not particularly pleased with the way mine go. Virginia Woolf appears almost immediately, followed by a half-remembered distinction by Milan Kundera between poets who drown and those who burn. Soon I find myself, like a true romantic at heart, meditating on death and on the strange possibility that a body disappearing into the depth of water might not be such a terrifying image after all. At this point it is difficult to know what belongs to the performance and what merely belongs to me. Perhaps that uncertainty is precisely what happens when a work removes the usual distance between spectator and environment. I suddenly realise the North Sea was never the protagonist here after all – it was me all along. I turn to look at my co-protagonists, all standing defiantly against the waves like sea stacks briefly holding out against erosion – a battle we are bound to lose, of course.

A cultured sea

Oh well. It is strange where your thoughts lead you when you stand still long enough in the sea. I should probably return to the beginning. Before we enter the water, Demeulenaere sketches the history submerged underneath us. In the nineteenth century, steam-powered fishing accelerated the disappearance of almost all of the North Sea's wild oyster beds. The twentieth century brought oil and gas platforms, pipelines and fossil-fuel extraction; today, another layer is being added through offshore wind farms and cables. 'Sounding Lines' turns these transformations into three sonic voices: recordings from offshore wind farms, sounds gathered from some of the remaining wild oyster beds, and processed sea shanties sung by contralto Cécile Pilorger and the amateur women's choir Aimée Thonon from Oostende (conducted by Steve Dugardin with musical dramaturgy by Ioana Mandrescu).

Once in the water, however, these voices become harder to separate. There is a soundtrack in my headphones, but also another, 'real' soundtrack arriving from the waves. I understand the language of the latter much more instinctively. The recorded material remains more elusive: underwater vibrations, mechanical resonances and watery sounds whose sources I cannot always identify. After a while, I stop trying to translate every frequency into a concrete image. Eventually, not knowing becomes more interesting.

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of distance.**

Far, far away, impossibly thin turbines interrupt the horizon. They look quite surreal, like an approaching alien army slowly wading towards land. Of course, they are supposed to be good guys: wind instead of oil; transition instead of extraction. And yet there they stand, driven into the seabed, another human structure reaching down into what lies beneath us. Strangely, the mechanical sounds become aesthetically enjoyable. They become incorporated into the music just as the turbines have become incorporated into the North Sea landscape.

Beneath this vast grey surface: fishing grounds, cables, pipelines and transformed ecosystems. Down there, apparently, we are everywhere. Perhaps what makes me sad is exactly this loss of distance. I would like to imagine that somewhere there are still places without our traces. Yet '*Sounding Lines*' ruthlessly dismantles that fantasy. The North Sea is not an empty wilderness outside human culture, but a sea shaped by fishing, labour, extraction, energy, technology and memory. 'A cultured sea', in Demeulenaere's words.

Oyster hunting

Then there are the oysters. Suddenly all of this history has a shell. Of course, humans have always gathered oysters and altered marine environments. Seas themselves are unstable formations: species migrate, coastlines shift, ecosystems transform. Change is hardly something we invented. Scale and speed, however, are another matter. Fishing for food is one thing; technological extraction capable of removing almost an entire habitat within decades is another.

And absence produces a strange desire in me. The more I hear about the oyster beds beneath the North Sea, the more I want to encounter them physically. After leaving the sea, Demeulenaere finally shows us one. Pale, rough, bleached, and suddenly carrying the imaginative weight of an entire vanished landscape.

The artwork leaks into the North Sea and the North Sea leaks back into the artwork.

My first thought is hardly the expected ecological conclusion: I want to return. I want to become an oyster hunter. Maybe this response is not as contradictory as it seems. Much ecological discourse reaches us through abstractions: biodiversity loss, warming seas, extraction, energy transition. '*Sounding Lines*' brings these enormous processes to sensorial proximity. The final appearance of human voices adds another historical relationship with the sea: work, dependence, memory and generations of lives organised around these waters.

The artwork leaks into the North Sea and the North Sea leaks back into the artwork. Water recorded elsewhere becomes difficult to distinguish from present water; turbines are simultaneously infrastructure, distant silhouettes and musical material; an oyster becomes food, ecological history and suddenly an object of desire. And throughout it all, the North Sea remains wild without being untouched, immense without being unreachable.

For all this depth, we are still only knee-deep at the edge of this curious vast creature, bamboo sticks in our hands, while the tide continues to rise.