



Signs of Life

Marina Pinsky

A friend recently showed me a category of YouTube videos, previously unknown to me, collectively referred to as Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) videos¹. These videos were performed by women whispering, in a tender (even maternalistic) voice, closely into a microphone, which magnified any involuntary mouth sounds such as saliva swirling around their teeth and their tongue movements. These videos would also include them chewing crunchy foods (like snapping into a pickle), tapping their long fingernails on a table, unwrapping tissue paper, or performing other such auditory activities.

The effect these videos produced on my friend was close to euphoric. He described an electric sensation starting at the top of his head, working its way down his spine, and causing his whole body to tingle. The Austrian writer Clemens J. Setz suggests that the earliest description of this effect is a passage from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, when a nursemaid speaks to the man who is her patient "deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper's, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound."

I have to admit, disappointedly, that watching these videos I felt no such physical euphoria. But at that moment, watching him, seeing his goosebumps, and knowing that this is a completely real sensation for some segment of the population, my understanding of individual perceptive capacity grew immensely. If there is an entire category for these exact psychosomatic responses, surely there must be people who would share in my own seemingly unrelated and uncontrollable pleasures, terrors, and indescribable *feelings*, which are neither purely emotional

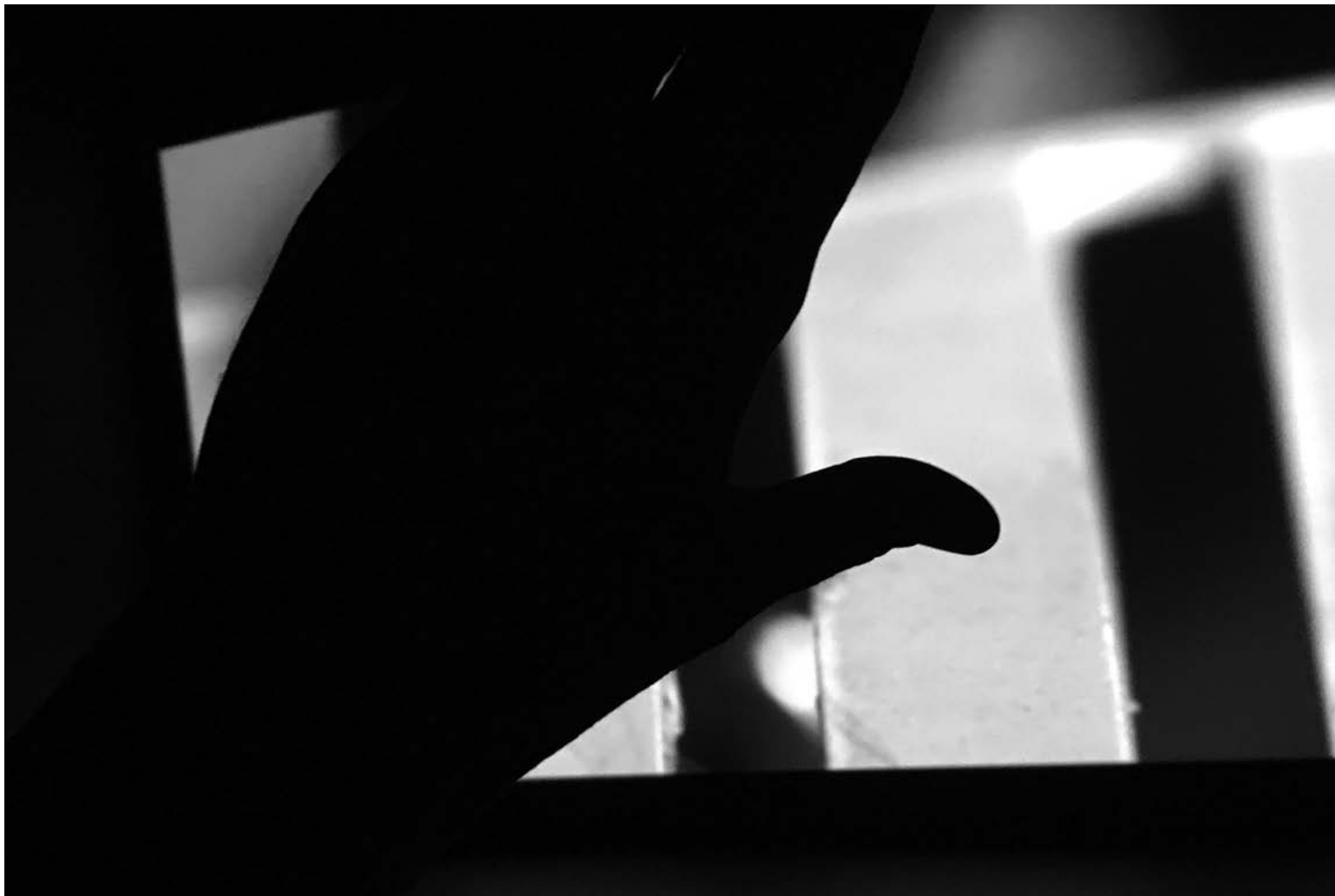
nor physical or sensational. This motivated me to return again to a situation which provoked something of the sort, namely the Nina Canell exhibition at the S.M.A.K. in Ghent. I had already seen it two times prior, but decided then and there that I needed to take one last trip to S.M.A.K. before it closed.

Walking into the vast first room, I encounter the *Gum Drag* sculptures, each standing at a different height and a large distance apart from one another so that they can be viewed as *individuals*. At first, approaching these sculptures is not unlike walking up to an Alberto Giacometti sculpture. From afar, it is a lone column, a human analogue, a totem, seemingly compressed by the air around it. In the case of Canell's sculptures, that is very literally happening.

As Giacometti famously worked and reworked his sculptures between clay and plaster with his brother Diego helping to make the molds, the original clay model was never fixed. The dark, rough, solid, sharp bronzes we see now in museums are just the traces in time of a constant state of malleability. The almost endless manipulation of the clay on the armature mirrors Giacometti's understanding of how space acts on the body. Only from afar is it possible to see the whole of a person; up close, one scans the parts of the body. Stepping back, one not only sees the body but also the air surrounding and compressing the figure. So Giacometti constantly adjusted the clay in keeping with his indefinite account of his subject.

In Canell's *Gum Drag* installation, the huge vista of space is compressing and dissolving the sculptures during the time they are on view. Instead of exhibiting a moment of a past process fixed in bronze, the process itself is unfolding in real time for the viewer. Each *Gum Drag* changes. From afar, at least at the beginning of the exhibition, they have the *gestalt* of basic standing figures,

1) Autonomous as in spontaneous, self-governing, with or without control; Sensory as in pertaining to the senses or sensation; Meridian as in signifying a peak, climax, or point of highest development; Response as in referring to an experience triggered by something external or internal.



something like the earliest herms (the precursors of ancient Greek divine or apotropaic sculpture). Up close, the soft “skintone” color and irregularities in the surface (tiny bubbles, grains, pock-marks) add to this anthropomorphism.

Over time, this effect gets magnified further and further. As the sculptures age (within the few months of a normal institutional show’s running time), their outward structure sags, making the internal metal armature more and more pronounced. Up close, the surface becomes wrinkled, the pores enlarge, the color gets deeper. They seem to mimic the human aging process with alarming speed. My first visit to the exhibition was about two weeks after the opening. Already the tops of several *Gum Drags* were falling to the side, as if their heads were drooping. A month later, after a long, record heat wave (keep in mind the museum has no climate control), the sculptures had sagged so much that they looked like they might soon fall off the armatures entirely. But a few weeks later (as the weather cooled down slightly) they still held fast. A few days before the exhibition closed, on my third visit, the armatures were pronouncedly protruding from the sliding mass below, but still holding on.

So, if I could ask a geriatric question about these sculptures: what do they say about the “human condition”? Unlike Giacometti’s sculptures, where the mainstream interest primarily is in the author’s behind-the-scenes psychological processes that lead up to their finished form, Canell’s sculptures develop in plain sight. As a member of the generation that grew up with the internet, I can say straightforwardly that in many ways I have also psychologically developed in plain sight. All my changes, from childhood to the present, inflected by the cultural winds, have been thoroughly documented for all to read on various online platforms and by various audiences. This cliché defines the “millennial.” Is this documentation interesting in and of itself? No. But the conversational aspects, the call-and-response between friends and strangers, the invented slang, acronyms, inside jokes, proto-memes, all of that internal language as an *effect* is the interesting part. At least it stands well enough to hold up a socially accepted definition of a generation.

In parallel, the processes of authorship of these sculptures (meaning the artist’s inner psychological workings while making the works) are less interesting than the time-based development of the works’ interaction with their environment and the space they hold, and that the very breath of the people sharing that space causes them to exhale as well, and to wither. That the air around them, the “aether,” that invisible force of space, purposefully degrades, desiccates, but also gives these sculptures their pronounced features, shows a determined position against not only the “eternal” art object, but perhaps in turn the desire for an “eternal” human body as propagandized in a mainstream culture obsessed with the appearance of youth.

Near to each *Gum Drag* are their recumbent counterparts, *Brief Syllables*. The (op)position of these two elements introduces the duality presented throughout the rest of the exhibition: the analytic processes of the central nervous system and the slimy, oozing, entropic physical matter holding it together, and the mythical gulf in between, like the liquid space in which a synapse can fire. This sounds like the relative of a Cronenberg-inspired aesthetic regime, but this is hardly the case. The works here do what many in this category have tried and failed to do; they don’t come off as being kitschy, creepy, quasi-magical, pseudo-scientific, or giving off any whiff of sci-fi at all. They are *elegant*, meaning they are not over-determined but leave enough gaps for the viewer to complete the circuit. They are effective post-minimalist sculptures, subverting their material expectations, but they go further in this language and really do activate the “magic” in the space between one another.

The *Brief Syllables* are undersea cables that have been cleanly sliced, or have naturally frayed ends, lying directly on the floor. Their title infers that they might still hold the memory of the language they once carried, like a tiny ghost in the machine. Their girth gives them the appearance of severed limbs. And indeed, these telecommunicative arms and legs previously spread across the globe. But, with Canell’s act of incision, the cables no longer transmit language, but now are a storage device for the few bits of information still trapped inside, as though Canell made the cuts while the cables were still in use (though

we know this is impossible). In the space of her poetics, they contain stored energy, without any interface able to receive it. The language has been chopped out of the sender-receiver loop. Now they are segmented and spread across this wide wood floor, with one just against the floor-to-ceiling window. However, their positioning actually seems to elevate the floor and, with the standing *Gum Drags*, gives the feeling of walking across a hollow stage. I mean this exactly in the opposite way from the old Friedian “theatricality.” The works here do not demand any “complicity” from their viewers, and their size and shape proclaim no authority nor any “seriousness” to the viewer. I am speaking only about the specific conditions of this one room, and its effect of giving these works (and my feet) a particular *lightness*.

The high windows make some moments of viewing these works ones in which I also feel viewed. Inevitably, I bend down in an absurd way and do all kinds of silly-looking things just to be able to see the details of these intricately woven cables. But as soon as I look outside, feeling caught in that moment, I exit, either stage left or stage right.

Maybe, like me, you’re drawn to the sounds occasionally emitting from stage left. Entering the room, before I see any of the frequency meters or generators or wires or anything else inside, I hear an almost unbearably high sound. As the frequency constantly rises and falls, my disorientation from the high pitch relaxes and intensifies, over and over. The reason: through some strange and rare biological fluke, the range of pitch I am capable of perceiving is much higher than that which most adults can hear. Basically, I have the hearing of a prepubescent child or a cat, so the tone generators that Canell (in collaboration with Robin Watkins) uses touch on the painful cat-level pitches, but only for brief moments. Staying in this room, watching the tiny wires on the wall rise and fall, scratching at my own pain threshold, was a personally willful masochistic experience—one that I joyfully repeated on each visit to the exhibition, each time staying as long as I could physically bear.

Rapturous yet depleted, I walk back across the large room and through to stage right. Here, some soothing elements, where the analytic vs. gooeey synaptic aspects are condensed, and given three small rooms to try various configurations. In the first room there is a single irregularly-shaped piece of a large floor tile with a shiny film going almost to the edge, leaving a maybe 1cm border all around. On one wall is a small grid of computer chips, and opposite them a tiny artificial half slice of cucumber. Stepping into the larger back room, the slightly broken grid from the wall of the first room spills onto the floor (but really the opposite of spilling). Here floor tiles like the one in the first room form a broken grid, each with its own shiny film and dry

perimeter. The more time I spend in this room, the more complicated the mystery of how this all stays together becomes. At first I imagine each tile is coated in resin until that border. But that’s too simple. I notice the tiniest, barely perceptible movement on the surface. The materials list includes only three items: stone tiles, water, hydrophobic coating. I come closer, draw a breath, and blow on the sculpture. The surface ripples with the speed of real water. I notice the opposite corner has already evaporated. And the tile is not stone, but ceramic printed with a stone-like pattern. What’s this coating then? How is the hydrophobic effect strong enough to support such a high meniscus rising from the edge? For a while, a rumination on the arrest of capillary action went out to the artificial cucumbers, how the false representation of that exact process is the dead ringer of their imitation of life.

Finally, the end of the exhibition (or what should be the beginning). There, the descriptive wall text, a plexi box holding printed exhibition guides, and an entrance to a room with a black curtain being blown slightly by a wind coming from the darkened room on the other side. From the description, inside is a video of a “colossal leopard slug” which immediately activates my lifelong irrational fear of most invertebrates (including their representation, or even their mere mention). I don’t remember if, on my first visit, I even dared to take a glimpse of the room. Only on the third, after I was sure I would be writing this review, did I work out a plan to be able to watch the parts of this video that wouldn’t inflict some psychic trauma. On this visit, I brought a “guide” who let me know when the giant slug made its appearance, and when it was ok to look. The parts of the video I do watch are mesmerizing, a slow zoom out on a “dragon hole,” a massive square aperture on a giant luxury apartment block in Telegraph Bay in Hong Kong. Here was the destination of the undersea telegraph cables similar to the ones presented in the adjacent large room. The resolution of the video is so high and the geometry of the composition so precise that it hovers between abstraction and meticulously rendered realism. After three such sequences, the camera goes down to the lower level, where some hexagonal algae-stained planters hold a tiny bamboo plant rustling in the wind blowing from the upper left. So, the dragon’s breath has affected the only visible living organism in this system.

Next come the parts unwatchable to me, where the slimy muscular mass slowly travels along some type of electrical switchboard. The system is very soon to be overwhelmed by “life force”: the slug’s mucus. And even by the suggestion of what is to come, I am overwhelmed by psychic anomalies, immediately panic, and must leave the room. It is no longer safe to enter again. Every sign of life has coalesced into total affect, jamming any possibility of analysis.

Le Grand Beguinage

Jannis Marwitz

It’s been a few years since my first visit to Le Grand Beguinage, on which I discovered Theodoor van Loon’s paintings, but it almost certainly coincided with my arrival in Brussels in 2015. There, like in many other Flemish cities, a new form of Christian cohabitation developed around the 12th century, the so-called Beguinages or Beguine houses, which enabled women a self-determined life in structures of their own making. Different from monasteries, these houses and institutions weren’t subject to the Church, assets weren’t collected, no vows had to be made, and it was easy to quit, for example to get married.

Many of the Beguine houses flourished. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Brussels Beguine convent comprised a whole neighborhood of houses, workshops, gardens and the church Le Grand Beguinage at its center.

Putting my encounter with Theodoor van Loon’s pictures into words emanates from a certain urgency that has been building up over three years. However, as is so often the case, it’s been external circumstances that, stronger than any inner urgency, have led me to realize this. A big monographic exhibition of van Loon’s work is planned for this autumn at BOZAR in Brussels,