

Caroline Levisse

***The Sudarium of St Veronica* by Leif Elggren together with Claude Mellan, 2007**

The Acoustic Dimension of the Holy Face

Paper for the conference **”Holy Face – face of God, face of Man”** [Sainte Face – visage de Dieu, visage de l’homme dans l’art contemporain. 19ème-20ème siècle”], Paris, INHA, 2009, Nov. 30 – Dec 1; organized by P.-L. Rinuy (Université Paris 8) et I. Saint-Martin (EPHE)

➤ The conference was originally in French, this is a short transcript in English of the speech:

The Sudarium of St Veronica is a work of sound art created by the Swedish artist Leif Elggren together with the French 17th century engraver, Claude Mellan (1598-1688). Indeed, at the origin of the acoustic performance lies Mellan’s famous engraving, *La Sainte Face* [The Holy Face], from 1649. It is an exceptional and unique work of art for it is engraved from a unique spiral line. Fascinated by this work, Elggren decided to record the sound of the copper engraving, by playing it. He used a copy of the engraving and a drypoint needle, which rubbed the plate, following the spiral line. This action took place in July 2007 and resulted in three recordings, each one of them being one of the acoustic trace or acoustic imprint of Mellan’s *Holy Face*. With the CD then produced, each one of us can listen to these recordings¹. In the CD’s booklet, Elggren explains: « I was really excited by the thought of detecting what was hidden in that spiral line. To hear the image! ». My aim is therefore to explore the significations hold by this acoustic trace in its relation to the source picture, the Holy Face.

The bringing-forth of the acoustic dimension of the Holy Face

In the same booklet one can read “Leif Elggren and Claude Mellan” as the authors of the work. What is really Elggren’s role here? He is not the author of the sound *per se* and indeed, Elggren describes himself as a “tool” whose role is to set up the right circumstances for things to happen. What the artist does is to reveal, bring forth, a sound that was always already there, but until the artist’s action it was hidden or rather inaudible. It is interesting here to draw a parallel with the image and the legend of St. Veronica, whose hands did not produce anything but were simply presenting, i.e. bringing to our attention, bringing in our visibility, the miraculous imprint of Christ’s face on her veil.

¹ L. Elggren & C. Mellan, *Sudarium of St Veronica*, CD, 2007, Firework Edition Records. Recordings : 1) 21’34”, turntable, by hand, CCW, drypoint needle; 2) 16’01”, turntable, 33 rpm, CW, drypoint needle; 3) 14’48”, the plate is on a table and the needle moving CW, drypoint needle

Physical characteristics of sound and acoustic powers

Sound is for Elggren “a companion in the enhancement of phenomena and moods”². Sound is therefore used to amplify already existing phenomena, as such as the image in our case. Music and sound in general have for a long time been given a special power on human body, especially due to the physicality of the acoustic vibrations which fill up the space and penetrate the body. [...]

“Amplified” perception of the Holy Face

In *The Sudarium of St Veronica*, the acoustic presence is added to the usual visual presence of Mellan’s *Holy Face*. This doubling of the presence is based on a sensorial overstimulation: one does not only look at the picture, but also hears it. The visual and the acoustic, the spatial and the temporal dimensions fuse together through the gesture of the artist playing the copper plate. The acoustic imprint revealed by Elggren is an amplification, an enhancement, of a phenomenon; knowing that a phenomenon is the manifestation of something, is it possible to identify what is this *something*? Are we simply hearing the sound of the image, the copper plate, or it is possible to go further?

An acoustic imprint of the divine?

The image represented by Mellan is not any image, it is a Holy Face; this engraving is thus linked to a long tradition of religious images which have their origin in the miraculous *acheiropoietos* images; images that are more than mere artifacts. If we add to this filiation the fact that Elggren considers himself as a tool; and the miraculous dimension in “hearing an image”; and the strong powers of the sound on body and psyche; is not tempting to interpret the sound of *The Sudarium* as the acoustic trace or imprint of the divine, of the invisible, present in all its absence beyond the material surface of the image? It would mean that there is a “crossing of glances”³, i.e. an exchange of glances between the divinity and the human through the image that happens in presence of this installation; this is indeed the characteristic of religious images such as the icons, which set forth a glance looking back at the religious viewer.

For several reasons such a hypothesis does not function. First because Mellan’s work itself rather belongs to the realm of the work of art than to the tradition of religious images (icons). Second, the exchange of glances supposes a “contract” – that is faith, prayer or liturgy – for the divine presence to manifest itself and be acknowledged; but here the context of *The Sudarium of St Veronica* seems very secular and profane. Finally, if one considers the whole artistic creation of Leif Elggren, the exchange of glances and the manifestation of a remote and unintelligible divinity are very unlikely.

Elggren’s strategy: the abolition of boundaries

If there were one red thread to identify in Elggren’s work, I would say it is the abolition of boundaries, starting with the one between image and sound. With such an attitude, his work consists in opening new worlds, accessible to all of us. When, along with Carl Michael von Hausswolff,

² Leif Elggren, in *Genealogy*, Stockholm, Firework Edition, 2005, p. 127

³ Originally in French: “la croisée des regards”, Jean-Luc Marion, *La Croisée du visible*, Paris, Quadrige/PUF, 2007 [1st ed. 1991], p. 85-115

Elggren proclaimed himself king of the Royal Kingdoms of Elgaland-Varlgaland in 1992 (KREV), he abolished the frontier between the king and his subjects, showing that royalty was accessible to each one of us. It's not all: in KREV, death has been abolished and all the citizens are consequently immortal. Dead and alive become two connected realities, or worlds, because the moment that represented the boundary between the two is erased. Communication is made possible and indeed in pieces such as *Talking to a Dead Queen* (1994-1996), Elggren tries to contact the other side. By abolishing the boundaries normally considered as impassable, Elggren abolishes the verticality of the world's structure, i.e. the hierarchies. There are no more worlds placed on top of each others, but worlds equally placed next to each others. The communication between the different spheres of reality is not reserved to some privileged and selected intermediaries anymore, each and every person can move from one world, one reality, to another.

Even more interesting in our case is the abolition of the distinction between human and divine. Elggren wrote and said several times: "We are all God"⁴ and "We are all, each one of us, Jesus Christ"⁵. What Elggren deletes here – in a will of social justice – is the privilege taken by some who declared to be the "intermediaries" between men and God: the pope and the priests. This will is very clear in the text for the performance *The Power is Yours!* done with Kent Tankred (Sons of God) at the Vatican in 1996: "For each and every person, we now want to reestablish the direct link with the divine within ourselves. We have shortcircuited the hegemony of the Pope and can now bypass the power of the Catholic Church, in fact of institutionalized religion altogether. We will create a new system and retain contact with the creator of everything [...] Our task is simply to return that which for once and all time was given and which belongs to each and everyone in this world [...] What we refer to here as the divine power is, in our eyes, the form of energy which perhaps makes up the epicenter of each and every life [...]. That which, again perhaps, is the driving force behind everything..."⁶ and somewhere else he says: "But there are no God's representative on earth! We are all God and equally people with the same unquestionable worth, wherever we might be in the world and on the social ladder. God is not outside us, God is in us all and we can all say: 'I am God!' " »⁷.

Connection with the other side – Connection with the psyche

"God is in us all"... Elggren brings back God into our own reality and enables us to establish contact with him within our inner existence. The artist erases the possibility of a prototype, an original that would be over us, would be inaccessible and unintelligible for human beings. While looking at the face of Christ as represented by Mellan and listening to its acoustic imprint, the other side that becomes accessible to us is our inner selves. Elggren's works are, according to the artist himself: "an attempt to gain access to those hard, rare moments when daily life merges with the heroic nature of the inner self"⁸. Such a connection with the inmost depths of the psyche can seem to coincide with Elggren's gesture when he realized the first recording of the engraving, which is a manual recording: with the drypoint needle he started at the exterior of the plate and then went

⁴ Interview of Leif Elggren and Kent Tankred for *Perfect Sound Forever*, by Daniel Varela, July 2005

⁵ Elggren, here in *Genealogy*, op. cit., p. 10, see also p. 22 and p. 117

⁶ Leif Elggren, the text of *The Power is Yours!* is reproduced in *Genealogy*, p. 174-5

⁷ Leif Elggren, interview for *Perfect Sound Forever*, op. cit.

⁸ Leif Elggren, *Genealogy*, op. cit., p. 135

downwards toward the center of the spiral, the tip of Christ's nose, in a counter-clockwise movement.

It is also interesting to notice that the face is what marks our individuality and identity. This face represented by Mellan and based on a spiral line irresistibly evokes a finger print, which is also a mark of our identity and uniqueness. We are all different and unique, but is there not, at the very same time, something that we all share? We are all God and Jesus-Christ; therefore there is something in the face of Christ to which each one of us can identify.

The springing up of the inaudible

[...]

When *The Sudarium of St Veronica* takes place in a church...

We have explored what *The Sudarium* could mean in a secular context; what happens when it is shown in a religious place? It is interesting since Elggren installed its work in the Evangelical Lutheran church of St Jacob in Stockholm during Easter 2008 (March 21-23). A big reproduction of Mellan's *Holy Face* replaced the usual altarpiece and it was possible at some times to hear the sound of the image. One of these moments was during the office on Good Friday. Before the priest's sermon, churchgoers were invited to listen to the picture. The *Holy Face* was a perfect image for that day, since it is linked to the Passion, but what about the sound? According to the coordinator of the cultural events for St Jacob's church, Eva Asp, after listening to the metallic abstract sound, the priest expressed his anger and irritation at the sound; he then flipped around his discourse and said that such negative emotions may actually be proper feelings for Good Friday, the day of Christ's death on the cross. Eva Asp went on reflecting on that point and considered that it was a really good dimension of Elggren's visual and sound installation: it allows the presence of negative feelings which are usually left outside of the space of the church. Indeed, in the liturgical space one usually find art that encourages feelings of peace, beauty and harmony, devotion, hope... but such positive feelings are not representing the whole meaning of being human; that is to say that a lot of what is it to be a human being is absent in most of church art.

➤ Conclusion:

The Sudarium of Saint Veronica is "une mise à jour" [which in French both means "a setting forth" and "an actualization"] of the Holy Face because it first is "une mise au jour" [a setting forth, a revelation] of the hidden sound of the engraving's spiral line – outwards spiral/recording; and it is at the same time "une mise à jour" [an actualization] of the Holy Face in the sense that Elggren's work offers a reflection about the meaning of this very famous and old picture for today's viewers after Nietzsche's death of God and the inversion of Platonism; that is to say after the suppression of the almighty and unintelligibly remote prototype.