

Mmmuting

Timothy Morton

...if I may...interrupt without words...but *what kind of silence is depthless silence?* Silence without depth, silence just the thinnest wafer on the sphere of the world? Or silence whose depth is so profound that it cannot be plumbed? The Icelandic parliament met in Thingvellir, a valley with a lake on the boundary of two tectonic plates. Legend has it that the lake is bottomless. What kind of silence? Does the question have an answer? How long before we know?

To be mute is in one sense to be silent, but this is only in relation to those who seem to be speaking. What is this muteness? For how long might it continue? The muteness of trauma, its unspeakability, perhaps:

There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs  
And Islands of Winander! many a time,  
At evening, when the stars had just begun  
To move along the edges of the hills,  
Rising or setting, would he stand alone,  
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake,  
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands  
Press'd closely, palm to palm and to his mouth  
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,  
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls  
That they might answer him. And they would shout

Across the wat'ry vale and shout again,  
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,  
And long halloos, and screams and echoes loud  
Redoubled and redoubled, a wild scene  
Of mirth and jocund din. And, when it chanced  
That pauses of deep silence mock'd his skill,  
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung  
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize  
Has carried far into his heart the voice  
Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene  
Would enter unawares into his mind  
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,  
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, receiv'd  
Into the bosom of the steady lake.  
Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,  
The vale where he was born: the Church-yard hangs  
Upon a slope above the village school,  
And there along that bank when I have pass'd  
At evening, I believe, that near his grave  
A full half-hour together I have stood  
Mute—for he died when he was ten years old.

There is no way to get to the “mute” at the end without going through all the words beforehand. To get to the quiet impact, the “mild surprise” to use the language of the poem itself, “There Was a Boy” by William Wordsworth, part of his revolutionary book *Lyrical Ballads*—revolutionary because in the book

Wordsworth and Coleridge are bonding with and giving voice to working-class people, people with disabilities, non-white, non-male people. In the muteness before the poem begins, “there was a boy”: for the French Jewish philosopher-theological Emmanuel Levinas, “there is” is the existential always-already-ness of being that is ontologically prior to appearance (French, *il y a*), the muteness and mystery of being beyond appearance, what is always not-even-one, cannot be counted, is infinite (Levinas: “infinity overflows the thought that thinks it”). The object that subsends its appearances, in its unspeakable muteness, its withdrawal, not because it is “bigger” but because, ontologically speaking, it is infinitely smaller.

The boy is dead. Appearances of the boy are all that remains, including memories in the speaker’s mind, words on the page, a grave that creeps up on us like the quietest of jump scares, all the more powerful for its quietness. Silence is never silent, in partial answer to the opening question. Silence is mute: silence has not yet spoken, it is quiet, it is the unspeakable part of what is the case at any moment, the always-up-to-date-ness of my life as a biological being in a biosphere, the one I can’t put my finger on because chemical signals about that life arrive in my brain always a little late, like words about a boy whose echoing hallooes arrive late across the lake in the ears of the owls who seem to answer him, in a poem made of echoes of those echoes, arriving too late.

But this is where the sacred mystery of life lives, the too-late of the echo meaning that what arrives is the future: the biosphere, this earth, my body is (in) the past but this past is not-

yet, I experience it as the future. The sacred is the futural quality of the breathing, pulsing world, none other than our bodies, the hairs all standing up like the iron-filing-like needles and fur-like parts of Kate Atkin's mute objects, thrilling to a world not-yet-known. The word mystery comes from the Greek *muein*, which means "to close the lips": to go "mmm." This is what it means to be mute. Dzogchen Buddhism describes the experience of enlightened mind, available every instant as the feel of the default sentience of a sentient being, as "like a mute tasting sugar": how to speak its sweetness without words? Mmm, the sound of pleasure lining up with the sound of the unspeakable.

What Kate Atkin confronts us with in her astonishing work are machines that allow us to go "mmm." To be practicing "muting" in this way, a neither passive nor active but "middle" mode of being that thus slips out from underneath the subject-object duality, a duality that is always a master-slave duality. Machines that allow us to dream a world of thrilling coexisting always felt as muteness, loss and absence as the feel of immanence and symbiosis without the violence of apocalyptic immediacy, the fourth wall collapse beloved by scientism and religious ideology and ecological authentication and QAnon. Without the violence that sorts the world into subjects and objects, masters and slaves. That makes us resonate with a thing in the valley of its appearing, where the parliament of all things lives, a silent ice land.

Atkin's work is depthless to the extent that we can't figure out whether it is deep without end or has no depth at all: it is not reducible to tape-measure depth or shallowness, and so it is deep beyond depth. Her art is mute beyond silence and sound. Her art is sacred in the truest sense that this is the feel of being a lifeform, not some scientific facticity but a tremulous palpitating, the magnetic pull of a powerful storm cloud, what is called "alive" in the Greek word *thumos* (whence "rhythm), not a biological concept (*bios*) nor a juridical term (*zoe*)

but a feel or a vibe, the “life” in Black Lives Matter, the right to be mute, asleep, dreaming in public, without having to calculate the risk of being killed or hurt. The right to slip out from underneath one’s data and all the ways data can be captured and used, to “subscend” not transcend appearing, to be ontologically small, like Christ in the Gnostic text *Interpretation of the Gnosis*: “I became very small, so that through my humility I might take you up to the great height, whence you had fallen.” This is what Atkin makes us see, “through” not “with” the eye (Blake), depthlessly within but not within, beneath but not beneath, the appearances thrilling in this room.

---

Timothy Morton is a professor and Rita Shea Guffey Chair in English at Rice University. A member of the object-oriented philosophy movement, Morton's work explores the intersection of object-oriented thought and ecological studies. Morton's use of the term 'hyperobjects' was inspired by Björk's 1996 single 'Hyperballad', although the term 'Hyper-objects' has also been used in computer science since 1967. Morton uses the term to explain objects so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization, such as climate change and styrofoam. Their recent book *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People* explores the separation between humans and non-humans and from an object-oriented ontological perspective, arguing that humans need to radically rethink the way in which they conceive of, and relate to, non-human animals and nature as a whole, going on to explore the political implications of such a change. Morton has also written extensively about the literature of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley, Romanticism, diet studies, and ecotheory. Morton is faculty in the Synthetic Landscapes postgraduate program at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc)