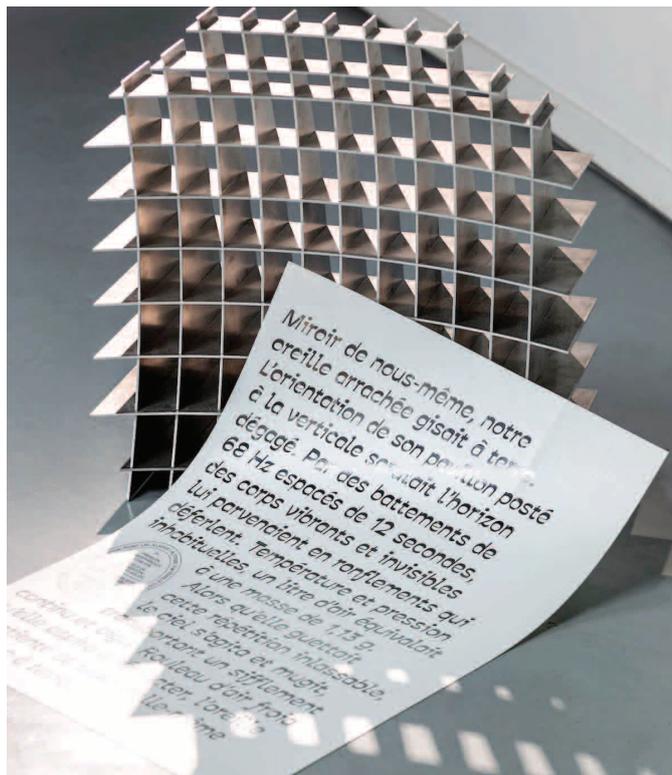


Texte de Flóra Gadó sur le travail de Lauren Tortil GENERATOR #2

*The works of Lauren Tortil –
The Sound of Silence,
Flóra Gadó, mai 2016*



Lauren Tortil, *Sound Signature 2*, 2017, Arondit, Paris.
Production GENERATOR / 40mcube, EESAB, Self Signal.

In this short essay I would like to examine the latest projects by Lauren Tortil who took part in the GENERATOR residency program in 2015-2016. This long-term residency allows artists to focus on their work, develop new projects and take part in several exhibitions. After introducing Tortil's artistic strategies and her interests in general, I would examine her earlier works from 2013-2014 as well as recent projects, on which she worked during her residency time. I would also present an exhibition organized by 40mcube at HubHug, Liffré, where Lauren Tortil presented her new installations, which were conceived and produced during the residency.

In her (sound)installations – objects, micro-architectures, texts and recently films and videos, – Lauren Tortil deals with the question of sound, the process of listening (e.g. early surveillance techniques) and their relations to architecture, politics and society. The artist considers the process of listening as “a process of knowledge – a mixture between the notion of *deep listening*, defined by Michael Bull and Les Back as *agile listening*¹ and the *casual listening* described by Michel Chion², which is »listening to a sound in order to gather information about its source³«.” She takes as her starting point contemporary facts and phenomena (e.g. contemporary surveillance devices like NSA, Echelon, Frenchelon) that are frequently used by the government in geopolitical contexts and she decides to examine “similar” methods like this in the past, in order to understand the present. This is why Lauren Tortil's practice could be understood also as research-based: through analysing situations and events that were significant in the past (in the 20th century) her works establish close links with contemporary tendencies. The outcomes of these researches are often printed materials and/or public presentations providing deeper insight into the topic. The other result could be the artwork itself in the classical sense, which is never a mere illustration or description, but a complex and experimental “situation” which counts on the viewer's presence in many different ways.

Lauren Tortil is impressed by the so-called acoustic mirrors, which are considered as the forerunners of radars and were built for example on the coasts of England between 1916 and the 1930's. Now, these bizarre architectural “objects” are marking a specific era and mindset even though many people forgot their previous function and importance. “These acoustic mirrors were intended to provide early warning of incoming enemy aircraft⁴” thus it is closely linked to early surveillance techniques – a site dedicated to the topic explains their original function. Here, we can see how these early efforts to listen to sound, could not be separated from military goals, and this dimension is exactly what Lauren Tortil is interested in. As the artist summarizes it, she is curious about these military devices, because they have the power to increase the ability to listen⁵. As part of her research, she visits places, like Dungenesse in England (*Absorbant Mirror*, 2013) where three different kinds of acoustic mirrors can be found, and she behaves like an anthropologist on a field trip, making films, and taking photographs which would later become part of the work itself. Through these projects she demystifies the sites and draws attention to their former function: “de/re-constructing” them in a special way (*Sound Miniature*, 2016).

1. Agile listening: “tuning our ears to listen again to the multiple layers of meaning potentially embedded in the same sound” In this quote, Tortil refers to *Sound Studies*, ed.: Michael Bull, Routledge 2015.

2. See: Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision, Sound on Screen*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994.

3. Quote from the artist.

4. <http://www.andrewgrantham.co.uk/soundmirrors/locations/denge/>

5. Quote from the artist, as well as: „They invoke an agile/attentive listening where the gaze is disengaged, in order to allow sound to become the focus of attention, the main sense to anticipate a potential danger”.

Other architectural sites are also in her focus of interest: e.g. the first parabolas from 1962 at Pleumeur-Bodou, Brittany or the DEW line in Canada, which is an outdated US radar station. She also deals with everyday objects, like the stethoscope, invented by René Laennec who was born in Quimper, or a hearing aid that Tortil constructed for herself in a playful manner. She even investigates the history of the alarm's sound. As she frames it: "I use sound devices as the stethoscope or the parabolic antenna to reveal a sound, that exists but which is not audible with our normal listening perception. I use this instrument to open the space of our audible perception⁶." It is important to note, that the artist is not driven by a nostalgic attitude, as she deals with these places and architectural sights in a critical manner. It would be also wrong to see these installations as technophobic visions condemning our digital age and virtual reality. Lauren Tortil's approach is much more theoretical, it is based on the ideas of French post-structuralist philosophers like Michael Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, contemporary thinkers such as Jacques Rancière or Gaston Bachelard and theories related to music and sound studies, through which she tries to avoid thinking in binary oppositions. A good example for this strategy is her edition of three booklets (2013), presenting research material of different military sites related to surveillance, e.g. acoustic mirrors, "les Grandes Oreilles" (listening ears) and the dazzle camouflage. Therefore, the question we can ask is rather: how does the theoretical side – with the research in focus – "become" art, what is the role of mixing reality and fiction in the installations, and how will the viewer and their participation become essential regarding the piece?

Before analysing Tortil's recent installation, I would like to describe some of her early projects. *Reflected Voice* (2013) is a minimalistic sound installation consisting of two parabolas, inspired by the above-mentioned acoustic mirrors, their technique and acoustic characteristics. As the title suggests, while the sound exits from one of the parabolas using a small loudspeaker, we can only hear it and listen to it from the other parabola. Presented in a gallery space, the piece almost looks like a "found object" from the previous century. The origin of the sound is absent, thus the viewer's body and their perception becomes the centre of the installation. Without the participant, the work would not fulfil its "goal", therefore we could consider the viewer or listener as a kind of animator, who starts the whole process of "reflected voices".

The installation *La voix de Cassandre* (2014-16) is a "sound sculpture" which is dealing with the sound of alarm, in other words *the sound of war siren*, which was invented by Cagniard de la Tour in 1819. The artist first wrote a theoretical essay about the philosophy of the alarm sound, creating a link with the figure of Cassandra, prophetess from the Greek mythology, as she draws a parallel between her and the siren which also forecasts the future. After publishing this text, Tortil started working on the artwork itself. Through creating a special electro-magnetic system to process the light waves of the lamp meeting with the two radio frequencies, thus creating a special sound, similar to the alarm. This complicated process, very much related to physics, takes form in a minimalistic installation, which also resembles an ancient divinity tool.

Lauren Tortil took part in the 2015/16 GENERATOR residency program, organized by 40mcube, with three other artists. The exhibition at Hub-Hug (Liffré) presented very recent works by the four artists. Tortil's project could be interpreted as an installation, which consists of a video, small metallic structures and posters on the wall and on the ground. It

6. Quote from the artist.

encompasses the different layers of inspiration of the artist in an enigmatic way. First, we can see small models, resembling architectural structures which – by now – look familiar in relation to Tortil's oeuvre. *Sound miniature* (2016) also takes its starting point from the Cold War period, and reflects on an outdated radar station in Canada and Alaska, named DEW line. According to the artist, as she was not able to visit the place, she was in search to create an installation, which could be the "substitution" of the real experience. The small models are similar to that structure of the DEW line, but they are more than miniature versions: they do not wish to be recognizable or to illustrate that specific station, rather to create a "simulacrum" of it. Changing the originally enormous site into small scale versions, the models could resemble the so-called "anti-monuments" which are deconstructing the power of the original ones. The poetic texts on the posters – which are crucial to understand the way the artist often uses texts in her works – create "a fictional scenario where sound and sensory experience would be to live in the here and now, and elsewhere at the same time: the viewer is mentally projected from the exhibition space to an audible and immersive experience⁷". This place is the above-mentioned site in Canada at the time of the Cold War and the artist counts on the "mental participation" of the viewer that she wishes to evoke especially through the texts. These texts are not following any linearity, nor are the exact time and narrator described, but they bring us into a timeless situation, which is emphasized by the utopistic aluminium models and wage installing. According to the artist the installation could also be seen as "sound scores" in relation to the space itself. The "formalist" structures become lively through these texts and also because of the video – the three different mediums enrich each other and the spectator can realize, that silence could never be separated from sound.

The second piece, *Preview* (2016) is a one-channel video projection without sound, installed in a corridor. It is set in Pleumeur-Bodou, Bretagne (Britanny) at the Pôle Phenix area, and presents one of the parabolas, which was used in 1962 to capture the first trans-atlantic television signals between Europe and North-America. The artist uses one of the parabolic satellite communication antennas from the 70's to capture the sound of the moon in collaboration with a radio amateur. Although the parc cité des télécoms – the other area of Pleumeur-Bodou – is open to the public, this sight at Pôle Phoenix is a closed area. That is also why the artist perhaps uses the medium of video to translate the experience of the site, because she cannot create there an in-situ sound installations. Lauren Tortil plays with the notion of being there and not-being there and emphasizes the paradoxical aspect of proximity and distance. Therefore, the artist presents the parabola as isolated, rather as a "non-site", a mysterious instrument in the sunset, which does not function anymore, but as a "fetish" it still can be seen as a landmark of the sixties and the birth of television. The title is self-explanatory: *Preview* is the preview or sneak-peek of the upcoming short film (working title: *Oreille à terre*), which will examine the site of Pleumeur-Bodou in more details. In this work, Tortil also emphasizes the similarity of the architectural elements and the technical aspects between the acoustic mirrors, listening ears and the parabolas at cité des télécoms / Pôle Phoenix, which can show the link between military and communication practices. The silent aspect of the video is important too: the artist draws attention to the sound of the exhibition space itself, and within it, the movement of the visitor becomes the "soundtrack" of the otherwise silent installation. In other words, parallel to the silent video, the artist created artificially the sound characteristic of the parabola represented in

7. Portfolio of the artist.

the video. This means, that the soundtrack becomes the reflexion of the gallery space in real time and the visitors could listen to the presence of what happened at that certain moment in the space (e.g. people talking, birds singing, sound installation of other artists). The shape of the corridor is created to reinforce this acoustic situation as well.

These themes and works remind me of *Liquid Horizon* (1999-2002) project by the Hungarian-born photographer Gábor Ósz. In this photographic series, he transforms the defence bunkers of the Atlantic Wall, built by Nazi Germany, into special camera obscuras, and creates almost monochrome landscapes through this technique⁸. Even though Tortil does not appropriate the acoustic mirrors and other sites in this sense, her approach could also lead her in this interesting direction.

8. http://www.gaborosz.com/liquid_text.html