

Stephen Kelly: Coarse-tuning It

essay accompanying the exhibition "Wave-Up" at SKOL, Montreal

0. Lonely Buoy

Somewhere out on the Atlantic Ocean drifts a solitary buoy. A droid beacon installed by government agents, it is augmented with sensory devices and a means of transmitting messages. Its fate is to dwell on the surface of the deep, sometimes gently bobbing, sometimes brutally thrashed, but always dutifully relaying its endless stream of data to whoever might care to listen: *the time is now, I am here, the waves are this high, the waves are this frequent, the time is now, I am here ...*

1. A Massive Gulf

All the time, everywhere, we are surrounded by things that exert their influence on our lives without our noticing – that is, until something somehow pokes through our crusted-over awareness, and we experience a momentary reminder.

Now it's Stephen Kelly I can imagine on the Atlantic, far from shore, afloat a chunk of foam and fibreglass, learning to surf, having such a realization:

*As I was floating in the ocean waves ... the massive physical force and significance of the ocean was made real to me. The ocean's currents directly affect regional and global climates, but its physical force and influence have no representation in the urban landscape. Even living in the city of Halifax ... it is difficult to perceive the enormous ... body of water next door. It is intriguing that there exists a gulf between the palpable experience of two environments that are so closely interconnected.*¹

This was a germinal moment for WaveUp. It seems natural that an artist would want to address (or redress) this gulf. The prelude to a day of surfing involves checking the buoy report: wave conditions downloadable from the Fisheries and Oceans website. It follows that the lonely buoy would become a key player in this project, a lifeline. WaveUp translocates the ocean to an urban gallery setting.

2. Different Kinds of Waves

Kelly is a musician. Sound and music are a lifelong love, greatly informing this work. In WaveUp, real-time wave data is gathered from our lone buoy. A loose musical structure is used to translate the swell and ebb of ocean waves into the language of sound, wherein the buoy data modulates sound emanating from loudspeakers. In creating an impression of the ocean in the gallery, *sound replaces water. Since the audio is generated from environmental data, the "music" of this installation encompasses all the dynamics and varied character of a Northern weather report.*²

3. Kempt Road, Halifax, summer 2008

I'm conversing with Stephen in his studio, looking at the transformer station and its array of giant power cables that make up the view from his window. He asserts his disbelief in randomness, and how this is central to WaveUp: the world is stupefyingly complex, with unending levels of precise details within precise details, elaborately interconnected. Nothing is for nothing ... when something happens, it does not, cannot, happen in isolation. Things that seem to make no sense are simply beyond our comprehension.

Feeling nihilistic, I'm not sure I completely agree, but I really don't know how I can argue from what is ultimately just a gut feeling. Rethinking this later, though, does lead to some insight into WaveUp.

¹ SK, grant unpublished application and/or website text

² *ibid.*

In my view, at its core this work attempts to reconcile a giant disconnect, and work through the profound sadness that results – at least temporarily. *At best, all we can hope for is a coarsely tuned representation of nature's infinite precision.*³ Stephen Kelly aims to pry open a space for contemplation, in which we may glimpse the massive gulf between everyday awareness and awareness of the invisible systems in which we are continuously immersed and to which we belong.

Peter Flemming
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³ attributed to SK, note from a conversation with SK