



FERMYNWOODS CONTEMPORARY ART PODCAST EPISODE 15 - SAMM ANGA & VERONICA PETUKHOV

<birds are softly singing>

Marie-Chantal Hamrock: Welcome to the Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Podcast, guest curated and presented by SUBTERRA. I am your host and one half of Subterra, Marie-Chantal Hamrock.

<gentle harps begin to play>

We invite you to get lost in the unknown as we take a stroll through rich woodlands, dark forests and subterrestrial landscapes. As we navigate these eerie and unfamiliar spaces, we will explore artist talks, discussions, and original commissioned sound art.



Marie-Chantal Hamrock: Welcome to our maiden voyage!! Developing out of the previous two podcast series, conceived, and curated by artist Jessica Harby, myself and Astrid Bjorklund are delighted to be hosting and curating the newest season of the Fermynwoods Contemporary Art Podcast. For our first episode we commissioned sound artist Samm Anga to respond to the theme of Xylophobia. Xylophobia is Fermynwoods Contemporary Art's new two-year programme funded by Arts Council England. The programme is named from the from the fear of wooden objects or forests, addressing related fears and issues of place and belonging which go to the heart of community feelings of exclusion from both the art world and woodland spaces.

Samm is a Nigerian-born composer, producer, and singer. In his current work, he finds himself questioning the multi-faceted identity of sound in the Anthropocene. In the following piece, titled Chesime, Samm takes a solitary journey into his own psyche and heritage, ruminating on his own fear of nature: water. Through field recordings, sonic representations of Nigerian mermaid song and recorded conversations with his parents, he navigates the listener through a rich ambient soundscape.

<CHESIME by Samm Anga>

Marie-Chantal Hamrock: Today, we're also joined for a discussion with Samm Anga and Veronica Petukhov, who make up the collaborative duo Muto Major. Veronica is a visual artist and VJ, working across digital media and sound art. Veronica also responded to the Xylophobia theme through moving image and audio, which you can see on our website fermynwoods.org. Veronica reimagined the mythological character of Lisovyk, inspired by Slavic folk tales her grandmother would tell her when she would visit her in Odesa in Ukraine. As the story goes The Lisovyk is a seldom seen forest spirit who is mostly harmless but when angered can be treacherous. Veronica

reimagines this entity through a 3D environment, layering poetry over an uncanny floating forest. Together, Samm and Veronica blur the lines between the audio and the visual, creating an exciting hybrid form that exists somewhere in the realm of music, dance, theatre and visual art.



Marie-Chantal Hamrock: Thank you guys so much for being here, and for doing your two pieces. It's really exciting to start off the Xylophobia program with these two very different responses to the theme. I was gonna ask if you could maybe briefly each talk about your piece, and your thinking behind it, and then we can kind of chat about it!

Veronica Petukhov: Yeah sure, shall I go first Samm?

MH: Yeah sure! Whatever is easiest

VP: All right, so I did the digital video piece, basically I... I'll start with the technical stuff and incorporated both 3D renders, which is a type of art I've been really getting into recently, and doing more and I graduated from uni actually. And I also used readymade videos – so not filmed by me, but found online, royalty free so it's fine to use them and... Just edited using generative coding and created these type of glitchy patterns and, just effects that you wouldn't find in a normal editing software.

The story behind it is that I was thinking about the theme you told me, and how I relate to the forest and, since I was a kid I remember my grandma always telling me stories from Slavic Ukrainian type of stories, and things that children would hear when they go to bed. And to be.. Even like in the past they would say these stories to be scared, so children wouldn't go to the forest alone and get lost. And it's this creature called Lisovyk, and he's found both in Poland, Russia, Ukraine, all those Slav countries has their own names for it. And basically it's usually represented as a male, old male figure like a grandpa. He's usually kind, but he's the protector of the forest, and children are scared of him because he can get angry if you do something wrong, so he's a bit of this interesting creature, depends how you see him.

So I thought this is perfect, because I was scared of him when I was a child. My grandma always said, "oh be careful where you go, because Lisovyk is gonna be there, and he's gonna you know, tell you to go away and scare you." And I thought instead of creating a figure, like a human figure, I did this, I dunno, crazy ball shape that's in the forest, and it's not really humanoid at all and that's how I envision him. And I also used this Ukrainian poem about him that I distorted and made all these weird sounds and just created lots of layers and things, so yeah! That's pretty much summarized.

MH: Oh wow, nice! I think, yeah both of your works *thing* that really struck me was like, the kind of myth building and worldbuilding between both of them. That was a really nice connection. Samm, what about you? What was your thinking behind your episode?

Samm Anga: Yeah, distorted weird sounds and created lots of layers was very similar to my process as well.

MH: Yeah.

SA: I started thinking about the work, last year, when I spoke to Jessica, I think who was the previous curator for it. We spoke a lot about like, Xylophobia as... Specifically this fear of wooded areas, and then kind of expanded that into thinking about it as a fear of nature, or natural spaces, and what might lead to fear of natural spaces, and it got to the point of talking about you know, classicism, and how you might not feel comfortable in a natural space because it might signify someone else's land depending on where you live. And there's also like, racial stuff about who natural spaces are deemed to be for in terms of representation and then obviously the like,

mythology and fear of the creepy crawlies in the dark and all the things you usually think of.

SA: So I really liked those directions cause it kind of offered this kind of, offered this intersection of all these different things that Xylophobia could be about, so I wanted to delve deeper into that. And... I guess I've never had a fear of the wooded space, so I was thinking of all the - what is a natural thing that I've gone through a phase of having a fear of, and I landed on water. Which had like, yeah when I was younger when I was wee I was terrified of swimming pools and... I guess the thought of drowning, for some reason, was something that was in my brain, I dunno. They always say that babies can swim.

But I feel like my first memories of water were just like "ahh", you know. So I wanted to kind of delve deeper into that, and that brought me to think about my heritage, of my family and learning more about my... Well I thought it was just my moms dad, but both my parents, and their parents were all just like, fishers, we just came from a fishing village where everyone fished. And I found that hilarious, because my granddad would just spend probably as much of his life at sea as he did on land, but... Then somehow have had to have a grandson that was like terrified of water. So I wanted to just delve deeper into these contradictions and explore them in context and relation to nature, so I did lots of recordings and interviews with my parents, and just built this kind of soundscape for these elements. And trying to think of if you were at sea what kind of soundscape would surround you, you know, there'd be lots of water, and voices, but then distorted voices sometimes when you can't hear them as clearly.

And then, with my dad we spoke a lot about when the oil, oil exploration became like really big, and the impact that had on fishing so I kind of had these horrible metallic like... oil rigs sounds as well that would just kind of, consume all the other sounds whenever they came in, and yeah just kind of created that journey of the work.

MH: And then yeah, I was really struck by that kind of fluid movement, which I guess is quite watery in itself, between that really natural watery sound, and these really kind of industrial, like you said like, oil rig sounds, you're like 'oh how are these related?' Yeah, it's funny how you're both talking about the sort of like, inherited story from family as well. It's funny how phobias can be kind of generational or, I dunno, learned maybe. But I thought it was interesting Samm, the way you kind of used word play and this kind of connective word to go from Xylophobia to xenophobia.

And the way the sound is edited kind of creates this sort of, entanglement between all these words where it is like water it's like your kind of drowning in these different meanings or like, coming up for air and then going back down again, I thought it was really effective! And I really enjoyed the kind of repetition, there was something which felt kind of like.. I don't know if you meant for it to be like this at all, but to me it felt like an incantation of sorts. Like, the words had this kind of focus to them, like they were coming in and out of focus, and sometimes they were vague apparitions, and sometimes they were the meats of the sound, and that was really nice, and it felt very much like traces or memory or of time, or... yeah. I thought that was really effective.

SA: Thank you, yeah. So when I had the idea of kind of this, word journey, and wrote it all down, I was kind of 'oh that's really cool, that kind of exists like a text piece', but yeah then when I was trying to record it I was like, it became quite important how it was performed, and I think also related to what I've done. Something that was a bit like an incantation and I'm happy that that came across. Oh, what was the second thing you said... the journey the words come in and out?

MH: Yeah kind of like, apparitions or memories or ghosts almost, you know. It felt very ghostly.

SA: Yeah there's this plugin I used a lot called Driftmaker, and I'm not sponsored by them, but it does really interesting thing with. It's usually used for like non-vocal things, I feel like I've heard it

being used for like, just to make ambient soundscapes. But when used on stuff with voices in them, it does really interesting things where it kind of reverses certain phrases and kind of stops and starts and like, chops it up. And so when I put that on that incantation it created this really percussive like sounds that then obviously didn't make sense but were slightly familiar. And when you were talking about like, memories and distant apparitions I felt like that part for me really makes it.. Cause like, I obviously know the text and I recorded it but then everyone I hear that I'm kind of like, this sounds weirdly familiar, of course it sounds familiar! But yeah, it manages to make it just that slight bit obscure.

MH: That water was kind of like the perfect vessel, or object, to kind of have be the presence throughout I thought, because especially when you're talking about movement or like, xenophobia for example, like water is the water is the vessel we enter or leave a country, most people would. And it's this sort of, permeable substance that has so many different forms, and I thought you know, the way how the sound would end and there would just maybe be this bassy, sometimes these kind of gaps. And I <laughs> to keep going with the theme of incantation, I felt like there was space there for conjuring like using these stories from your family to create new meanings and new myths. And yeah, that kind of mythmaking was just really fascinating how that was the thing that came out of xylophobia and this fear of something.

Cause I think myths are often made in how we, you know how people deal with fears is by creating stories

like with, for example... I can't pronounce, how do I pronounce the forest person? <laughs>

VP: <laughs> It's Lisovyk, lee so vik.

MH: Yeah, so that is obviously a way to warn children of the dangers of this dark wooded space. And the only way we can really like, kind of do that is by making up these or, maybe they are real, who knows but -

VP: Yeah, maybe! <laughs>

MH: <laughs> These stories to kind of understand that fear I think. Or that in the piece of text that comes up at the beginning of the piece Veronica, the forester who's kind of got this watchful gaze... And I think there is always that feeling when you're in the woods of voyeurism, you know?

<Clip of *Lisovyk* by Veronica Petukhov>

MH: And then you know, the floating island? I thought it was so wild, cause at first I thought that you know, your pieces didn't have that much that I thought was in common but then when I saw this floating island and I was thinking about water separating people, or water being a vessel around which we can move. And also that kind of fluid, bubbly figure of the creature, kind of like a sprite that was glowing in the dark, I thought that 'oh! There's a really strong connection here'.

VP: Yeah! It's actually interesting because me and Samm haven't spoken for a while and we just decided to do our own thing and turns out we did quite similar like, ideas at the end. There are some connections still, so I find that very interesting, even the enchantment and the chanting cause the poem I used, I used a lot of echo and delay and distortion so you can repeatedly hear the same words over and over again so it connects very much to what Samm was just telling us.

MH: And also just that feeling of isolation that you managed to create just by kind of separating this earth from... Cause it like really just looks like a kind of floating planet, almost.

VP: Yeah well that was the idea because you know when you're in a forest alone, if that happens, I'd be scared. I know I'm not that scared of forest but there's still, as you were saying, an eerie feeling, I feel watched all the time. Maybe it's the animals, but there's an energy, if you believe it

or not, but there's definitely something going on in these forests you know. So, when you feel, like, why I did it floating like that obviously it was a bit mythological but also, as you said, to feel like disconnected and you're by yourself and you're surrounded by water or by trees.

MH: Oh also, I really wanted to talk to you about the power of the glitch in the film, and I know you use glitch kind of a lot in your work in the visuals but I don't know if you've ever read the book *Glitch Feminism* by Legacy Russell?

VP: No! I'll write that down.

MH: She has a brilliant manifesto within it where she talks about the power of the glitch as being something which is not a fixed point so it allows for movement and abstraction and leakages and you know, all these things that Samm is also talking about with water. And so yeah, it's really fascinating how those two kind of... Like the audio of Samm's would have worked with some of your visuals as well you know! <laughs>

VP: Yeah true, definitely! <laughs>

MH: which is really cool. I was gonna ask if you had spoken about your pieces before or if you just kind of did your own thing?

VP: Not at all, no no. I think after Sonica we're like "we need a break now thank you very much"
<all laughing>

VP: Nah I'm joking we're working on -

SA: We were on a break!

<all laughing>

VP: It's not you it's me!

SA: Yeah no, no. Well, we always joked that like, we permanently share two of three braincells at this point.

VP: Yeah <laughs>

SA: I guess I wanna ask like why did you think of like, creating a watery feel to your video? Because it is a forest story right?

VP: Yeah. I was thinking, there is usually water in forests, maybe a river or some sort of... There is a water aspect even in the mornings when you wake up, oh.. What's it called in English... Um, the dew! On the.. is that what it's called?

MH: Yeah.

VP: The dew, like watery so it's misty and there is a lot of water aspect in a forest. And then as I was thinking how to create this 3D scene I have to say like I was just making the forest and I just didn't like it, it didn't speak to me and I thought you know what.. I feel when you're in a forest alone you really feel lonely, like everything looks the same and you're surrounded like you're on a little planet by yourself, and that's why I thought, lets make a floating forest, a lil rock with some trees on it. And also obviously because I was doing mythology and you know, tales and stuff like

that, that gives it this lil' magical feeling as well in my opinion.

SA: But yeah it's quite funny with mythology cause with my work I was kind of like I was so.. I was so excited about the chat I had initially about it that I was like "yeah I'm just gonna completely go into this direction about like, in this political, sociological implications of Xylophobia" and was just not wanting to think about mythology. And then I started speaking to my dad and he's talking about like, seeing mermaids and <laughs> when they went fishing and went "yeah you know they used to like kidnap people sometimes and they'd come back and they would be like deaf and they cant speak" and I was like, woah this is so insane, and then it obviously inspired my work cause I was thinking of incorporating that element into it with the mermaid song and design synths that sound like weird, vocal textures and things like that. So yeah, it's funny how mythology crept into my work organically and how water crept into yours.

<Clip of *Lisovyk* by Veronica Petukhov>

MH: But yeah so were all working across like, well, you Veronica you're working across moving image, VJing, sound art, and you know, you're both working in a theatre, or theatrical performance art kind of space as well. And when I watched you perform I was moved by, well obviously the work itself, but also your movement together on stage. Even though veronica is not, you're not playing an instrument right, but it really looks like you are! There's like a rhythm...

VP: I was petrified for the first part of it! <laughs> Then I think I felt Samm's energy a lot and observant we were nervous, and there was a lot of emotions to go on stage, I'm not a stage a stage person, Samm definitely knows his way around being in front of people. And the first 15-20 minutes I was a bit stuck, I didn't know what to do with myself and then I looked at Samm and I saw how he was dancing and performing and I just felt the vibes, the energy <laughs> you know? I started, not as much as he was, but I definitely felt something going through my body.

MH: That's great. Yeah you could tell! You could tell, and it was so fascinating to see the kind of different roles that you both play within that collaboration but also how you really come together in so many different kind of forms.

SA: But yeah I really, I thought how you mentioned how it looked like Veronica was playing an instrument, I loved that. Because we both... And this is why I love live performance and it's funny cause I think most people that have perceived our works have probably not been live, Heretik was the first time we really got to do that, well properly anyway. So it's nice that you kind of saw that and then, we're having this discussion because when things so live we actually both are using the same equipment, it's just controllers, and I love controllers.

Because now they look like anything, traditionally you'd have a piano with buttons but not its just like boxes, and pads and knobs and.. You just essentially learn to perform with the machine so even if whether you're doing visual or audio you're performing, and that's why one of the reasons I though that it was necessary for her, for Veronica to be on stage with me, because I think it would not have worked or been the same with her hiding at the back of the room. And similarly wouldn't have worked if she was on stage but then, cause you cant be on... I like the stage cause it's kind of unforgiving, you cant just 'exist' on stage and blend in, so you can't do what you were doing at the back of the room or stage. And I think that did come into it.

It would be like, "oh yeah Veronica you can do some vocal work you can use these voices, and like voiceovers and move and we'll like coordinate" and then she was like "Samm I need to like, I will forget! Because I would just be like you know, panicking", so I was like okay cool cool.

VP: <laughs>

SA: So I just streamlined what we had to do to just facing each other, exiting physically, wearing the costumes, and then, yeah, the movement just organically came out of it all.

MH: Thinking about action-based research so, obviously Veronica you talked about you know, your grandmothers' stories and Samm you talked about your parents stories and I was just thinking about, that actually so much of our research is already there its like lived daily experiences and I thought, you know, reading both of your pieces, statements, it was really exiting to hear about this kind of, personal research method.

VP: I have been, like you said, more on my personal interest and personal research. Before university obviously you go to the library, you read a lot of books, you go into topics that maybe you weren't thinking about? Maybe I should continue doing that too, but right now I just find myself thinking about my past, my heritage, all stuff that you relate to because I think that when you create art, and it's something you are very passionate about and that's in your DNA let's say, you're gonna do a good art piece.

MH: Yeah for sure, for sure.

SA: Yeah... Yeah it was really fun. I enjoyed challenging myself for the research process for this piece cause I've not, since my masters, not really done like, proper long-form, just sound, which is very exciting. Cause as much as I enjoy working with other mediums it is nice to like, go back to just sound on a theoretical level and you know, not even like music or compositions or sound design. And I knew that in order to do it I would really have to delve into like, a proper research process, and I kind of when I was writing the artist statement, and I dunno if it read a bit like the blurb of some action, mystery ?? or something, all these different locations.

Because yeah, I think its something I've noticed since I graduated that you're not as bound by "well I got a lecture tomorrow" you know, you just actually kind of live in the experience of creating art and. In a way, life helps you do that and, I kind of set that intention of like "yeah I wanna kind of explore some of my heritage, particularly on my mother's side."

And so I ended up having a residency down in Hampshire and then... And my mum asked me to take my dad to see her in Dover, which is a whole four hour trip from Kent, where is where they actually lived so it's a lot of driving involved. And it was during that long drive that I ended up speaking to my dad and recording the chat and again, playing around with the quality so that you can kind of tell that both conversations happened at very different spaces, both through the editing and through the fact that there's an engine going *vrrr* you know, and then I had to like, think about that when I edit.

And we ended up just, doing all these things that were water related without me having planned them so we went on a boat trip together which I recorded. We did a lot of swimming, there was a jacuzzi, I did a steam bath, a sauna, just cause it was like in the hotel that they were staying in. And I hadn't even planned to stay over, it was just cause my dad had messed up the times, and we'd gone a day late so I had the opportunity to stay longer and eat lots of sea food and just... My parents would just keep telling me all these stories about like, my mum had to take like a four hour boat trip to get to school and then stay there for the semester to take the four hour trip back. And she would just talk about how like "yeah it was horrible and intense" but she was fine, but there would people who cried and being sick. With you know, being from where were from, she wasn't afraid of water and...

Yeah if this process continued on I would have loved to go to Nigeria and try do some finishing and go to see the oil rigs and just really stretch out – I even did the thing where I was looking at my relationship with water personally and, this didn't make... it's not a consequential part of the piece but It's some of the soundscapes you can hear. I've tried to record every drink of water I had

in a day, cause I realised I was having problems with <laughs> regulating and not dehydrating myself, so yeah, I did that. I did lots of just little interesting things where I was kind of... almost like a performance art process as well, where you're like, challenging your body to do things.

<Clip of *Lisovyk* by Veronica Petukhov>



Marie-Chantal Hamrock: You can find more from Samm at his website samm-anga.co.uk and Veronica at her blog vncptk.tumblr.com. Accompanying images for this episode as well as Veronica's video are at our website. There are links to all of this in the episode description.

This episode has been edited by Astrid Bjorklund, the other half of Subterra.

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Thanks for listening. Hope to see you back here soon!