NOUR MOBARAK'S POLYPHONIC OPERA DISSECTS THE POWER AND LIMITS OF THE HUMAN VOICE

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A well-known story from Ovid's first-century narrative poem *Metamorphoses* goes something like this: after the sun god Apollo kills the snake-dragon Python, the god of love Cupid seeks revenge on Apollo by striking two arrows. The first causes Apollo to fall madly, irrevocably in love with the nymph Daphne, while the second causes Daphne to revile Apollo, forcing her to transform into a laurel tree to escape his advances. This ancient Roman story of unrequited love and conquest was the basis of the world's first opera *Dafne* written and composed by Ottavio Rinuccini and Jacopo Peri in 1598, from which only the original libretto survives.

Los Angeles–based artist Nour Mobarak's sonic and sculptural reimagining of *Dafne,* on view at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York through January 12, expands this classic myth of Daphne and Apollo to tell a different kind of story around the power of language and individual transformation. The exhibition, *Dafne Phono,* features a cast of 15 singing sculptures made of mycelium, the root-like structure of fungi.

Ovid's godly characters are whittled down to basic geometric forms like ovoid shapes and cones that together recount the tale in some of the world's most phonetically complex languages, such as Abkhaz from Abkhazia, Chatino from inland Oaxaca, and Silbo Gomero from La Gomera in the Canary Islands. The result is an unfamiliar and deeply sensual aural clash of whistles, clicks, and consonants, each molded and metamorphosed by their enveloping fungal tissue.

Mobarak began thinking about the relationship between language and mycelium in an earlier work, *Father Fugue* (2019), a full-length album and series of column-shaped sound sculptures culminated from 15 years of recordings with her polyglot father, Jean Mobarak. The A side of the album features tender, recursive conversations and word games between Nour and Jean, who spoke French, Arabic, Italian, and English, but whose degenerative cognitive condition prevented him from sustaining memory beyond 30 seconds. Listening to the record, though, the content becomes less relevant than the materiality of their voices, as if the space of exchange lies in the musicality and cadence of sustained conversation rather than in the dialogue itself.

For Mobarak, who was growing mycelium at the time, transferring those recordings onto speakers covered in the decaying mushroom felt like the obvious next step: "When I looked at these blocks of mycelium, I felt that I was also looking at a synesthetic, materialized form of the conversations that I was listening to in the studio," she said in an interview with *ARTnews*.

With its rhizomatic structure, mycelium proliferates through a constant cycle of decomposition and

regeneration, which Mobarak related to the life cycles of human language. "I became very excited about the potential for mycelium to allow me to talk about causality and external systems," she said.

The presence of uncontrollable outside forces—namely time, deterioration, and fragmentation—are continuous lines of inquiry for Mobarak, whose work moves seamlessly between performance, sculpture, moving image, poetry, and music.

In the online exhibition *Locus/Lacuna* (2022), for instance, Mobarak tracked the site of a personal memory using the ancient mnemonic technique of the "memory palace." She presents her recollection of being exorcised by an evangelical priest through three different vocal tracks, which visitors can live mix as they move across a blown-up painting of the site of the memory, namely, a plush red seat. The experience attempts to recall *lacunas* or lost memories, yet in trying to remember, temporalities and subjectivities become muddled and new thoughts, ideas, and images form in the viewer's mind.

Mobarak later took the painting of the red seat and cast it in mycelium so that only traces of it remain visible. The image becomes metabolized by the fungus in a process of self-annihilation and, like the memory itself, given a new kind of presence through its decay.

"There is something very comfortable to me about off-setting," Mobarak said of translating a sculpture into a sound piece, and a sound piece into a painting. "I'm ambivalent about this, but others have theorized that it might have to do with being a diasporic person where you're never really of the place where you are. You're always a bit off, and yet always adaptable."

Mobarak's family is originally from Lebanon; though she was born in Egypt and grew up in Italy and the U.S. As a teenager, she underwent seven years of classical vocal training before swapping operatic formalism for the experimental music and poetry scenes she discovered during her time at the University of Sussex in England and later in Paris. Mobarak's constant exposure to languages she didn't speak fluently gave her an early awareness of the ways in which sounds and sensations can communicate differently from semantics.

Dafne Phono began with an investigation into the origins of the talking voice as a musical instrument. Rinuccini and Peri's *Dafne* was performed using a new style called recitative, in which the vocalist would have imitated the rhythm of spoken language rather than focusing on the melody. This translation of a single voice into music, and of bodies into material instruments, was related to Mobarak's longstanding interests in mechanized voice and extended vocal technique, long used by avant-garde vocalists, like Joan La Barbara, Meredith Monk, or Klaus Nomi, to explore the limits of the human voice.

"But I realized that a lot of these artists I knew of were Anglo-Saxons and that the apparently radical sounds they were making are present in many, many other spoken languages," Mobarak said.

Given the limited sonic palette of Romance languages, Mobarak sought out to make an opera with the widest array of human vocal sounds by translating *Dafne* into some of the world's most phonetically complex languages.

Mobarak had been investigating the affective power—and limits—of the human voice through phonetics with earlier performance works such as the series "Allophones Movement"(2019–21), in which she combined collaged audio samples from the UCLA Phonetics Lab Archive with live vocal improvisations.

“I was thinking a lot about empathy regarding how we communicate using our voice in language,” she explained. “Language is a carrier of meaning, as are sound waves. Being able to go through a process of uncoupling meaning from language was a way to be able to focus on how its sounds affect how we interpret what people are saying.”

In the lineage of sound artists and composers such as John Cage, Brion Gysin, and Robert Ashley, “Dafne Phono” sees Mobarak experimenting with how divorcing sound from the fixed meanings of language can generate new systems of knowledge and cognition.

The process of translating the libretto—from its original Italian into English, then from English into Abkhaz, Chatino, Silbo Gomero, !Xoon (Taa dialect), Latin, and finally back again into English—was different for each language. Many of them required Mobarak to perform the translation process *in situ*. She traveled to Namibia, for instance, where only around 2,000 people speak West !Xoon; its speakers have experienced genocide for centuries and live in extreme poverty, often without access to modern amenities like Wi-Fi and cellphones.

“I was never seeking out rare languages. I was wary of fetishizing indigeneity and rarity, or speaking too simplistically of these things,” Mobarak said. “But what presented itself as I did this research was that a lot of these phonetically complex languages were also some of the oldest languages still spoken on earth.”

At MoMA, the effect of these languages sounding together extends the metaphor of Daphne’s silencing to the suppression and eradication of thousands of linguistic systems and, with it, their cultures. Mobarak’s aim was to put into relief the many ways our spoken phonetic palettes, and therefore sensory faculties, have narrowed in tandem with the imperial forces of monolingualism, assimilation, and globalization.

“We are listening to far fewer phonemes on a mass scale due to hegemonic forces,” she said. “What does it mean to have less colors and textures available in our vocal and aural palette when we’re trying to communicate with one another?”

The twice-translated English subtitles of *Dafne* appear in a video in the corner of MoMA’s gallery. They are color-coded based on the speaker broadcasting each line and projected word-for-word on screen, resulting in a sculptural experience of language akin to concrete poetry. The audience can choose to follow the video or move around the sculptural cast in the room, but in each case sound’s enveloping logic of call and response activates various emotional and cognitive registers with a felt immediacy and intensity.

Sophie Cavoulacos, the exhibition’s curator, described Mobarak as “both a formalist and a sensualist,” someone who is “process and materials-based, but is also nurtured by a great curiosity and determination.”

Dafne Phono is the largest project the artist has made to date and, in a way, represents her own metamorphosis alongside Daphne’s—the outsourcing of a singular voice and body into a multiplicity of voices that together transform into an interspecies performance. Daphne’s original voice cannot be recovered but Mobarak animates a space for its absence to be heard anew, among a polyphonic chorus of human-nonhuman sound that is at once incomplete and overflowing.

“Moving away from the primacy of the human body as a sensory and intelligent force was a way to question the expansiveness of what a body is,” Mobarak said. “And how all realities are individuated yet deeply interconnected.”

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