

HELENA NEAIRA'S SONG

THE MYTH OF PALINURUS IN AN EXTENDED DIGITAL OPERATIC SHORT

*'How do we relate to the gaps in a story, a history, a myth? Do we fill them with our personal speculations? Do we try to sense their edges and listen to their echo?' In a cross-departmental project, spring 2021, students from Sandberg Institute, the University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam Conservatory were invited to create digital operatic shorts through a process of translation, reworking, undoing or abandoning of **Palinuro**, a video artwork by multimedia artist Nol de Koning, inspired by the myth of Palinurus. Central in the project were the myth and De Koning's speculative approach. The students were encouraged to find their own relationship to questions as: 'where lie the gaps in our imagination and how do we deal with them? How does our understanding of our current time allow us to imagine a future, a past or a different present? And what could we learn from De Koning's work as a historic work of speculative art?' (All questions are quoted from the project's open call.) Although his own speculative approach as elaborated in De Koning's closet drama **The C of Scylla** had been the initial trigger for the idea of the project, the video artwork from 1989 had been taken as its jumping off point. For De Koning himself the cross-departmental project has led to the idea of two new artworks, entitled **Et in Arcadia - Elissa's glow** and **Et in Utopia - Sibylla's cavernous mouth**. Helena Neaira's song can be considered as an extended digital operatic short by De Koning for a chamber opera or concert visual. The song is also realised as **Et in Arcadia - Helena Neaira's song**, a two channel video installation (2021) and the as **Dido's glow - Helena Neaira's song**, a revision of the video installation for one video projection (2024).*

PALINURO - THE INITIAL WORK

Palinurus, the helmsman of the ship of Aeneas, is a fleeting passage in the epic poem *The Aeneid* by Vergil written between 29 and 19 BC. Overcome by sleep Palinurus falls overboard and for three days he is at the mercy of the stormy sea. When eventually he manages to reach the Italian mainland at the town of Velia unharmed, he is murdered by its inhabitants for his clothes. His body is left unburied on the seashore. In the underworld Aeneas' guide Deiphobe, the Sibyl of Cumae, promises Palinurus that a monument will be resurrected for his abandoned body and restless soul. This became Cape Palinuro that still exists today.

Nol de Koning has been working many years on a project that both speculates on the remains of the myth and maps the possible traces of the events as described by Virgil. His installation *Palinuro* (1989) - part of the collection of The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage and preserved and presented by LIMA (Amsterdam) - associatively mixes erupting volcanoes, the unruly sea, running burning horses and the searchlight of the lighthouse. Together they create a shifting nocturnal brooding landscape. Watching the installation we hear the crashing of waves and a lamenting voice singing in the distance. (The digitised analogue film and sound served as the raw material, inspiration or counterpoint for the students to create their operatic works.)

THE NARRATIVE GAP

According to the British writer Cyril Connolly, who wrote a book in 1944 under the pseudonym *Palinurus*, the account of Vergil's story is 'full of difficulties'. 'Looking for you, Palinurus, bringing you sad visions, guiltless though you are. But was Palinurus guiltless?' (Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave*, p.132) Was Palinurus' disappearance a deliberate attempt to abandon Aeneas? A planned act of escape or revenge by Palinurus himself? Or was his death through his own fault or a divine intervention in the shape of a propitiatory sacrifice of the helmsman without guilt?

Connolly does not draw final conclusions. Finally we are left with ‘a planned act of escape and revenge by Palinurus or with supernatural intervention in the shape of a propitiatory sacrifice of the helmsman’ to a god. And with Connolly’s opinion that the story about Palinurus should be considered as a myth with a valuable psychological interpretation. Connolly (p.137): ‘Palinurus, in spite of his great ability and his conspicuous public position, deserted his post on the moment of victory and opted for the unknown shore.’

Ole Bouman in his review (*De Groene Amsterdammer*, 1989) about *Palinuro*: behind Palinurus lies ‘Carthago, where departure had led to treachery and death of the sovereign.’ (Dido) ‘In front lies Latium, where soon the model of all usurpation that history would know would be built. Treachery in Africa for the sake of the holy mission in Europe, divinely presented to admiral Aeneas.’ ‘Nol de Koning, after British writer Cyril Connolly, lets Palinurus, who, incidentally, we only get to know through his mind's eye, leave the ship on purpose. De Koning views the occurrences as an act of resistance against the inescapable solemnization of a violent world-destiny.’ Ten years later De Koning was wondering if Palinurus really opted for an unknown shore.

In his project *The C of Scylla - a platonic phantasy*, started in 2009 as a closet drama, De Koning gives his answer to that question by using the common Dido-motive in a personal, ‘opposite’ way: Helena Neaira, the abducted daughter of Helen of Sparta and Troy as Palinurus’ Dido. When he deserted his post and left the ship, Palinurus had made his aim to rescue Helena Neaira of sexual slavery on Sicily, as Aeneas had designated her as priestess of his mother Aphrodite in the temple to be built for her after leaving Sicily to continue his mission to Italy. In spite of Palinurus’ great ability as Aeneas’ chief helmsman, he was killed by the sea monster Scylla on his way back to her.



Dido's glow - Helena Neaira's song

Two digital design drawings of the two-channel video installation/sculpture (2021)

HELENA NEAIRA'S SONG - A SPIN-OFF OF THE DRAMA AS AN EXTENDED OPERATIC SHORT

The work as shown in the exhibition *Nature and Aesthetics, Redefined* (autumn 2021) is an *operatic spin-off* of the closet drama. It is based on my own *digital operatic short* that I made in the period of the cross-departmental project. The work - a video installation / video sculpture - depicts the quest of Helena Neaira for Palinurus’ dead body after she had a vision of his death. She wanders from the Helikon to Cumae, the site where Palinurus started his retreat, then to Velia, the site to which Palinurus’ dead body was brought by dolphins and where he had been buried near the cape, and finally to Scylla, the site where the helmsman actually was killed. After the crime the sea monster was turned by Palinurus’ tutelary deity Hekate and her sisters Nemesis into a rock.

(Based on texts of Nol de Koning, Mieke Kolk, Sjaron Minailo, Julia van der Putten, Cyril Connolly and Ole Bouman)