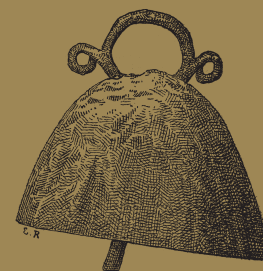


Sabine Mirlesse
Ofrenda

Produced for
Quelque chose ici va venir.
32nd artist residency
Ateliers des Arques
2023



Bell suspended in the air, high among the foliage, *Ofrenda* is the central artwork created by Sabine Mirlesse during her residency at Les Ateliers des Arques. I had invited Sabine as one of a small group of artists and designers to work on the region’s wealth of legends and beliefs, its local folklore and culture, with the aim of revealing something of the place to itself. She was already working on the subject of geomancy—and I told her about the Drac, the malevolent water spirit that prowls the Occitanian countryside. We went for a walk in the village bog. That’s when the idea for *Ofrenda*—“offering” in Occitan—was born.

A marvelous apparition in the protected environment of the marsh, the bell is an emanation of the very idea of what in France is classified as a protected “sensitive natural area” or “espace naturel sensible”, the legal category to which the Arques marsh belongs. Made of copper and metal from various vessels collected from local residents, blended into the vegetation and bathed in the same light as the bog, it captures the spirit of the place.

The Romans are said to have found the source of poetry in the rustling of leaves in the forest wind. *Ofrenda* is a poem that draws circles in the water with its long clapper, making the marsh ring out. The inscription, in Occitanian, takes the epigraph from Schiller’s “Song of the Bell” and adds two of the artist’s own verses, translated by a group of local Occitanists and the eldest inhabitants of the village.

This is the meaning of Sabine Mirlesse’s “offering”: that not only, in Lautréamont’s famous phrase, “poetry must be made by all, not by one”, but also that poetry is an emanation of places, that it is bound up with their history and countenance, with their very own living order. It’s on the artworks, and us, to know how to grasp and preserve that poetry.

Ofrenda shows us how to embrace the beauty of places, their singular geography, the fruit of the unfolding of living nature and the work of man. It’s as if there were one and the same movement, whereby nature becomes a poem and the poem makes nature sound. “Man is a creative glimpse of nature turning in on itself”, wrote Schlegel in 1800. And Novalis, at the same time: “Art is part of nature, [...] it is, so to speak, nature contemplating, imitating and forming itself”. *Ofrenda* follows in the footsteps of this early romanticism, inviting us to consider art as an offering from nature to itself, and beauty as an address from nature to us. In the current ecological catastrophe, such a program has nothing to do with ethereal idealism or nostalgic anachronism: it’s an aesthetic for our time.

Poetry’s Source

Emmanuel
Tibloux

Artistic Director,
Ateliers des Arques,
2023 edition

Cridi los vius Plori los mòrts
Bresi los lhauçes
Bolegui las prigondors
Agachi enlà de las aigas





Imagine a shipwreck, a surrender of manmade forms lowering heavily to the bottom of the sea. There is a kind of quiet once the last items have slipped below the surface. Underwater, there might be a slow howl, muffled, accompanying the descent. The domestic human interior's bodies lose their grounding. Gravity is not removed but altered, their usual positions above the waterline suddenly rotating, floating, asunder, gliding downwards. These objects—witnesses to a dramatic provocation, are now muted— they are from a world and a moment in time, destroyed and preserved at once. Wood will disappear over time. The plastic, if there is any, will float away and pollute. The metals, heavy, made from the same earth's core that they are now dropping slowly towards, will survive the longest.

Now imagine this is not a shipwreck. This is not a human tragedy and there are no lives lost. Imagine, instead, an intentional sending into the abyss. Historically, humans have sent messages in bottles by way of ocean tides. We've sent vinyl records into space—, that other oxygen-less infinity we know so little of.

Ofrenda

Sabine
Mirlesse



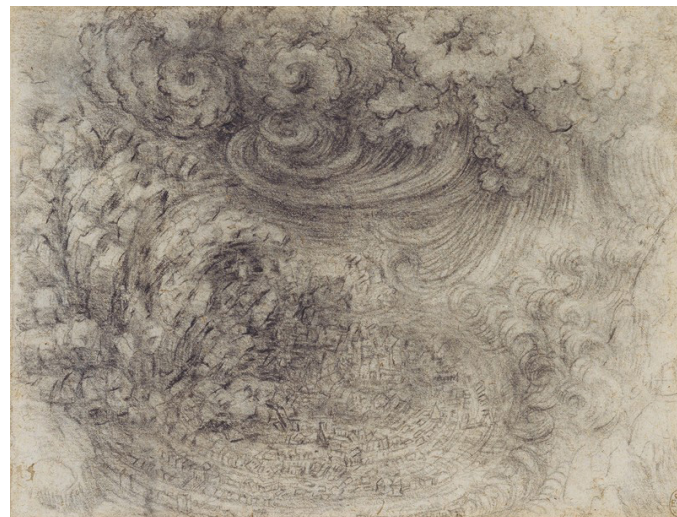
Natural spring
of the Masse marshes (left),
and the village
des Arques 2023



There *is* a recipient—that is after all the idea behind the gesture. Even if we know nothing of where exactly our ‘envoi’ will land in either case or where the end of its journey will be. We don’t know how or if it will arrive. We don’t know the name of the the destination that will uncover it. The intention in the sending, the sinking, the propulsion into the unknown, is what reveals.

“The bell turns the cloud”

Leonardo da Vinci,
Deluge, 1517–1518.



When I arrived to Les Arques I was already familiar with a few tales of sunken bells— bells singing out from lakes in Auvergne, or chiming from ponds in England or Germany to the chosen few who had the gift of hearing their sound and the burden of what that hearing could mean. Stories of villages that had suffered dramatic floods mixed with fairytales of mythological beings that left bells in their wake for children to be entranced by. Even Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Bell* tells the story of a bell that swooped out of the belfry from an nearby Abbey and plunged to the bottom of a lagoon in sorrow. But this story was different from the others. This sunken bell was the result of a collective gesture—a story of a village that had come together to dismantle and hide their church bell in the natural spring. The reason, likely connected to the movement to dismantle 60,000 church bells during the French revolution, during which many villagers sought to protect their town bell from being melted for canon, is unverified. However the choice of the spring as destination stood apart. This site of pagan worship to a goddess the Gaulois called Aiga, in the middle of the marsh at the bottom of the hill. Of all the places to hide its bell there are also others less imbued with local mythology and meaning as a sacred source, place of offering, place of scrying. Offering and scrying: That is, an the act of worship in the form of gifts to a kind of unknown, and the art of telling the future through the reflections of water’s surface and the shape of its responses to your touch. How we interpret and interact with landscape has always been part of my research, but the choice of the place to hide the bell combined with this history of ancestral ritual surpassed what I could have expected coming here to work.

Taken by this narrative and it’s poetic possibilities and my project became clear—to make a bell for the village, for the spring, for the inhabitants, in honor of that intended “envoi” into the source. And maybe to call to it in the depths... this predecessor, its inspiration below, from a vertical suspension above.

Natural spring,
Les Arques marsh



Local women came with cauldrons, spoons, bowls, and candlestick holders. This is the way bells once were made. I was looking for the red copper and the opaque grey blue of that real old-fashioned pewter and tin. Many vessels appeared, for domestic and agricultural activity of yesteryear, and goblets recalling the inverted bell shape. I learned that bells even undergo a ritual contact with waters in this region—their very own ablutions before being put into service. They are baptized to be given the power to speak, and to apparently welcome children into the world of language at the moment of their christening. An inscription would be necessary, too. In the Quercy many bells are engraved with a prayer to protect against the storm. I chose a latin verse from Schiller where the bell speaks for itself, *calling the living, mourning the dead, breaking the lightning*. I added two lines: *to stir the depths, to see through the waters*. But language is important, and this is an instrument for sound after all—and one that is most familiar.

Tin, copper, and bronze contributions from local inhabitants



Tin, copper, and bronze contributions from local inhabitants



Forest in the Masse valley,
Spring 2023



It made sense to choose the language better known orally, its sound calling out in familiarity rather than its script. Occitan, the local dialect, would be the language for the inscription. With the help of some of the most elderly of the community I would find the correct way of saying all of this and placing these five lines of verse onto its perimeter.

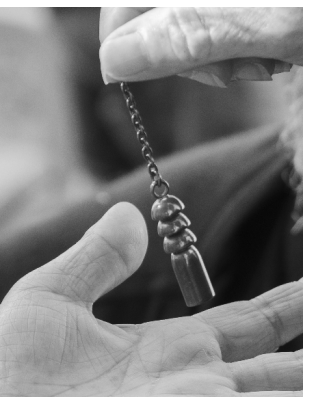
I visited the spring regularly, photographing this discreet place where the waters lifts vertically upwards in unprovoked ascension, bubbling up and outwards into concentric circles like a target for your reflection. I drew the crown of the new bell to resemble these forms appearing like sound waves from the middle of the waters. They also resemble an eye, for the seer, in a nod towards previous divination practices that might have inhabited the space. Someone asked me if I would venture to prove the existence of the bell, to excavate it somehow. I replied there are ways of excavating without touching the land—it didn't seem necessary to prove or disprove.

Still, I heard there were still a few dowzers in the area, people that feel the presence of water below, and sometimes other forces. I sought them out in order to meet with them and invite them to experiment. My obsession for instruments that measure the invisible had already led me to experiment in making divining rods and altering their silhouettes, but every region and every dowser has their own traditions. Here, I was taught how to make them out of the same hazelnut wood that grows all over the village, thanks to Louis, a craftsman with the gift. But he prefers his pendulum. He felt there was something buried in the marsh, but he couldn't tell me what, just over there beyond that felled trunk. A market grocer who also practiced dowsing told me it was perhaps once sunken there but wasn't there anymore. I made more divining rods. I searched for the form of the vertical communication of the bell above calling to the bell below and made hazel wood sculptures of the bell inverted into a chalice, a cup for drinking that I stacked as high as they would hold in my studio.

Bells, early
preparatory sketches



Pendulum (below)
and copper divining
rods (left).





“The essential point [...] is that the act of burying reveals a certain representation of the future.”

Alain Corbin, *Les cloches de la terre*.

To sink a bell into water, seems efficient for a heavy object someone told me, if the waters are nearby. But its a long walk down to the source. And so I imagine that decision to send a form, a bronze bell, plunging into the waters as deliberate, with an intention for it to survive and be able to be retrieved one day, brought back to the surface to tell its tale. To sink something into the deep is as Corbin says, is proof of belief in a future. Perhaps there is a bell ringing from below, sending air to the water’s surface. A call to tell you the hour, the ceremony, the one and the many. This is my proposal inspired by that intentional submersion.

hazelwood
traditionally used to
make divining rods



Water dowser,
Les Arques



Installation in the studio
in Les Arques,
sculpted hazelwood and
cherry tree stacked in balance
(bottom right),
suspensions (left)





🐼
Bell foundry,
Villedieu-Les-Poêles,
Normandy,
June 2023



🔥
Bell foundry,
Villedieu-Les-Poêles,
Normandy,
June 2023



🔔
Bell waiting to be installed
in the Marais des Arques,
July 2023







☞
Installation of the bell Aïga
in the marsh
de la Masse, Les Arques,
July 2023



Biography

Born in 1986 in the United States, Sabine Mirlesse lives and works in Paris, France. Her research focuses on the visibility of thresholds and the interiority of landscape, with a particular interest in how geological sites are divined, interpreted, activated and narrated. Weaving her way through mineral narratives and cosmologies, Mirlesse’s multidisciplinary approach links photography and geology as guardians of time and manifests itself through an accumulation of layers and strata, complemented by sculpture, installation, video and writing. Her creative practice is rooted in her training in the history of mysticism and literature. While photography is her primary medium, she also works in other forms such as sculpture, installation, video, engraving and writing.

She holds a Master’s degree in Fine Arts from the New School in New York and a double Bachelor’s degree from McGill University in Montreal. Her second book, *Pietra di Luce* (ed. Quants), was nominated for the Bob Calle Artist’s Book Award. It contains critical texts by Jean-Pierre Criqui and Federica Soletta.

She is a laureate of the French Ministry of Culture’s *Mondes Nouveaux* project for her entitled *Crystalline Thresholds | Les Portes de Givre* installed at the summit of the Puy-de-Dôme in Auvergne in winter 2022-2023.

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☞
Idol in the form of a bell,
Boetie, 8 century BCE



