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**Laura Magnusson**

I was wearing golden clamshell earrings

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## Breathing Underwater:

### On Laura Magnusson's *I was wearing golden clamshell earrings*

The first time I saw Laura Magnusson's film *Blue*, I saw a dancer moving. Not a virtuosic soloist now moving a limb or a leg or a body part with perfect control, but someone in deep connection to an unimaginable array of forces, sensations, histories, bodies and beings. Someone dancing the edge of risk, so deeply in her world, breathing on borrowed time and moving with a strange and evocative intensity. So vulnerable, this small body on the unliveable and vast dance floor of the seabed, with its delicate choreography of underwater's other gravities. The whole film testifies to the experimental grace of the risks Magnusson took making this work, her body on the line. Watching, I held my own breath unconsciously, a deep, somatic witnessing to this suspense. It took me time to register that the film was silent, that I wasn't to actually hear the sound of the sea roaring in my ears, to hear the space carved out from these conditions. Rarely has a silence felt so present, so insistent. A silence that is the sound of making life.

To enter the arena of the justice system as a survivor of sexual violence is to be asked to become an expert in everything, in a situation you never asked for: to advocate for yourself as an amateur lawyer, nurse, social worker, therapist, detective. Amateur (noun): a lover of. If you cannot figure out how to act to care for yourself, there is no guarantee anyone in the many institutions of care you will pass through will do it for you. And yet, as a survivor, in the system you are often absented from the experience itself: beholden to, but unable to act upon, chains of evidence, testimony and judgement. In *I was wearing golden clamshell earrings*, Magnusson has shifted this devastating encounter to her own territory. In this work, fundamentally about an encounter with survival, she reimagines the terrain of art not as one of mastery and perfect control, but as radically vulnerable and necessarily shared. Remaking an archive of lived experience, she radically expanded her technical repertoire in search of forms and practices adequate to what she lived, finding her own ways to be with materials and experiences not of her own choosing. Again and again, she has created a sensory forensics that insists on the living body in the aftermath of trauma: hers, yours, mine. The artist and activist Jasmeen Patheja, founder of Blank Noise, has spent years working at the intersections of art, advocacy and sexual violence. From this work, she has cultivated a specific demand: the right to be vulnerable. Magnusson's evocative edgings of risk in this work are an exploration of such a demand, inviting us into charged and crafted spaces of care.

Magnusson makes the archive tremble in this installation, restoring flesh to the fixity of judgment, dissection, and certainty. Amongst the archival materials are documents from her cross-examination, at the pre-trial for her sexual assault, and from the final judge's decision that failed to find her a credible witness to her own life. These have come to bear the touch of her own body—blacked out lines and blurred words—that make our own attempts to witness, to read, to see for ourselves deeply embodied acts. On the surface, a lawyer on the attack: the question, the question, the question, the question, the question. No room for Magnusson to breathe in here at all. Blacking out insists on pause, insist on the beat of a breath. In music, a clam is a wrong note, a misspoke lyric, a bad performance. Replaying this archive, Magnusson sounds all the false notes in this tired old tune of victim blaming. Making an image of the documentation of the judge's decision, Magnusson restores a rhythm to this droning voice of god. Does that blur in vision belong to the page or to my perception? I don't need to see what is hidden to feel long histories of misogyny and pre-emptive fear rise up, a knowing in advance how these things go. The blur makes the thin page oceanic, a gazing into the depths, a form of scrying. In the softened zones that disappear and interrupt all this verbiage, my eyes receive a zoning in and out, a smudging of authority of judgment. But as with the silence of the film, that doubles the rush of blood pounding in my ears, this vertigo re-places me in my own body. Against the deadening effects of a court system that so often fails, and the finality of judgment, Magnusson's response, shared with us as the witness with and to this work, is these small racks of focus that remind us: we are here, we are alive, we have a body and it moves with the world. Her artisanal forensics restore the labour of making sense to a process insensitive to how it replays and reproduces the violence that it claims to mitigate. Magnusson interrupts systems, insistently putting herself between the generation of the record that will stand as evidence against her own words, her own body, her own memory and the finality of legal judgement. She doubles at every turn systems of extraction and preservation, restoring a tremulous delicacy and suspense to automatism of ruthless recording. In reworking that long encounter, Magnusson is her own advocate. To advocate: from the Latin for *ad-vocare*, or "to call to one's aid". What could one want from survival after trauma?

At the start of the installation, *Blue* stands apart, Magnusson's careful curation of spaces and silences capacious enough to hold all the feelings this work evokes. Her film fills the room with an immersive and magical blue light. The film's silence is a ritual summoning, a calling to aid. What do you hear in this image of Magnusson dancing the seafloor? Working underwater, Magnusson was effectively without her usual points of repair. She could barely see, she couldn't hear, she had to trust that the support system of colleagues and equipment she set in place would be there. But she found new capacities for the bodily re-orientations diving demands, new way to move in the alien atmosphere of the underwater. There, in the absence of our habitual ways to check that we are okay—that we can breathe, move, feel safe—the diver comes to rely on an expanded set of references and tools in the pursuit of neutral buoyancy, that requires a profound kind of attention. If dissociation and disconnection are trauma responses that distance oneself from one's own body, for Magnusson, "at a time, when I didn't feel like I had a lot of connection to my body, (diving) was kind of a forced way to reengage in a new way with my body... being able to take care of myself, and experience this freedom of moving through different dimensions".



In this process, Magnusson calls out to and calls on Hafrún, an *Arctica islandica* clam, who was dredged up from the seabed off the coast of Iceland in 2006. Like rings of a tree, clam shells are prized historical markers, with the caveat that they are only reliable witnesses in the event of their own, dated death. Pried open, Hafrún is already dead when her body is made to speak by scientists, her witnessing also her extinction. As evidence, she only matters measured against the stillness of her body. To clam up: the body's defense against trauma. *I was wearing golden clamshell earrings* takes place in the afterlife of Magnusson's testimonies. She wasn't silent, and was held to account again and again. Documented here as *74 minutes*, even when she couldn't speak, her body scratched out a counter-testimony to her assailant's words. Part of the brilliance of this work is how Magnusson reimagines what it could mean to clam up, to witness forms of silence that speak volumes, to map and document where words and cries are not heard. To clam up is also to be a star witness. In *Blue*, Magnusson burrows her body into the sand. That sand returns, after the fact, in *Examination*, contaminating the evidence of a hand-crafted rape kit with the memory of another site of life. Diving off the coast of Iceland, near to the seabed where Hafrún burrowed in for the long haul, Magnusson wondered if her own Icelandic ancestresses fuelled their survival with the flesh of clams. In these waters, women were drowned as witches by men fearful of what they might say. Did Hafrún filter their silenced screams through her soft body, her hard shell and send them back out into the sea, to find their echo in Magnusson's art? To clam up might be to make yourself a soft shell. *Shell*, a handcrafted parka transposes the ice air of Northern Manitoba first to the seafloor, and now to this gallery. Underwater, it is made for the wrong kind of cold, but Magnusson makes it work. Wherever it is, *Shell* continues to insist: it hurts here, it heals here. Magnusson describes the underwater spaces she dove in for this project as "an experimental place... a contained space where I could try to work out some of the somatic qualities of the trauma and experience... I didn't find it terrifying. I found it really peaceful". In the deep silence of her work, "the medium of water was so receptive, I felt like I could exhale like things into the water and that it would receive it in some way".

*Up through Water, Into Stark Light* suspends a hand-cast bronze clamshell over a small mirror. The shell is opened, and inside is a small, bronze swab. The monumental material belies the disposability of this everyday item, and this still life, minimalist and restrained, vibrates with intensity. *I was wearing golden clamshell earrings* documents an experience that exploded time and its measure. The materials of this work are "massive temporalities, real extreme slowness, extreme longevity, durations" as much as bronze, oxygen, paper, fabric, resin. The loop of *Blue* and its fragmented and non-linear images; a clam in the act of opening/being opened suspended above "an altar, a pond, a place of reflection, a witnessing, a space to be with"; the finality of a legal decision that is laughable at effectively ending things; the tender curiosity and care for the dissected clam. The lifespan of a clam might well not be so alien in relation to the unmoored time of trauma and institutionalized forms of violence. The time signatures of a shaking hand punctually interrupted by the swap of a fresh page to write on in *74 minutes* becomes another form of dance notation, a technique Magnusson developed for being able to stay still in the courtroom as her assailant was allowed to tell his story. The body cries out uncontrollably in the face of trauma and in the need to be heard; Magnusson describes being told she was "disruptive" in the courtroom. In her own advocacy, she calls to aid an image of the earth trembling itself, an intimate seismography of her own witnessing, a machine of capture that let her hand land and testify to its own (dis)possessions. This counter archive of refusal makes sense. Between the shifting of the earth and the dance of the hand, through her work Magnusson has made (re)livable the extracted, the dredged up, the pinned down and the cut open. These are ways to move, again.

**Alanna Thain**

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