
Sarah Hayden

Response to *asweetsea*

asweetsea – as elaboration upon, and sonic compression of Sweet Sea: title of a 1980s kids’ cartoon about the adventures of a mer-child and her sub-aquatic friends.

a – as prefix: the indefinite article signalling scope for alternatives, versions, variation.

a – as trace of the enunciative style of Sylvestre’s child, who voices the *asweetsea* video. Onscreen and in audio, their elongated ‘aaaaaaand’ makes legible the effort of communication.

a – as the reach to remember, the stretch to convey, the delay as speech is formulated. In spoken conversation, such small phatic sounds – ‘umms’, ‘aaas’ – cue a listener or receiver to anticipate language as on the way. Like the pins by which lego bricks connect, an a – can maintain the connection between interlocutors. Keeping a channel open, an ‘aaa’, ‘uhhh’ or ‘ummm’ says ‘hold the line, stay with me, there’s more’.

In the *asweetsea* video, Sylvestre has collaborated with her child to reimagine an animated cartoon from the artist’s own childhood.

A child relays a story that is no longer audible to a parent who remembers and recreates. Their remake of Sweet Sea is a

tender evocation of access in the everyday: access as what is made in the act of description.

To recall the TV shows that entranced us as children is to enter reverie. Narrative events lose their edges. Feelings and sensory impressions melt together. In Sylvestre’s video, fragments of the mer-child’s underwater escapades with mudpuppy and ‘that squid-guy’ stick, blur and repeat. Neologisms transcribe the inventions of speech under pressure of enthusiasm. Animated sequences arrive in flurries. Like memories, they dissolve, go blank and startle with sudden jumps – sending the storyline astray. Sound and image freeze, shimmer and shiver. What prevails is a palette, an abundance of bubbles, and a certain ‘swaying’ quality of movement.

Sylvestre’s remake chops into and reassembles the animated material. The honey-toned original voiceover is replaced by a child’s retelling. Moments of high peril are recounted with high emotion. Gender is read one way, then another. Tenses turn slippery. What might have been labelled is instead, elaborately, described. Aspect ratios shift about. When soft-edged, striated analog images surface within digital frames, they register the transmission of cultural artefacts across phases of media technology as well as generations within families.

Throughout, the film’s soundtrack is intermittent. Undependable sound swells

without warning, then cuts sharply. With legible affection, Sylvestre’s captions catch the character of her child’s vocal delivery. They make visible the idiosyncrasies of a voice that is (like any other) specific, and still in formation. In the pacing of text onscreen as well as voiceover sound, the cadence of kiddish storytelling conveys affective textures and tone. Viewers and listeners bear witness to an intimate, technicolour parent-child interaction. Two now-differently configured sensory sensibilities meet over the glitching fragments of a fuzzy 1980s cartoon.

In the *Parts* drawings, instructions for the construction of Lego models overlap on tracing paper with diagrams for the assembly of cochlear implants.

Visual vocabularies interact in Sylvestre’s *Parts* drawings. Details are rendered with delicate, evenly calibrated attention, soliciting in turn slow contemplation. In sharing the same simple, line-drawn aesthetic and combining on a single (though composite) plane, disparate systems seem to become mutually intelligible. Scales collide without resolution and boundary-lines are partly obscured. Lego hinge constructions look oddly joint-like. Arrows between human silhouettes designate them as senders or receivers, but the messages they pass remain indecipherable.

COLLECTIVE

Scenes re-drawn from cochlear implant diagrams imag(in)e access only in public productivity— at the lectern, in the boardroom. Sylvestre propels figures and devices alike into a wider open. As a child, the artist brought her Sweet Sea doll to difficult medical appointments. As an adult, Sylvestre gives material form to the resulting mix of memories, sensory fragments and feelings. Objects transplanted from the video—a flower from the royal garden, the necklace that ‘lighted up’ the ‘Coral-King world’ — appear in outline. Chargers and battery packs occupy space—pointing up the constraints that pertain to our every co-imbrication with technology.

Sheer layers of tracing paper give partial access. Zones of overlap and opacity invite closer speculation, but resist disclosure. Patterns of fold-lines summon work-in-progress: plans pocketed for revision on the fly. Traceries of creases imply topographies of iteration and revision: blueprint drafts crumpled, retrieved, then smoothed out. In the drawings, as in cochlear implants, magnets (that most ancient technology-magic) hold the elements in place.

In Collective’s library and online, Sylvestre’s captioned audio artwork offers an entry route into (or exit route from) the exhibition.

Lyrical and resolutely embodied, the tone of the artist’s legible and audible voice in *asweetsea_excerpt_captions_with_sound* recalls that of her *Captioned* series (2016—). Sylvestre talks of the necessity of distributing responsibility for access between individuals a family (or among friends, or within a workplace, public space). The siting of the work at Collective models this principle in practice. Supplementing the drawings and video, it carries some of the burden of communication, whilst also complicating and thickening what is communicated.

Originally conceived for another port city, *asweetsea* has been reconceived for Collective.

Like many other prostheses, telescopes contract distances. Transmitting light (with delay) across space, they enable users to translate points of luminescence into information about the unreachable. Like other technological fixes, they can disappoint. Edinburgh’s City Dome was built to house a refractor telescope that proved unreliable.

Access-making often occasions repurposing, acts of everyday ingenuity. Just metres away from the City Dome, the Nelson Monument’s time ball – a mechanism that once allowed sailors to synchronise their clocks to the empire standard – is, at core, a toy repurposed. This space that once granted access (for some) to the stars is an apt location for *asweetsea*’s exploration of

human-machine collaborations, communication and sensory memory. Inside a monument to (fantasies of) precision, Sylvestre re-orientates attention to provisionality, asynchronicity, and the inevitability of gaps.

Across *asweetsea*, fragments of narrative and anecdote drift between the video, drawings and audio artwork.

Ideas and figures recur, but never in quite the same form twice. What is missed in one iteration might be picked up elsewhere. Tints from the projection play back over the plexiglass surfaces of the drawings. Distinctions between things are rubbed soft.

Liza Sylvestre shows how access is created between intimates, within families, among friends. Her work dislodges access thinking from disability-specific discourse – pulling it to the surface of communication in general. In *asweetsea*, access is an ethos: a responsibility shared by every participant in any given social structure.

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