still life
cally spooner

solo exhibition
24 march – 6 may 2023

IMPERCEPTIBLE FIGURE – in support of Cally Spooner's exhibition *Still Life*
text by Jesper List Thomsen

… Well, I saw her, I mean, I heard and saw her. I met her. She was singing and I heard her, and then I met her. *

The uncontrolled Eros is just as deadly as his fatal counterpart, the death instinct. **

There is a painting by Pierre-Auguste Renoir depicting an arrangement of onions. I came upon this painting just over a decade ago, at a museum in Massachusetts. The art historical categorisation of this painting is 'still life', yet, reading further into its history I have come to learn that Renoir painted it on a trip to Naples in 1881. I suppose it could also be categorised as travel painting. Or painting made elsewhere to where one belongs. Or painting that captures the light that one doesn't know, inexcusably. Or painting carrying its subject through association, and its form as an excuse. The painting stayed with me since this first encounter. Its colours, its weight, its intrinsic communication through experience over matter. Was Renoir painting an onion? Or was he painting Naples? Was he driven by 'immersion in place', this taking priority over 'death in representation'? Or is the enduring quality of this painting the result of his ability to summon an *affinity* between exactly that which is alive and that which is dead?

I remember nothing else from the museum, apart from a view into the garden. It was covered in snow. This view was as enticing as the Renoir, yet framed not by the limits of a canvas, but by the architecture of an institution. As is often the case when snow has just fallen and the sun is shining again, the impression that meets the eye seems very still.

There is a soundtrack in Cally Spooner's exhibition that is divorced from its image. Presented on a single speaker is a recording of the dancer, Maggie Segale, captured by a radio mic while she delivers her eponymous solo to camera, in New York City, early 2020. Segale wore the mic for the 42 minutes and 15 seconds she was dancing. Her breath, her movement, her bodily intent is captured. So are the radio frequencies of a variety of phenomena that happened to pass through the airwaves and radio spectrum during this first and only take. The mic was 'left open', that is to say; no sound engineer was assigned to monitor the recording, to keep it 'clean'. Segale, delivering her solo, becomes an acoustic imprint carved out of, or into, a sonic clutter of mobile phone waves, microwaves, WI-FI routers, etc. Into the radio-wave soundscape of New York City during those 42 minutes and 15 seconds. An aural image emerges, one that stands in opposition to the pictorial in its condition as negative. Like a fossil record of a body; its labour, its determination. To hear the image of Segale's body in motion is an experience that decries the gaze and its innate supremacy. It is an almost imperceptible figure.

* Linus Van Pelt recounts to his friend Charlie Brown an encounter. While rollerblading home from school, Linus hears a voice singing. He follows his ear into a garden and comes upon Mimi, the girl to whom the voice belongs. He invites her to his birthday party. (*Peanuts*, 'It Was My Best Birthday Party Ever, Charlie Brown', 1997)

** Herbert Marcuse explains why civilisation begins when eros, the life instinct, is renounced and brought under control of death instincts: productiveness, toil and security. (Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 1974)