

*NEXT Matilda Aslizadeh: Moly and Cassandra*

“And it’s all the same if nothing of mine persuades you, of course: the future will come; and you will soon be at my side to pity and call me too true a prophet.”

—Kassandra in Aeschylus’s play *Agamemnon*<sup>1</sup>

Over the past fifteen years, Vancouver-based artist Matilda Aslizadeh has produced a multifaceted body of video and photographic work that deploys a broad set of references, ranging from ancient mythology and the traditions of European genre painting to sales pitches for contemporary timeshare properties and familiar tropes from mainstream cinema. Aslizadeh’s recent installation *Moly and Cassandra* (2018) addresses the correlation between the terms in which abstract economic systems are represented and the physical extraction of raw materials by precisely interweaving statistical charts, images of monumental excavations into the surface of the earth and scenes of operatic divination.

*Moly and Cassandra* features three sculptural components that recall scenery flats—commonly used in theatrical productions and moviemaking—of mountain landscapes with precipitously serrated horizons that evoke the rise and fall of the commodity and stock markets. A video image is projected onto each flat, so the viewer simultaneously encounters operatic performances by three solitary female performers—soprano vocalists—who appear to be standing in open-pit mines. The resemblance these mines bear to the amphitheaters of ancient Greece is uncanny. While the despoiled landscapes recall the settings in which the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides were first staged in the fifth century BCE—and the city-state of Athens, where Western democracy was allegedly born—the attire of *Moly and Cassandra*’s performers echoes the haute couture of the late 1970s and early 80s, situating them at a pivotal moment in the shift from Keynesian to neoliberal economic policies in many Western democracies. This transition—marked by the advent of a mode of governance that downplays societal well-being in favour of free-market principles—was concisely summarized by former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, in her now infamous proclamation: “There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women...and people must look after themselves first.”<sup>2</sup>

While the compositions performed by the vocalists initially seem to be affective expressions of human emotion, they were actually produced by superimposing graphs that track the value and production levels of molybdenum onto musical notation charts. Named after *molybdos*—the ancient Greek term for lead—when it was discovered in the eighteenth century, molybdenum is a chemical element that was first exploited commercially in the early twentieth century. Its initial application was in the arms industry. Demand for molybdenum—and its market value—skyrocketed with the advent of World War I, when it was combined with steel to produce alloys used in new forms of weaponry, such as tanks and enormous artillery pieces. Often referred to as “moly,” it is now ubiquitous and can be found

in alloys used in automobiles, bicycles, chain links and furnaces, as well as in weapons. The data used to configure the compositions performed in *Moly and Cassandra* tracks statistical information from the first industrial applications of molybdenum up to the present; therefore, as Aslizadeh has noted, the performer “who sings from the vantage point of 1979 is both a historian and a prophet—akin to Cassandra from classical Greek mythology, whose predictions of misfortune were cursed to inspire only disbelief.”

A princess of Troy, Cassandra is an archetypal tragic figure who—in plays by Aeschylus and Euripides and in Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*, among many other texts—suffers the objectification and violence women often endure in classical mythology. Smitten with Cassandra’s extraordinary beauty, Apollo, the god of reason, logic and order, gives her the divine ability to see the future, present and past simultaneously. When she refuses to have sex with him, an irate Apollo puts a curse on Cassandra so that, while her visions will prove to be true, she will be seen as a liar or madwoman and no one will believe her. Cassandra attempts to alert her people of the deception of the Trojan horse and the coming destruction of their city, but her warnings go unheeded. Troy falls to the Greeks, and while the city is being sacked, Cassandra is abducted from the temple of Athena and brutally raped by the Greek warrior Ajax. She is given to Agamemnon, king of Mycenae—whose death she also foresees—as a trophy of war and is then murdered by Agamemnon’s wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus.

In the ensuing centuries, Cassandra has been widely taken up as a figure who represents women’s struggles to have their voices heard within the dominant patriarchal order, appearing in the works of a diverse set of authors, including the founder of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), and the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1882–1960). The basis of Cassandra’s failure to persuade varies from one version of the story to the next. In some, her warnings are simply discounted by other characters as untruths. In others, such as Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, her language is unfathomable: her words emerge in a combination of sung and spoken verse—produced in response to the trauma of intensely felt visions of horrific events—that lies beyond the comprehension of both those she wishes to caution and the play’s chorus. Aslizadeh’s Cassandra is most closely aligned with this last text, as the vocalist of *Moly and Cassandra* sings only the statistically determined notes of the composition. No accompanying lyrics specify intent through conventional language.

If the turbulent rise and fall in the pitch of the performers’ voices—which sometimes seems dramatic and sometimes comic—echoes the persistent rise and fall in the monetary value of commodities in an economy based on resource extraction, it denies the conventional terms through which data is represented and evades the Apollonian order of graphs and charts. The incongruity of a haute-couture-adorned female body standing in the masculinized space of a strip-mine-cum-amphitheatre turns attention toward the displacement of one abstract system (statistics) with another (music) to emphasize the detached distance between the

terms through which resource extraction is represented and the depredations it actually produces. On this level, *Moly and Cassandra* opens onto the question of what form of representation might be required to register the coming consequences of the economy, as it currently stands within our collective consciousness, at a time when the idea of society itself is in dispute.

— *Grant Arnold, 2020*

#### Notes

1. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 458 BCE, lines 1239–1241.
2. Margaret Thatcher, interview, *Women's Own*, October 31, 1987.