

**ROBERTO
RUBOGGHI**

Suillakku

Roberto Cuoghi

Šuillakku

14 October—
23 November 2008

Curated by Marcella Beccaria and organised by Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli-Turin



Introduction

The ICA is proud to present *Šuillakku*, the first British exhibition by the young Italian artist Roberto Cuoghi. The main element in the exhibition is an eponymous sound installation, to make which the artist undertook an imaginative journey back to Mesopotamia in the seventh century BC, at the time of the ancient Assyrians. This was the point at which the Assyrian empire was under attack from its enemies, and Cuoghi's piece takes the form of an appeal by the citizens of Nineveh to their gods, shortly after the city's fall.

To create *Šuillakku* the artist spent two years immersed in the language, rituals and superstitions of the Assyrians. The sound track he subsequently composed draws on this intensive historical research as well as his own imagination, and includes a myriad of musical instruments, voices and other sounds. All of the vocal parts were recorded by Cuoghi himself, who also made many of the instruments which can be heard (and some of which are being made available to visitors as part of the ICA's family programme).

During his researches the artist frequently came across the god Pazuzu, a winged being with a dog's face and a scorpion's tail (and which was, incidentally, used as a model for the demon in the film *The Exorcist*). Pazuzu was one of the most powerful of Assyrian demons, and its image was often placed at entrances and gateways to drive away lesser spirits. The other element in the exhibition is a giant statue of this demon, mounted above the entrance to the ICA – completing Cuoghi's exploration of superstition and fear.

Mark Sladen
Director of Exhibitions, ICA

Cuoghi's Metamorphoses



Statuette of Pazuzu, Musée du Louvre, Paris
(photograph by Alessandra Sofia)

Slight physical alterations, complete transformations, temporary disappearances and voyages into the immediate future or the most distant past – these are some of the elements that characterise the everyday world of Roberto Cuoghi. Experimenting to the point of obsession, the artist continually reinvents himself and his practice.

At the age of twenty-five Cuoghi began a process of physical transformation, one intended to make him resemble his father. Intentionally bypassing his own youth, the artist thus assumed the manners and gestures of a man in his sixties, living this way for nearly seven years. Although Cuoghi says that his motivations were personal, his gesture operated in a shadowy territory between the private realm and his work as an artist, and provoked the curiosity of many in the contemporary art world. In retrospect, it is clear that the idea of metamorphosis is fundamental to his artistic path. At once a physical process and a striking mental operation, metamorphosis becomes the connecting thread that ties together Cuoghi's multiform practice: a practice characterised by technical and stylistic invention; and by an investigation into the themes of time and memory, and of the borderline between appearance and reality.

Originally presented at Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli-Turin, and now recreated at the ICA for Cuoghi's first UK solo exhibition, *Suillakku* offers the artist the opportunity to make a vertiginous leap backward, landing in Mesopotamia, at the time of the Assyrians. Intentionally, he focuses on the most dramatic period, between 612 and 609 BC, when the empire fell into ruin. This was the time in which Nineveh, the empire's last capital, and then Harran, fell victim to attacks by the Medians and the Babylonians, the defeat of the two cities (whose ruins are situated in modern-day Iraq and Turkey) coinciding with the end of Assyrian civilization.

Almost as if he were moving about the streets of Nineveh,

Cuoghi breathes in its heat and dust. He observes the men, women and children, and absorbs their language, rituals, and superstitions; and, when the fatal assault is unleashed, it is as if he were participating personally in the flight of the survivors. *Suillakku*, the sound work conceived by Cuoghi for his eponymous exhibition, is the result of this metamorphosis. Changing his thoughts and multiplying them into those of some hundreds of ancient Assyrians, he shares the latter's anxieties and beliefs, resolving them in a lamentation addressed to the gods. Pronounced 'shoe-ee-lah-coo,' the title is an Accadian word – from the language commonly used by the Assyrian population – and refers to a prayer position in which one hand is raised, used to invoke the attention of the gods.

If Cuoghi's imagination is captured by the dramatic moment of flight, then it is his reasoning that allows him to create and interpret every sound or voice in *Suillakku*. The artist spent months in complete solitude, constructing all of the musical instruments required for the work. While it is true that there is no information about Assyrian musical composition, there are numerous records relating to instruments of the time. Cuoghi personally fabricated flutes, sistrums, trumpets and drums, sometimes modifying found objects, including contemporary toys. He turned to the help of a professional only to assemble a large lyre, inspired by an important archaeological find. To develop the sequence of the various groups of musical instruments he referred back to the Old Testament, where the prophet Daniel mentions the orchestra that accompanied King Nebuchadnezzar. Balancing archaeological reconstruction with imaginative invention, he used a child's toy keyboard to construct a melody based on the repetitive alternation of two notes. Corresponding to the phrase 'ui-ua-ui,' a form of stylised weeping, the work respects the microtonal structure on which Assyrian music is thought to have been based.

Cuoghi's hypothesis is that certain characteristics of the music of the Assyrians, a Semitic population, might have

been preserved in traditional Hebraic formats. Taking Hebraic lamentations as a model, *Suillakku* is structured in phases that represent isolation, anger, negotiation and despair. These correspond to the sense of abandonment; the bitterness caused by the tragedies the people have undergone; their faith in the divine; and, finally, their awareness that if the past has been marked by positive events then the present, in contrast, is without hope. At the ICA the antechamber contains sounds that relate to the first two phases. In the first phase, isolation, repetitive chanting is used as protection against the evil spirits, and one can hear the noise of spitting – since the Assyrians felt that this gesture kept misfortune at bay. The next phase, anger, is chaotic and noisy, and focuses on the idea that it is necessary to identify evil persons among the people.

The main room at the ICA contains sounds that relate to the final two phases. The chorus is abruptly interrupted by the sound of the lilissu, a large drum, used – together with animal horns and trumpets – to announce the most sacred moment of the lamentation. Corresponding to the third phase, negotiation, this section is recited by the kalutu, the priest, with the chorus responding to his words. The language used in this latter section is Sumerian, the idiom the Assyrians reserved for the religious realm. As with all voices in the work, the parts of both the priest and his priestesses are played by the metamorphic Cuoghi, who is able to modulate and alter his own voice to create an astonishing variety of interpretations. Negotiation is followed by the final phase, despair, and the memory of the splendid city of Nineveh, lost forever.

In order to experience the complete sequence – which lasts about ten minutes – and to perceive the division of the sounds, it is advisable to circulate through the rooms. Empty at first glance, the exhibition space is in fact saturated, and the distribution of sounds and noises – staged by the artist with the help of speakers and subwoofers – modifies the space as one passes through. It would be

an understatement to define the feelings experienced on hearing *Šuillakku* as ‘uncomfortable.’ It is a cacophony that assaults without respite, made up of music, chants, animal sounds and other noises. Transmitted in a continuous loop, *Šuillakku* is the most complex sound piece that Cuoghi has created to date. The artist has no formal education in music or singing, but, endowed with innate skills in transformation, he always manages to step into the shoes of a professional when creating his projects.

In the process of his researches Cuoghi frequently came across the god Pazuzu, a metamorphic being with both human and animal parts – including the head of a dog, the horns of an antelope and the tail of a scorpion. The final element in the exhibition is a six-meter statue of this demon, based on a fifteen-centimeter bronze statuette in the collection of the Louvre in Paris (which gave its permission to the artist to scan the artifact to create his work). Pazuzu was one of the most feared spirits in the Assyrian pantheon, and images of it were used as amulets or charms – a greater spirit used to drive out lesser ones. Such charms were often placed at entrances and gateways, and Cuoghi has chosen to situate his statue above the entrance of the ICA, looking out over the Mall.

The image of this ancient demon – which has many iconographic affinities with subsequent depictions of evil in western culture – is both ironic and disturbing, completing the artist’s invocation of a civilization in crisis. A journey into an apparently distant time and place, Cuoghi’s project conveys the uncomfortable sensation of a world operating under a fearful irrationality, within which the past no longer seems remote and instead offers a troubling echo of the present.

Marcella Beccaria
Curator, Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli-Turin



Pazuzu at Castello di Rivoli
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Rivoli-Turin
(photograph by Paolo Pellion)

Roberto Cuoghi

Roberto Cuoghi was born in 1973 in Modena, Italy, and lives and works in Milan. Cuoghi studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, graduating in 2001. His solo projects include exhibitions at Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Bergamo (2003), objectif_exhibitions, Antwerp (2006) and Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan (2003 and 2006), while his group exhibitions include Manifesta 4, Frankfurt am Main (2002), *Verso il futuro*, Museo del Corso, Rome (2002), *Venice*, Villa Manin Centro d'Arte Contemporanea, Passariano (2004), T1 Torino Triennale, Turin (2005), 4 Berlin Biennale, Berlin, (2006) and *Sequence 1*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2007).



Roberto Cuoghi in the Assyrian galleries of the Musée du Louvre, Paris (photograph by Alessandra Sofia)

Šuillakku, 2008

Voice, Yemenite horn, ram's horn, Jewish shofar, bamboo flute, double-reed flute, dung chen, launeddas, nay, lyre of Ur, begena, tanbur, kora, santoor, African lute, bronze cowbell, sleigh bells, wind chimes, bull roarers, Indian elephant bell, sanctus bell, ankle bells, wood bells, metal ratte, sistrums, wasamba, pandereta, sege-sege, wood bowls, coconut shell, windblown leaves, Mexican beans, pod, shells, bamboo, metal tubes, funnel, modified shakers, shaker made of bone, kayamba, modified mallets, goat nails, birdcalls, castanets, cymbals, T'ang ku, dhyangro, clashed cymbals, aluminium plate with sizzle, wood plates, semanterion, copper plates, anvil, udu, sandglass drum, bendir, gong, damaru, bodhràn, ocean drum, tin cans tambourine, glass mortar, bronze mortar, broken glasses, guira, zithers takumbe, angklung, temple block, elephant whip, badminton racket, twig brush, marimbula, gopichand, putipù made of African pumpkin.

Hardware: Macintosh G5, Edirol Audio Capture FA-66, Edirol PCR-1, Mixer Yamaha MG-124 CX; microphones: Schertler Dyn-ABG-Set, Sennheiser E 602-II, AKG C1000S, Rode NT5, AKG C2000B; software: Cubase SE.

Installation: MiniMac, external hard disk, monitor LCD, digital optic cables, cables BNC, Behringer Ultrapatch Pro PX3000 Patchbay switch, Behringer Ultragrain Pro-8 Digital ADA8000, M-AUDIO Profire Lightbridge Ardour, loudspeakers, subwoofers.

Courtesy Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli-Turin.

Pazuzu, 2008

Epoxy, solvent varnish, fiberglass, polystyrene, steel.
595 x 296 x 250cm.

Courtesy Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan.

List of works



Šuillakku at Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli-Turin
(photograph by Paolo Pellion)



The studio used to record Šuillakku

Artist's talk

Roberto Cuoghi in conversation with Francesco Manacorda

Thursday 20 November, 7pm,
Nash Room
Admission free, but booking
advisable (call 020 7930 3647)

During the last week of the exhibition, Roberto Cuoghi will talk about his work – and *Šuillakku* – in conversation with Francesco Manacorda (Curator, Barbican Art Gallery, London).

Family programme

Cuoghi's favourite films

Roberto Cuoghi has selected some of his favourite films especially for families and young people, to be screened over the half-term holidays in October.

All screenings are free, in Cinema 2 at 12.30pm. Children to be accompanied by an adult.

Monday 27:

The Exterminating Angel

Buñuel's surreal classic of a bourgeois dinner party gone very, very wrong. 1962, 93 mins, subtitles, 12 certificate.

Tuesday 28:

Legacy: The Origins of Civilization

A journey through time and across continents with Michael Wood, historian and the original thinking woman's crumpet, linking ancient cultures to our modern world. 1991, 52 mins, no certificate.

Wednesday 29:

The Prince of Egypt

The story of Moses as animated by Dreamworks, and with the inspired choice of Val Kilmer providing the voice of Moses. 1998, 99 mins, U certificate.



Thursday 30:

Buster Keaton's Three Ages

Buster Keaton directs and stars in a tale of escapades in the Stone Age, the Roman era and modern times. 1923, 80 mins, U certificate.

Friday 31:

Simon of the Desert

More Buñuel, a brilliant attack on religion with a pious man on a pillar tempted by surrealism, a sharp-tongued dwarf, a devilish woman and New York disco. 1965, 50 mins, subtitles, 12 certificate.



Cuoghi's instruments

Come along and play with some of the instruments that Roberto Cuoghi used to create *Šuillakku*. Instruments are available by appointment only. Please email eduintern@ica.org.uk to arrange a visit.

Selection of instruments used for performing *Šuillakku*
(photograph by Alessandra Sofia)



Pazuzu, 2008
Giclee print with silkscreen glaze

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by an in-depth catalogue on the work of Roberto Cuoghi, published by Skira, Milan. This publication includes an essay by the curator, biographical and bibliographical appendices and images of many of the artist's previous works. The catalogue is available, priced £25, from the ICA Bookshop and via the ICA website.

Limited edition print

To accompany the exhibition Roberto Cuoghi has produced a special silkscreen and giclee print featuring an image of Pazuzu – the demon that plays such an important part in his thinking for the exhibition. For details, or to order a print, call Vicky Steer on 020 7766 1425 or email vicky.steer@ica.org.uk

Produced on the occasion of the exhibition
Roberto Cuoghi: Šuillakku,
Institute of Contemporary Arts,
14 October—23 November 2008

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The exhibition is in the ICA's lower gallery, and runs concurrently with *Nought to Sixty*, a season of solo projects by emerging artists from the UK and Ireland, taking place in the ICA's upper galleries (5 May—2 November 2008).

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All images courtesy the artist and Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan. Installation shots from Turin courtesy Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli-Turin.

Family programme supported by City of Westminster



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