

SOUNDTRACKING A MICRONATION

Neurobash's engagement with Ladonia

[Received January 28th 2019; accepted March 11th 2019 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.13.1.11]

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ABSTRACT: Ladonia, conceived and helmed by artist Lars Vilks since its inception in 1996, operates as a physical and online micronation that is particularly concerned with freedom of artistic expression. While much of the creative activity undertaken in – and in association with – Ladonia has involved sculptural work, the micronation also appointed the electronic music ensemble Neurobash as its official band in 2006-2008. This article explores the ensemble's motivation for engaging with Vilks and his Ladonia project, the musical work created by them in association with the micronation and their subsequent distancing from Vilks's activities. In approaching these topics, the article produces a characterisation of one of the few sustained associations between a creative ensemble and a micronation and the opportunities and issues involved in this.

KEYWORDS: Ladonia, Neurobash, Lars Vilks, micronationalism, micronational cultures

Introduction – Ladonia

As discussed in detail by de Castro and Kober (2019) elsewhere in this issue of *Shima*, the micronation of Ladonia was established by Swedish artist Lars Vilks in 1996 following a sustained dispute with local authorities about the artist's unauthorised construction of large-scale sculptural works on the coast of the Kullaberg peninsula in south-eastern Sweden. Vilks's protracted disputes with local authorities and his identification of the micronation as dedicated to "free expression and art" (Ladonia website, nd) made him something of a *cause célèbre* amongst artists and various anti-establishment radicals in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and also attracted tourists to the remote area, stimulating the local economy in the process (de Castro and Kober, 2019). Amongst the early wave of individuals seeking citizenship and/or status as "nobles" within the micronation were analogue synthesiser composer/performer Ralph Lundsten (whose work is discussed further in Section II) and music has played a continuing – albeit minor – role in Ladonian culture. As Hayward has emphasised, "micronations – like nations themselves – can be understood to be performed by rhetoric, by quasi-legal and administrative practices and/or by symbolism and symbolic acts" that "have a particular strategic value in micronational contexts in signalling the existence of an entity that claims autonomy for itself" (2019: np). Flags and anthems are key aspects of this symbolism (ibid) and – in addition to its flag (see Ladonia, nd2: 6) – Ladonia has two national anthems, one a conceptual work and the other a more traditional musical

piece. The first, by composer J.L Eriksen, is entitled 'Throw a stone for Ladonia' and involves a participant throwing a stone into water and listening to the sound of its impact and its echoes in the physical space the act occurs in.¹ The second is a more traditional anthem comprising two verses sung to an accompaniment written by the state Minister of Health (Ladonia, ndb). The opening verse proudly declares:

*Ladonia, Ladonia,
We hail you ancient shore
Where fishermen for centuries
Have sailed the stormy sea
Ladonia, Ladonia,
You're standing tall and free
No nation could be prouder no man
could ask for more*

While the second verse juxtaposes Latin and English versions of the first six lines of Samuel Francis Smith's American patriotic song 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee':

*My country, 'tis of thee
Sweet land of liberty
Of thee I sing
Land where my fathers died
Land of the pilgrims' pride*

The second anthem has been subject to various interpretations that freely interpret its lyrics and original melody in manners that undercut its pomposity, including Walter Ehresman's 'Ladonia – For Thee I'll Fling' (2014) (a version of which has been posted online accompanying a collage of images of Ladonia together with an invitation to apply for citizenship²). Along with these anthems, in 2006-2008 the micronation was prominently associated with a Swedish electronic music ensemble named Neurobash, whose work is discussed in detail in the following sections.

NB All quotations from founder band members Ober and G-Nome³ reproduced in this article are taken from an email interview with them conducted by Philip Hayward in January 2019 – thanks to both parties for permission to reproduce this material here.

I. Enter Neurobash

Neurobash formed in Eslöv in southern Sweden 2004 and made a number of singles and EPs before being invited to perform in Ladonia at its 10th Anniversary celebrations in 2006 (Figure 1).⁴ As the band have recalled, they grew up in south eastern Sweden with an awareness of Ladonia's status as an idealistic and contested zone:

¹ A performance of this by Vilks is shown in a video posted online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eenMpmciBXA> – accessed 9th January 2019.

² Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOc7ElbliAg> - accessed 9th January 2019.

³ The band members concerned have requested that we use their professional monikers rather than birth names in this article.

⁴ A short 'teaser' sequence featuring the band's music and stills of the performance is online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PDSRSz9qQc> – accessed 9th January 2019.

Everyone had heard the stories about it since childhood. The driftwood construction known as 'Nimis' was legendary in itself...⁵ We were all fascinated by the inventive defiance against different state agencies in relation to the mere existence of 'Nimis' and the nation of Ladonia. As the sculpture is situated in a nature reserve, certainly not everyone agrees that it should be left standing. The debate around it was quite entertaining to follow. And no matter your opinion beforehand, it is quite a fascinating site when you visit... It had all made a strong impression on us... Neurobash has never had a political agenda but we have always been united in our beliefs in the freedom to exercise all forms of art. And Ladonia is like a manifestation of that. Ladonia offers a very creative atmosphere, without any restrictions of what is possible or not. So, of course Ladonia was an intriguing and inspiring phenomenon to us.

Our involvement came into being by fortune... Neurobash was invited to perform at the Biennale in Eslöv, back in 2004. We performed a few songs inside the old water tower that was no longer in use. During the event we heard about the upcoming anniversary of Ladonia and we decided it would be fun to write some music to honour the event. This was an idea that quickly developed into a musically interpreted history of the micronation. Our idea somehow leaked to the people involved in the preparations, who immediately – and to our great surprise – invited us perform at the event. (Figure 1)



Figure 1 – Neurobash performing on a rocky ledge in Ladonia at the micronation's 10th Anniversary celebrations – 4th October 2007 (source: <http://www.ladoniaherald.com/2007/neurobash-national-band/>)

⁵ See de Castro and Kober (2019) for discussion of 'Nimis'.

As it transpired, the ensemble's performance at the Ladonian 10th Anniversary celebrations involved complex logistics:

When we were given the chance to be part of the celebration of Ladonia, we did not hesitate.... There had been concerts held in Ladonia before, but nothing had been performed that required electric amplification.

Due to the remote destination, it was indeed quite an ordeal to get all our gear to the concert venue. We brought two diesel generators, a massive mixing desk, large loudspeakers, several synthesizers, microphones and a lot of other stuff that never had been seen anywhere near 'Nimis' before. The concert itself was held right beside 'Nimis' on a set of large rocks. We even had a camera team in place with three large professional video cameras and their additional gear. It was all brought to the venue by boat, courtesy of the emergency rescue team of the village of Mölle, some kilometres away. Then everything had to be carried by hand from stone to stone along the rough shore. And as if that was not enough, we could not use the boats to transport it all back, due to too large waves later in the evening. So we had to carry everything up the steep hillside. Now, that was quite an effort! We were not finished until the middle of the night, even with the help of the camera crew and even state officials.

Neurobash recorded their Ladonia-themed tracks on a 15-track album entitled *Ladonian Incidents* that was released online by the Electric Fantastic Sound label. The band also produced a limited run CD edition (Figure 2) for 10th Anniversary concert that sold out immediately (with the material not being re-released on CD format since). Two of the tracks, 1980 *The Beginning* and *Hammer-Banana Transformation*, feature Vilks and the final track is a recording of the micronation's anthemic stone in water sound piece. Several of the tracks featured on the album combine sampled digital field recordings and with digitally produced musical elements. The following section discusses some significant examples of the band's creative approaches to "soundtracking Ladonia" and indicates the manner in which the selected tracks work to realise the themes indicated by the titles.

The album's first track - appropriately entitled 'The Beginning' - opens with a brief collage of water sounds, a sustained low-pitched synthesiser drone and percussive sounds. The opening 15 seconds could be interpreted as the sound of a stone hitting the water (a reference to the first national anthem) and then hammering and construction sounds represent the building the first sculptures. The hammering sounds then become a regular pulse that form the rhythm bed of the track, with the number proceeding with a steady 120 bpm tempo and a solid 'four on the floor' kick drum pattern (four quarter notes in a 4/4 time signature) accompanied by a repeating synthesiser bass riff in the key of D minor. The texture is thickened by multiple repeating synthesiser melodies and high-pitched constant 16th note synthesiser arpeggios. The overall effect of the composition and its mixing is to indicate the energy of Ladonia's enterprise. In a similar vein, 'The Founding (ie of the micronation)' begins with a minimalist constant quarter note synthesised bass line that builds to a crescendo before pausing to feature the return of the stone hitting the water sound (again referencing the first national anthem). The track also features a church-like organ sound playing a repeating major chord pattern that gives a somewhat religious tone. This mood is disrupted by somewhat dissonant theremin-like sounds and arpeggiated synthesiser sounds that bubble underneath the grand mood created by the church organ. This track, perhaps more

than any other on the album, captures the mix of quasi-nationalism, disruption and artistic response that is central to the Ladonia project.



Figure 2 – Cover of Neurobash's *Ladonian Incidents* album (2006) (showing a negative image of one of Nimis's towers)

The positive elements of the opener are in contrast to the darker mood of 'The First Fire', which begins with a sustained high-pitched metallic ring prior to the entry of a dark industrial beat (at a tempo of 132bpm) driven by a repeating four bar, constant 16th note, distorted two note synthesiser line. A repeating one bar drum pattern and a high-pitched siren-like sound complete the main sonic texture. The aggressive, distorted sounds and fast tempo of this track reflect the theme of the first arson attempt on Ladonia's wooden sculptures.

The optimistic and celebratory aspects of the two tracks discussed above are offset by 'Seemingly Lost', which refers to the Swedish state's attempts to repress the Ladonia project. The track has two distinct sections and proceeds at a relatively slow tempo (c100bpm), beginning with a gentle, cycling melodic sequence in a major key that evolves into strong synthesised vocal pad sound that is prominent in the mix. The drum pattern in the first section features constant 16th notes on the hi hat and a very syncopated kick drum pattern that is in stark contrast to the solid 'four on the floor' patterns of the opening tracks. The musical elements in the track's first section have a floating and unresolved quality that echo the title. The second part of the number becomes more trance-like, with a more defined drum pattern (beat one and three accented) and with a warbling Roland TB-303 bass line driving the rhythm bed. The overall tone is ambiguous, indicating the unresolved issues suggested by the track's title. By contrast, 'The First Fire' is more overtly referential. begins with a sustained high-pitched metallic ring prior to the entry of a dark industrial beat (at a tempo of 132bpm) driven by a repeating four bar, constant 16th note, distorted two note

synthesiser line. A repeating one bar drum pattern and a high-pitched siren-like sound complete the main sonic texture. The aggressive, distorted sounds and fast tempo of this track reflect the theme of the first arson attempt on the wood sculptures.

Neurobash's close engagement with creative practices taking place in Ladonia – and involving its iconic sculptures in particular – is evident on 'Hammer-Bana-Transfiguration'. As the band have related, the track was inspired by a peculiar incident that occurred when Vilks was working on 'Nimis':

the story behind it was actually brought up by Vilks himself. It captures an event when the artist himself was conducting maintenance work on the grand sculpture – not itself uncommon. After a full day's worth of hammering, replacing drift wood and repairing the structure to keep it intact and safe to climb around on, Vilks returned up the hillside to the mainland. His trusted hammer remained at the site, as always, well hidden among the countless boulders beneath 'Nimis'. But the next day the hammer was gone. Well, not simply gone – but in fact replaced by a banana.

Vilks never found out how that come to pass. As far as he could recall, there had been no visitors around when he left his precious tool. We agreed that is was a fun theme for a song, aspiring to let the imagination roam regarding what really happened to the hammer that turned into a very eatable banana.

The song actually features the artist himself conducting work on his grand sculpture. With a new hammer, should be added. This is part of the soundscape we sampled in Ladonia and became part of the music.

In the track, a mid-frequency sample and hold synthesiser effect provide an overarching rhythmic bed that is supplemented by a two bar repeating syncopated kick drum and bass pattern. Thin synthesiser lead sounds play melodies that outline a C minor tonality. Following on from the above story, the bubbling sample and hold effect offers a listening experience that allows "the imagination to roam". The syncopated kick and bass pattern is analogous to Vilks's hammering on the structure, and more syncopated percussion sounds are heard later in the track that use the actual samples mentioned in the above quote.

The specific event that led to Neurobash's concert in Ladonia is celebrated in 'The Anniversary'. Set at a 120 bpm tempo, the track opens with a repeating constant 8th note synthesised bass sound reminiscent of Vangelis' *Chariots of Fire* film theme (1981). The pulsing synthesiser bass is accompanied by subtle percussion and multiple repeating melodic fragments, outlining a strong G major tonality. A four on the floor kick drum patterns enters in the latter half of the track, and together with the sweet melodic elements, the overall mood is jovial and uplifting, consistent with the celebratory nature of the track's title.

As a collection of tracks, the *Ladonian Incidents* album offers the listener a journey through various moods; from coalescing soundscape of 'The Beginning', or the industrial sounds of 'The First Fire' through to the more reflective, abstract soundscape of 'Storms', or the more triumphant visions rendered in 'The Founding' and 'The Anniversary'. The events marked by each of the track titles offered Neurobash a unique opportunity to create a coherent musical work that connected to an audience through the shared history of Ladonia.

II. National band status

The concert and CD were well received by Ladonian officials and resulted in the ensemble being given the honorary title of 'National Band.'⁶ In addition to the somewhat epic focus of the album, the micronation's national band also produced more affectionate reflections of their head of state, collaborating with vocalist Yamo Kawaih on track entitled 'Ever Ever' based around Vilks's concerns that a knee injury might prevent him from playing soccer in Summer 2007. Neurobash's involvement with Ladonia also led them to commence work with veteran (analogue) electronic music composer-performer Ralph Lundsten, a registered Ladonian "noble", resulting in the production of a collaborative album entitled *The Naked Sun and The Virgin Sun* released on Andromedia Music in 2007. The band have described the project's origins in the following terms:

A storyline came to life with Ladonia in the centre of a coming settling of the solar system and beyond. Old analogue sounds were blended together with modern digital ones in our studios. We recorded vocals in simulated space helmets and we turned the spectrum of the music to create unusual expressions and really pushed the limits of our creativity together.

The band's close association with Ladonia was however short-lived with the micronation's Ministry of Art announcing that the ensemble had ended their collaboration with it in December 2008 (Ladonian Ministry of Art, 2008)⁷. Interviewed in 2019, band members identified various factors behind their disengagement:

In hindsight it is somewhat hard to explain exactly what happened. Our relation has always been a respectful one, and we are very thankful for the opportunity to be a part of the artistry involving Ladonia. But during the years following the 10 year anniversary, interests and ambitions shifted within the band. It was getting increasingly hard to set a clear and common path that we all felt comfortable with. Too many ideas and, onwards, also too much politics, along the struggle between artful expression and acceptance of our audience divided between different genres and scenes we were touching – it all became too much to keep contained within a single entity. Most of the original members decided to take a break or abandon all ongoing collaborations at this point. This was sometime in early 2008. This was quite a dark time for us all. And it took a while for G-Nome and me [ie Ober] to reach the decision to carry on alone. It took us even longer to find out what Neurobash would indeed sound like in the future... we have an uncharted territory to fill... but when it comes to mixing politics and music, we are sure never to go near these realms again.

One factor that contributed to the fragmentation of the band was the involvement of several members in a project that commemorated and reflected on one of Vilks's personal (and

⁶ While Neurobash were the first and, as far as we are aware, only ensemble to be afforded such a status by a micronation, the US band Ariel were announced as "official lords" of the micronation of Sealand in 2007 shortly after releasing an album entitled *The Battle of Sealand* (Immediate Future, 2007). While none of the songs on the album addressed any aspect of Sealand's history or circumstances, the band were invited to give a live performance of the album on Sealand that never eventuated.

⁷ It is notable, as discussed further below, that band members stated in 2019 that their association had never been terminated but had, rather, been less intense in recent years.

most controversial) projects, his depiction of an ornamental *rondellhund*⁸ with the head of the Islamic prophet Muhammed in a series of drawings for an exhibition in a gallery in Tallerud, in south western Sweden. Following the gallery's withdrawal of the sketches shortly before the show opened in June, on grounds of their political sensitivity and potential to provoke violence against the gallery, Vilks submitted the drawings to another exhibition which rejected them on similar grounds, sparking debates in the Swedish media about freedom of expression (one of Ladonia's founding tenets). This debate led a number of newspapers to publish the images in August of the same year, resulting in strong diplomatic complaints from Islamic nations, violent demonstrations in Pakistan, protests by Swedish Muslims and a credible death threat against the artist from an Al Qaeda affiliate (Agence France Press, 2007: online).⁹ One of Vilks's responses was to collaborate on an audiovisual account of the controversy over the drawings in collaboration with two members of Neurobash, who provided a series of new compositions, leading Vilks to characterise the film, entitled *Dogs*, as a "musical," provocatively comparing the project to stage musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Cats* and commenting that "Muhammed is also a superstar in the modern sense of the term" (ABC News, 2007: online)

A spokesman for the band explained their two participants' interest as aligned to Vilks's:

This is really a debate about democracy and censorship of art. We think these are important themes to discuss, hence we have accepted to contribute to the forthcoming musical. (Monitor, 2007: online)

The first and second acts of the musical were recorded and videos were uploaded to services such as YouTube and to a dedicated MySpace page in early 2008 but were withdrawn soon after and are no longer available. The removal of this material was one aspect of a de-intensification of relations between the band and Vilks that included the shutting down of Ladonia's online NeuroArt network, which featured Neurobash material, and all other YouTube and sound material associated with the micronation. A cryptic statement on the Ladonian Ministry of Art website (2008) announced the "The fog is lifting" and ended with the statement that the band "refused to make any comments on these action [sic]" (ibid).

Despite the announcement quoted above, Ober and G-Nome - two members of the band who were not involved in the *Dogs* project, and who maintained the band's identity following the fragmentation - have a different perspective:

Neurobash has in fact not officially lost the title of national band of Ladonia, but it has been a while since we used that title. Although some collaborations ceased back in 2008, not all have. And we have no real reason to distance ourselves from the micronation itself. We have continued to work with selected artists related to Ladonia, most recently with sculpture artist Magnus Petersson. We have written a number of soundscapes and songs during the past years to accompany his suggestive models and hope to continue that collaboration for a long time yet. It might be hard to distinguish in the public eye, but within the band we have always seen Vilks and the micronation as two different entities. 'Nimis' and the founding of Ladonia should of course be

⁸ An ornamental, dog-like form of street-art sculpture that enjoyed a vogue in Sweden in 2007.

⁹ Further death threats followed and in February 2015 shots were fired at a free speech seminar attended by Vilks that left the artist unharmed but resulted in the death of one attendee, filmmaker Finn Norgaard, and injuries to three policemen who attempted to intervene.

attributed in great part to him. But the micronation lives its own life... through its numerous and steadily increasing citizens, subsequent art projects and so on. In our hearts, we are still Ladonians.

Conclusion

While Neurobash's involvement with Ladonia as an official artistic group saw some members become embroiled in a high-profile international controversy that they could not have foreseen when the ensemble first performed live in Ladonia's bucolic enclave in 2006, the philosophical and ideological aspects underpinning the controversy were plainly present from the outset. In Vilks's case, the free-thinking libertarianism that characterised his establishment of a micronation that he perceived to be "at war" with the Swedish state at various points led to his own projection from the localised performance of micronationalism into an international arena where radicalised groups and individuals attempted to silence his voice through violent means. While fully on-board with Ladonia's micronational ideology, which Neurobash's musical performances and recordings served to celebrate and support in the mid-2000s, some members of the ensemble became diverted into (increasingly dangerous) spaces through their association with Vilks's personal projects. In this manner, the performance of micronationality and the band's performance as representatives of a specific micronation illustrated the far more slender bounds between micronational players and the projects of the entities they are involved in promoting and the more deep-seated ideological entanglings of patriotism and politics in established nation-state, religious and/or ethnic activist contexts. Neurobash can, in this manner, be perceived to have engaged with core aspects of Ladonia's principals in a notable manner, celebrating the micronation's history in musical works that leant Ladonia a sonic *gravitas* that has not accrued to other micronations. While only comprising a brief – if influential – moment in the ensemble's own career, the band's Ladonia-themed output in 2004-2008 constitutes a key contribution to the manifestation of micronationality in cultural media.

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