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Editor's introduction: Dreaming of Another Place

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This special issue brings together contributions from presenters at the MeCCSA PGN's 2021 Conference, Dreaming of Another Place, which took place at University of Brighton in September of that year. The articles here are reflective of an academic world in transition; in the second year of changes researchers faced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the authors here reflect on how their practices had changed. However, the articles in this special issue step beyond the pandemic, as well. While some authors changed their creative and research practices, others reflect on changes to places beyond the scope of the pandemic. As such, the theme of 'Another Place' takes on a variety of significant meanings.

This issue also brings together creative practice, theoretical approaches, and different conceptions of 'place'. As a whole, this issue reflects a time of changing environments, changing approaches to our work, and a changed sense of connection. While the 2021 Conference took place remotely, the papers presented and those included here remind us of both our physicality and distance. Place is an inspiration for and collaborator in creative practice for Joe Jukes and Epha Roe, Sarah Keirle, and Simon Olmetti. For Maria Abdel Karim, place is a key component of Nadine Labaki's film *Capernaum* (2018), and Dominic Budhi-Thornton looks at the meaning of place through the lens of the sacred/secular use of Manchester Cathedral. Bethan Prosser documents how her research practice changed as a result of Covid restriction, and how to conduct place-based research in a remote way. Petra Seitz and Joskaudė Pakalkaitė present design as a determiner of place and one's experience within it.

Together, this issue's authors present a series of timely interactions with place and how we, as researchers, can interpret, connect, and shape it.

Cover image: Epha J. Roe, Queen Elizabeth I Oak, Cowdray Park, Easebourne, from the sub-project Arboreal Encounters, 2021; courtesy of the artist.

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‘Queer Constellations’: Reflections on Curatorial and Creative Practice at the Museum of English Rural Life

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from our independent disciplines of queer theory and photography, this paper examines the creative and curatorial practices, and the theoretical frameworks that structure them, in relation to ‘Queer Constellations: Artistic Trespass and Rural Gay Histories’, an art exhibition that took place at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) between July and September 2021.

As the exhibition featured within a museum whose focus is grounded in the practices and culture of agricultural life, our paper explores queerness as an affective form of ‘dis-orientation’ within such spaces, asking the question: is there queerness in rural life? This is then reflected upon through Epha’s practice, exploring how photographs can function as a form of blending of worlds.

KEYWORDS

Queer, Rural, Dis-orientation, Trees, Photography

Introduction

This paper is a co-authored review of ‘Queer Constellations: Artistic Trespass and Rural Gay Histories’, an art exhibition that took place at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), Reading, UK, between July and September 2021. Among the eight artists that took part in the exhibition (James Aldridge, Daniel Baker, Claye Bowler, Gemma Dagger, Emma Plover, Oren Shoesmith, and Eimear Walshe), two PhD candidates at the University of Brighton, Joe Jukes and Epha J. Roe, were involved in its development; Joe as the curator and Epha as a participating artist.

As both of us were part of the exhibition but took on different roles, this paper examines the curatorial and creative processes that took place, a grounding of these processes in theory, as well as reflections on an exhibition that uniquely combined the place of a museum dedicated to the lives and practices of people within rural areas, with our curated space that explored and posed the question: is there queerness in rural life? As both Joe’s curatorial methods and Epha’s creative processes took place independently but also as conversations, and as many of our observations relate to one and other, we have chosen to split the body of this paper in two in order for us to deepen our individual explorations of our related practice. The format is therefore presented as two columns to mimic this relationship and to highlight their inter-relation.

Joe’s section of the paper will highlight aspects of their curation related to queer scholarship and suggest how one might curate queerly or curate objects that queer. In particular, dis-ori-

entation becomes the form that queerness takes in the exhibition space and Joe's text explores how this relates to notions of rurality, as well as how the terms queer and rural are combined and expanded within certain artists' work.

As an exhibiting artist, Epha's section of the paper is dedicated to the creative work exhibited, its background, processes, intentions, and relations to theory. This is then explored reflectively as the work is re-contextualised through an exhibition that considers queerness and rurality, and how one might think of 'queering' as a form of mixing between two seemingly opposing worlds, such as the vegetal and the human, rather than reinstating their differences.

To further highlight the conversational format through which the exhibition was created, reflected upon, and how this paper was organised, we refer to each other, when applicable, with our first names.

Queer Curation

Joe Jukes

To curate is to impose a certain kind of narrative upon a group of things, to order those things (Foucault 2005) and in doing so to shape a certain kind of (exhibition) space such that particular themes become more felt or obvious in its context (Smith 2014; Church et al. 2021). This is the work of juxtaposition and composition, to manipulate artists' work in the service of the imaginary viewer. Because of this, curation runs the risk of enacting a disciplinary function on artworks and by extension their artists by naturalising, reiterating, and consolidating dominant conceptions of 'otherness' through the use of equally dominant and familiar 'exhibitory grammars and articulations' (Toila-Kelly and Raymond 2020, 3; see also Bennett 2018). For instance, curation might group works together under a certain rubric and in doing so flatten or obscure the differences or tensions between them. It risks turning what one knows to be expansive approaches to art, say, photography or sculpture, into exemplar forms of some greater category – for example 'queer art' - even when the artwork itself might be concerned with pushing at the boundaries of that same category: calling an artwork queer, for example, is different to noticing how an artwork queers (Katz and Söll 2018). This is one entrance point to the impasse of what might be termed 'queer curation'.

Arboreal Encounters

Epha J. Roe

Part of the project I submitted for 'Queer Constellations' was a series of tree portraits titled *Arboreal Encounters* (2018-present). In my section of the exhibition these three portraits were assembled in the centre, flanked above and below by their sister projects. *Organic Impressions* (2019), a diptych of two framed photographs made using soil gathered from the roots of the Queen Elizabeth I Oak, the subject and focus of this display, drew the viewer quite literally down into the earth from which the oak tree originated and continues to thrive. Above, sat an early iteration of *Perceiving Phytochrome* (2020) hung frameless and attached to the wall with bulldog clips, a project born from imagining how tree's might 'see' by the use of a protein in their leaves that are used to detect light in the far-red region of the visible spectrum (Micaleff 2011).

In the centre hung the tree portraits: three A4 cyanotype prints on A3 watercolour paper and hand toned with tea, all depicting the Queen Elizabeth I Oak, an ancient, heritage oak tree within the grounds of Cowdray Park, Easebourne (Figures 1 and 4). Tinged with hues of earthy brown that varied from print to print, the use of tea was not just an accidental nod to childhood memories of ageing hand-written documents, but was instead a cheap and preliminary experiment in the effects of

Figure 1. Epha J. Roe's section of the exhibition with the sub-projects *Perceiving Phytochrome*, upper-centre, *Arboreal Encounters*, diagonal row, centre, and *Organic Impressions*, bottom, as part of the group exhibition 'Queer Constellations', Museum of English Rural Life, 2021. (Photo: Epha J. Roe)

As David M. Halperin (2012) has discussed in the context of gay studies, queer might be a term used to describe a particular cultural practice that is slippery, ironic, humorous, radical, and uncapturable. Inasmuch as one would rightly resist the collapsing of some curatorial practices over others into a standardisable practice of 'queer curating', there remains nonetheless a certain generic playfulness (Halperin 2012), a certain perspectival anti-normativity (Warner 2000), that can lend curation a queer ethic or feel. Eve Sedgwick's well-known framing of queer as the space where everything doesn't 'always mean the same thing' (1993, 6) provides a helpful starting point for the queer curator.

What would it mean to bring works together not to provide examples of an artistic style, historical movement, or tradition, but rather to constitute 'an open mesh of possibilities' (Sedgwick 1993, 7)? Such a practice would use, and refuse to resolve, the 'gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' (Sedgwick 1993, 7) in dying prints with a substance derived from plants and trees, known as tannin.

The word 'tannin'allegedly takes its origins from the Mediaeval Latin word 'tannare', derived from the earlier form 'tanna' meaning oak bark (Lewis-Stempel 2018, 54; Miles 2013, 211-15) – a reference to its frequent human extraction from oak trees for the practice of tanning leather to produce wearable clothes and shoes (Miles 2013). Found commonly in the bark, wood, and leaves of trees, tannins function to protect them from fungal or bacterial infection, or from being consumed by insects. When oaks are growing and find themselves under attack from predators, the volume of tannic acid flowing throughout their bodies can prevent excessive, and potentially fatal, grazing (Oakes 2021). In brief, the history of tannin is dually constructed in the vegetal and human realms – helping to both protect the oak and the human from climactic or animal invasions— and is just one example of many in which the oak tree and English cultural heritage are intertwined.

and between the works in an effort to bring about 'a space within which to rethink the very idea of boundaries, within which to explode categories, multiply centers [sic], and begin imagining a desirably queer world' (Hutcheson and Blackmore 1999, 13). I want to take seriously Jack Halberstam's (2005) naming of the queer body as 'out of place', alongside the observation that queer bodies and artefacts have been consistently excluded from the museum space (Sullivan and Middleton 2019; Vanegas 2010). For Halberstam 'what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up [...] alternative relations to time and space' (2005, 2), or as Epha explores in this paper with reference to 'plant thinking', an alternative framework by which to think those relations. Hence, curation might queer precisely when it owes less to the normal ordering of time and space, here, in a museum, and instead begins

Heritage trees, and indeed the concept of them, are arguably another example of this co-construction and in this sense act as a kind of crossover entity; squished together in the cultural imagination as both an artefact of human history and mythology, while at the same time existing independently as a living organism. Their ancient and cultural status are the foundation point upon which even conservation efforts are built, which are themselves arguably informed by folkloric and mythological viewpoints (Forestry Commission 2013; Woodland Trust 2020). As natural phenomena, they also form part of the wider debate on plant-intelligence which, among many other things, explores how plants develop symbiotic relationships with other plant species through the use of mycorrhizal networks (see Wohlleben 2015; Sheldrake 2018; Simard 2021 as examples). However, networks can be thought of not just as physical webs of fungal and vegetal roots, but also as cultural ones (see Actor-Network-Theory scholars such as

Figure 2. Flo Brooks. *War Trousers*, 2020. 186 x 227 x 4.5 cm, acrylic on wood. (Photo: Rob Harris. Courtesy the artist and Project Native Informant, London.)

to bring about dis-order (Halberstam 2020). If queer stories have been and are 'out of place', then the curatorial hand ought to turn place inside-out.

Dis-ordering rural

In curating 'Queer Constellations' I became interested in working with an ethic of disorientation. I was inspired by artist Flo Brooks' 2021 exhibition 'Angletwich' which encouraged me to shift focus away from an ethic of representation or neat visibility. 'Angletwich' comprised several paintings of rural life on cut board that emphasise the daily contests of country life, which are negotiated at all scales. The exhibition platformed not discrete rural identities, but chaos, suggesting that rural places are comprised not just by semiotics and simulacra, but also material flows, labour relations, migration, and the nonhuman environment (Woods 2010). Like Epha's use of tannin in the photographic development process, here the social and nonhuman environment is depicted through the materials by which it is constituted. Brooks' rural is one that is plural (Heley and Jones 2012), and always in motion, a view afforded through the asymmetrical and leaky shapes of the paintings, which in turn speak to the slipperiness of rural as a container of geographic and cultural meaning (McGlynn 2018).

In refusing to condense rural to a neat image of country life, Brooks' paintings instead prise apart the multiple ways in which the rural is written, lived, and felt, producing something closer to an open mesh of possibilities. I therefore wanted to begin curating with the observation that what we know as the rural is a contested space even for those queer people who, like Brooks, reside, work, grew up or create within it. It is with a marginal relation to rural life, like Brooks' queer relation to it, that a view of the whole (hooks 1989) opens up to the outside-d onlooker, a queer orientation to space (Ahmed 2006) that isn't beholden to optimism but operates with a wry pragmatism, as much a friend to abjection as re-imagination.

Latour 2004 for example).

Where heritage trees sit differently to ordinary trees at large is their particular individual histories linked to the human realm and in some cases even to specific humans. One example of this is the naming of the Queen Elizabeth I Oak, so called due to the Queen having allegedly leant upon one of its great boughs while taking aim at a deer within the Cowdray Estate in West Sussex in August 1591 (Questier 2006, 170-174). Of course, it is entirely possible that the oak she leant upon was the other grand oak that stands not ten feet up a small incline from the one that bears her name, or indeed it may have been one that has since passed, or perhaps never was. The mythology, however, persists, and in 2002 she and many other trees of varying genus and age were signposted as 'Great British Trees' by the environmentalist organisation and tree charity, The Tree Council, in order to commemorate the current Queen Elizabeth's golden jubilee. This list, and specifically those that are oaks within England, forms the basis of my research and are the subjects through which my PhD discusses how photography, particularly as a light-based medium, might be able to illustrate how concepts of plant-intelligence can be made both visible and tangible.

Theory and Method

My interest in the study of plant-intelligence is primarily an outcome of my desire to explore how trees might be included in the process of their visual representation. In part, my argument is that if one wishes to examine the concept of vegetal agency it is not enough to view or depict the tree just through photographic means, but to discover ways where the plant is 'invited' to participate in the process of its own imaging (Gibson 2021). In order to do this, one must learn about the subject and overcome what the botanists James H. Wandersee and Elizabeth E. Schussler describe as a kind of plant-blindness. This materialises, they argue, in part due to 'the misguided anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals and thus, as unworthy of consideration', but also more broadly as 'the

Brooks' leaky rural landscapes (Figure 2) evidence a world, perhaps normally or normatively buried under the surface, that is queer itself. A rural defined by dis-order and mobilities helpfully resonates with Massey's (2005, 9) framing of space as 'the sphere of co-existing heterogeneity', a constant emergence. It was in this context that 'Queer Constellations' became an effort to allow different relations to rural, different queer rurals, to co-exist in, through and because of their difference. This was a curatorial strategy to work with incommensurability. I proceeded with an ethic to feature artists whose sense of self resonate with queer, and who live, work, and create rurally. But it was more important to me to focus on their particular perspective on rural, and how their creative practice queers dominant understandings of rural.

Presenting a variety of queer-rural perspectives without justification or explicit linkage, the exhibition space was a product of this co-existing and differentiated queerness, rather than the presentation of some unified queer comment on rurality. The primary inability to see or notice plants in one's environment' (Wandersee and Schussler 1997). In part, this argument is a resistance to notions that plants lack knowledge, independence, or intelligence. Michael Marder in his 2013 book *Plant Thinking*, defines such vegetal modes of thought as 'the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking proper to plants' (Marder 2013) – to imagine plants thinking one must first imagine thought without the same systems, processes, and networks that humans require and associate with thought.

Elizabeth Howie directly addresses these theories in her essay titled 'Contesting Plant-Blindness with Photography', noting that 'counteracting plant-blindness must include both education about plants as well as sensitivity to plants and their biocommunities, and philosophical recognition of the subjectivity and profound otherness of plants' (Howie 2021). To do so, she argues, evokes what Marder refers to as an 'interactive, if not always symmetrical, relationship' (Marder 2013), suggesting that combined philo-

Figure 3. Daniel Baker. *Copse*, left, 2006, 170 x 90 x 50 cm each, enamel on wood; and *Canopy*, right, 2015, 600 x 600 cm, gilded camouflage netting. (Photo: MERL, courtesy the artist.)

challenge in this work was to invite not just a diverse group of rural artists, but also a diverse variety of rurals to include themselves – like Epha's arboreal environs – in the process of their own representation, and in this way to surrender much of my own agency in the curation process.

Artistic Trespass

'Queer Constellations' presented eight differently queered rurals on its walls, with only one of the featured artworks depicting a body explicitly marked as a queer body. It featured video work, sound art, installation, organic matter and photographic prints, quartz, workbooks, and reclaimed wood. By superseding all these works with the title 'Queer Constellations', I wanted a visitor to know that any item, any theme, any medium in the room could reveal a queerness to them, if they wanted or could interpret it as such. This is a condition of queer possibility, which Margaret Middleton (2020) has described as 'an interpretive strategy' for museum curation to uplift the voices of marginalised groups. Middleton highlights how queer might be considered 'inclusive in its ambiguity', involving visitors in the act of curation as 'it asks museum interpreters to question who is considered an expert and what is considered evidence' (2020, 433).

A visitor to 'Queer Constellations' would first see the shininess of Daniel Baker's *Canopy* (Figure 3), an eye-catching gold coloured length of camouflage netting, strung up across one wall and providing a backdrop to Baker's other installation, *Copse*. *Copse* comprises five pieces of signage, made from wood reclaimed from an abandoned Gypsy site, left behind after an eviction. Baker, a Gypsy artist, displays these signs with common countryside messages that denote property and exclusion: 'KEEP OUT', 'PRIVATE', 'NO TRAVELLERS', 'NO ACCESS' and 'NO ENTRY'.

Beginning with these violent invocations and defying the signage by nonetheless entering the exhibition space, I wanted to involve visitors in an act of trespass themselves, to sophical and physical engagement between humans and natural phenomena can create a form of interaction which is itself a form of recognition.

Unfortunately for me, heritage trees raise particular challenges when dealing with direct, physical engagement, as many of them are fenced off to prohibit such close interactions which may contribute to soil compaction or damage to the trunk by animal grazing (see Figure 4 for evidence of this), both of which may seriously harm the tree (Miles 2013; Farjon 2017). Because of this, and as many of the trees are ancient and are therefore more vulnerable than younger trees, some of my photographic encounters with certain trees in my study perform a symbolic interaction where I am unable to gain direct access, or choose not to in order to minimise further impact on the tree's health.

As such, my research gathers together photography, biology, and cultural history in an attempt to place the tree, its organic functions and biology, alongside its human-oriented identity. Methodologically this has produced a series of photographic prints that combine the process of making and bleaching cyanotypes, a method of exposing a photographically sensitive solution to the sun (symbolising photosynthesis), with the extraction of oak leaf tannin for use in toning. By using watercolour paper, each print acts as a kind of semi-permeable membrane, one that contains both a human oriented view of the tree – an image of the tree itself – but also one that is contextualised by, or viewed through, the tannin extracted from the oak leaves. This mixture of photography and organic matter results in a view which is no longer singularly produced by the photographer, but is instead co-constructed by both myself and the tree; one that is guided by and contextualised through an element of the tree itself. Although it feels somewhat superficial to call this mixture a 'collaboration'— the word implying a conscious working together, from both parties, towards a mutually beneficial aim – it may, however, be considered a symbolic form

have them feel, or empathise with, being 'out of place', and for this to happen as a spatial gesture (entering the room by crossing a threshold).

Baker's *Canopy* provides a complementary framing for this entrance. It suggests that in addition to a primary exclusion of some bodies from the countryside, its margins might also be navigated through the interplay of concealment and visibility. Whilst camouflage is typically used to disguise that which is underneath, Baker redeploys the material to expose the very act of concealment as something queer (see Baker 2011), a kind of closet epistemology (Sedgwick 1990). The shininess of the material which typically hides something emphasises the perverse visibility of those who try to hide, and their failures to successfully blend in with their surroundings, as well as reflecting and multiplying the faces of those who look at the piece.

On the one hand, *Canopy* speaks to the experiences of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) communities who have long lived in and across the countryside, yet who are marked with a troubling visibility by non-Traveller cultures. On the other hand, the paradoxical camouflage evokes a rural queer experience, whereby a material that makes everything look the same is reproduced in error, and with a certain joyous visibility. This interplay of exclusion and belonging as experienced by queer GRT populations is something that Lucie Fremlova (2021) has described as non-normative queer belonging and that Baker has reflected on in his own artistic and writing practice (Baker 2015).

In both pieces, and as an opening vignette to the exhibition, Baker offers a way of understanding concealment and failure as a queer critique of normative ways of seeing and being rural, emphasising the persistence of difference in the country in a practice he calls 'dislocation' (Baker 2015, 90). I sought throughout the exhibition to replicate this double gesture. Simultaneously offering: i) an educative lens by which viewers can understand of human/non-human connection.

Despite the fact that the prints displayed in the 'Queer Constellations' exhibition were not toned with tannin derived specifically from oak trees, I have had success with extracting tannin from fallen leaves and branches collected from my home in rural Herefordshire and using it to tone smaller prints. In the coming years this will be developed and applied to larger, A3 prints on A2 watercolour, to emphasise the scale, detail, and individuality of each of the twelve trees I have visited, worked with, and photographed.

Queer Reflections

Although my photographs are specific and contextualised within the grounds of my PhD research, their presence within the Museum of English Rural Life and an exhibition focussed on the lives and experiences of queer people within a rural setting, allowed them to be re-contextualised and interacted with through a queer lens. This re-contextualisation has also caused me to reflect on and notice connections between my creative methods and queer identity, which had until then been buried under the surface.

Some criticism of a body of work which seeks to re-centre the tree within their own visual narrative might well question the use of monochrome, a visual form that removes colour – particularly green – from the natural world, which is arguably one of its defining characteristics. However, representing nature authentically or as it is, if there is such a thing, has never been my intention. To Paul Grainge, black and white's association with old photographs helps to 'configure subjects within a certain depth of historical meaning' which even imbue contemporary photographs with a quality of pastness (Grainge 1999, 384-5). Speaking purely photographically, as black and white images can never be 'truly realistic', to strive for 'superficial realism' is therefore a waste of time (Jussim and Lindquist-Cock 1985, 40). Although my prints are not strictly black and white, they were made on black and white film and were originally intended

Figure 4. Epha J. Roe, *Queen Elizabeth I Oak, Cowdray Park, Easebourne*, from the sub-project *Arboreal Encounters*, 2021. 21 x 29.7cm print on 29.7 x 42cm cotton paper. Tea-toned Cyanotype on watercolour. (Photo: Epha J. Roe)

stand 'other rurals' through the deployment of symbolism, as exemplified here through *Canopy*, as well as ii) generating a new sensitivity, or feeling of 'profound otherness' (Roe, in this article), through which to engage with the artworks and those dominant representations of rurality that they speak to or against. Just as Epha works with plants and organic matter in the process of developing images, the act of trespass that *Copse* stages invites the excluded into conversation from the beginning, after which the other may either haunt or enliven the visitors' experience.

With three pieces to the left of Baker's installations, and four to the right, it was my hope that the visitor found themselves pulled between many ways of viewing the countryside, thereby feeling the incommensurability of these ways of seeing. They might have empathised with some perspectives over others, they might not have 'got it', and ideally, they wouldn't have to be printed as such. Their origins, therefore, still reflect these discussions and don't just contrast notions of authenticity, but actively resist them.

To place these thoughts in relation to conditions of heterotopia (Foucault 1986) and more broader contexts within the discipline of queer ecology (see Mortimer-Sanilands 2005 for an introduction), the monochrome prints could in this way perform a visible sense of otherness (or being 'other-ed') through the absence of colour. There are interesting similarities to be drawn here between the othering of queer and vegetal bodies within places they inhabit and live out their lives, and the historical lack of social and scholarly agency given to both parties. The removal of colour may also be thought about by what Joe refers to in relation to Daniel Baker's *Canopy* installation as the 'interplay between concealment and visibility', something Baker conceptu-

found any perspective particularly satisfying.

I wanted the visitor experience to be one of dis-orientation, a feeling that Sara Ahmed (2006) describes as occurring when one's own orientation to a given referent appears to fail. Disorientation, she writes, is 'a bodily feeling [that] can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground' (Ahmed 2006, 157). Through presenting the great variety of media, locational perspectives, and identities associated with the artworks, I wanted a viewer to feel dis-oriented by rurality, to feel as if they were getting lost, or bewildered. Bewilderment, relatedly, is the affect Jack Halberstam (2020) attaches to dis-order, the moment at which order falls away from spaces, and a feeling of wildness is introduced. In the act of trespass, the wayward visitor needs to look to ephemera and gestures in the exhibition 'as indicators of queerness' somehow beyond the physical plane 'to interpret queer possibility in an imaginative way' (Middleton 2020, 433).

Constellations

Beyond the ordered spaces of the typical curation space, 'Constellations' sought to create the representative but also the affective conditions for heterotopia (Foucault 1986), a space we most definitely inhabit in a given moment, but which draws us out of ourselves, our lives, our time and history (Soja 1996), producing a sense of otherness. This heterotopic effect holds in tension the fiction and the realness of the exhibition space. The rurals presented are experienced as uncanny. They cannot uncritically be evidenced as queer, but could be experienced as such through unseen or hidden aesthetic codes, which might at any rate only be detected after viewing all the pieces together. Indeed, Epha's reflections in this article explore precisely this sense of what they call 're-contextualisation'. This search for meaning in the inexplicit, and the foreignness that I had hoped to imbue in the space between each artwork, constitutes an invitation to cruise this space-of-rural-spaces (Muñoz 2019), a challenge to find the queer between it all.

alises as a kind of queer act (Baker 2011). However, the desire to conceal one thing to make another more visible could also be considered a distinctively photographic act. In removing colour there is an emphasis drawn to form without potential distraction from the various wide-ranging hues of the human and natural worlds (Plicata 2013), monochrome flattening them into a visual form of equality wherein, for example, in Figure 4 the tree and its humanly-constructed fencing are blended together through the use of rippling shadows, rather than visibly separated by their distinctive colours, had they been rendered as such.

In short, the visual narratives of the tree, whether constructed by the human or non-human, are shown alongside each other as equal parts of the story – neither one of them collapsing to give way to the other but instead becoming unified through the use of shadow, form and tone. This creative method of unifying the human with the non-human is explored further within the printmaking process, as organic matter is then absorbed into the physical make-up of the print itself, the visual and material outcome of which is literally held together by its component parts, co-constructed by both the human and non-human.

Can, then, queerness portray a radical sense of blending between worlds as much as it may perform (or expose) a sense of othering? In this sense, my invitation to the Queen Elizabeth I Oak to participate in their own visual representation is also an invitation for our worlds to simulate a kind of blending together. To take the time to learn, to study and to invite the other into conversation – especially the subject of your photographic interest – in the face of dominant narratives, is its own form of queer resistance which may even open up new forms of co-belonging, rather than reinstating pre-existing forms of opposition.

Curating queerly might constitute taking seriously each artwork on its own terms, but also attending to its extraneous ephemera, that is, the affects, linkages, 'entrances and exits' (Berlant and Warner 1998) that spill beyond the artwork, connect or depart from the pieces adjacent or opposite, and that collectively constitute the exhibition space as a 'simultaneity of stories so far' (Massey 2005, 24). For 'Constellations' was not a project that produced a clear or coherent rural, but rather one that staged rurals produced either through exclusion from, or the perversion of, the ideal of rural itself. Its aim was not to display the rural but to ask how we might queer it, or what queers might do with and despite it, even when separated from each other by great distances. The word constellations was included in the exhibition title to explain this long-distance collaboration.

As Jack Gieseking (2020, 946) explores in their work on lesbian-queer geographies, constellations comprise not just stars – which accumulate 'brightness through experiences, ideas, nostalgia, and desire in places, on bodies and/or in memories' - but also the 'lines of network [... and] absences that fill the space between' (942, 950). Using this title to remind the visitor to attend not just to the pieces in isolation, but to the ways in which all eight artists are put in relation and conversation with each other, is to remind oneself that it doesn't matter just where an artist is based, or where rural is, but also how one gets there, where a piece might take them, what connects them to these other rurals and how this particular position relates to other positions in a great queer-rural constellation.

Put in its place

Our following conclusions are written collaboratively and no longer are divided between columns to reflect our individual perspectives.

For all the dis-orientation, queer possibility and nonhuman agencies that came to enliven the exhibition space, the exhibition 'Queer Constellations' still became an attraction in itself. Some visitors came to the MERL specifically to visit the exhibition space, others may have seen it as part of the Museum's whole. Whilst for us, the bringing together of artworks in one space was a starting point to get lost in the category rural, or with rural materials, for others 'Constellations' was a destination or end point. This raises questions about the limits that bound our collaboration.

By inviting those queer or creative perspectives that would otherwise be excluded from the Museum space in to the Museum, 'Queer Constellations' operated with a form of queer resistance that, to paraphrase Epha's earlier remarks, 'took the time to invite the other into conversation in the face of dominant forms of narrative' (Roe this article). The 'Nook' of the Museum made space for the queer imaginary and the material rural to be included in the processes of their own visibility. This could be considered a troubling of the kinds of rural norms that over time systematically 'congeal' (Butler 1990) through Museum practices such as tagging historical ephemera in such a way that records come to indicate little to no queer presences in the countryside (MERL 2021).

We are, however, also mindful of the ways in which this exhibition's politics could be considered self-defeating. Staging queer stories within the Museum implies that the project is somehow restorative, that it aims to lift the diverse experiences of queer people in the countryside up to the same recordable and worthy standard of becoming museum knowledge. In this scenario, we will have unintentionally produced an exemplar form of queer-rural that could be considered representative of its time, despite Joe's noting that a homogenising of these artists and others still would be a mistake, if not a possibility.

Subsequently, we run the risk that the story of this exhibition will itself become absorbed into the history of the institution in which it took up space. In this gamble, 'Queer Constellations', rather than staging an intervention from within the Museum, could be in future resignified as an indicator of the institutions enduring virtuousness, when it comes to telling 'other' rural stories, which would be to overlook how the Museum and others like it might historically have produced that very 'otherness' to begin with.

Constellated consistencies

Between our individual writings above exist several points of resonance. Indeed, the benefit of writing collaboratively in this way is that we have been able to notice consistencies in our thinking, and more beneficial still, how these consistencies can arise out of very different approaches.

JJ: Epha's practice constitutes to me an education on how plants live (making both their form and their vital processes visible on paper), as well as a burgeoning sensitivity to 'co-belonging', appreciating the qualities that plants share with us – symbolically, organically – and that they do not. Seeing that plants exist as 'human history and living organism[s]' (Roe this article) without destroying that very concept 'plant' is an effort I hope 'Constellations' replicates with rural. What we know today as rural is a human achievement, and has changed in meaning over time in relation to different socio-economic modes of production (Woods 2010), but it is also a

vital ecosystem, as evidenced in Brooks' 'Angletwich'.

Epha describes the watercolour paper of their prints as a semi-permeable membrane, through which a perhaps-familiar image of a rural scene is developed through the 'human-oriented' practice of image-making. Yet because of Epha's use of tannin-wash in this process, the material oak is also the substrate through which this image must pass and be constituted by, a radical contextualisation that at least recognises, if not yields, agency to nonhuman matter. It strikes me that this is the exact outcome of my curation also.

Only by nestling in the comfortable and authority-bestowing environment of the Museum of English Rural Life could such familiar and human-oriented images of rural life be displayed and played with by the contributing artists. These artists, in turn, use their own experiences of queer rural life, through which to expose a new rural, one suffused in queerness, circuits of desire and subjugating social exclusions. In other words, queer does the recontextualising work of the tannin in Epha's prints, and in this way bends the lessons of *Plant Thinking* into a new shape.

Embodying the act of trespass, adopting a cruise methodology, curating for dis-orientation, 'Constellations' sought precisely to promote the kinds of 'non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking' (Marder 2013) necessary to take visitors away from those images of rural life they already know and into new queer worlds. Rather than present or explain queer rural histories, what does it mean to resist the representational function of the museum space and in its place 'create a form of interaction which is itself a form of recognition' (Roe this article)? Does this recognition enact a kind of justice, or reconciliation?

ER: The word dis-orientation has punctuated our paper as a phrase to discuss a deliberate curatorial method, a kind of creative mirror for how queer people might feel growing up in the countryside, or indeed the feeling they may have when interacted with by those who, perhaps, find their presence dis-orienting. This is exemplified within the grounds of the Museum of English Rural Life, due to its exploration of the 'skills and experiences of farmers and craft-speople, past and present [...] and the ongoing relevance to the countryside to all our lives' (MERL 2022). Of course, this specialism does not necessarily imply the absence of queer people. In a blog titled 'Uncovering LGBTQ+ Rural Histories in Archives', written by collections researcher Tim Jerrome and produced alongside and in relation to the art exhibition, evidence of queer people within rural areas before the de-criminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 was present in the historical records of the museum, however only in reference to their crimes.

As a means to shift the perspective on this, the museum's response was to search for objects in their archives that related to specific men who were charged and/or sentenced for homosexuality, invoking their stories through artefacts that symbolised their rural occupation in an order to demonstrate, in the museum's own words, that 'these men were more than just a conviction. They were ordinary people living ordinary lives' (Jerrome 2021).

This placement of the exhibition within MERL, its interaction with the museum's re-contextualised objects as symbols of the occupations of rural gay men – a reference to the past experiences and challenges of living rurally and queer – alongside the many iterations of, and interactions with, what it means to be queer and to live rurally, exemplify the exhibition's focus on constellations. To think of queerness as itself a constellation, or what Joe describes as 'what queers might do with and despite of [the rural], even when separated from each other by great distances' (Jukes this article), is to define queer by its heterogenous or diverse qualities.

This speaks to the innate plurality of the experience of queerness which exists even when the boundaries are specified within a rural context. In short, queerness is never bound by one thing, however it has bound us together.

For 'Queer Constellations' it could be said that we asked the audience to both trespass and be trespassed. In contrast to urbanity, rural life can be felt as quiet and expansive and in that beholden to endless, unfolding creative opportunity, uprooted from feelings of social surveillance experienced in the town or city. The countryside in this sense is never just the backdrop to queer life, but a participant in the constant unfolding and discovery of it (Ingold 1993). In part, evidence of this unfolding was revealed upon the walls, in vitrines, in objects and ideas, and as such has acted as active invitations into different modes, models and migrations through queer and rural life.

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Our Ancient Woods: The Animal Voice Within The Compositional Process

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ABSTRACT

Our Ancient Woods is an electroacoustic work created using recordings of past and present British wildlife. This article documents the use of animal vocalisations and behaviours within this work in order to create new sonic means for conservation awareness, public engagement, and nature connection.

Our Ancient Woods is available at https://www.sarahkeirle.co.uk/our-ancient-woods

KEYWORDS

Nature connection, Conservation, Animals, Electroacoustic composition, Transmodal perception

Introduction

The electroacoustic work *Our Ancient Woods*, composed using animal vocalisations and behaviours, was created to engage listeners with British wildlife of the past and present in an attempt to facilitate a greater connection to nature.

The use of animal vocalisations and behaviours has a long history within human culture. Songs based on animal calls and movements are widespread across the world and may form the earliest musical systems of some cultures (Keeling 2012). References to animal calls can be found throughout literature (De Bruyn 2021); composers from Janequin to Messiaen have tried to reproduce birdcalls with instruments (Ensen 1985; Cheong 2008); recordings of animal calls have featured in orchestral music, pop music, and musique concrète (Brumm 2012), as well as more recent electroacoustic work (Doolittle 2008). Acoustic ecology and soundscape studies often use animal vocalisations and my compositional practice is firmly rooted in these traditions; *Our Ancient Woods* focuses on 'the interrelationship between sound, nature and society' (Westerkamp 2002) and shares the 'essence' of soundscape composition – the 'sonic transmission of meanings about place, time, environments and listening perception' (Westerkamp, 1999). *Our Ancient Woods*, however, cannot be described as a soundscape; instead of the 'musical essence' emerging from or being discovered within the recorded sounds, the aesthetics have been designed and inspired by the animal body and its movement, using tools from Denis Smalley's 'Spectromorphology' (1997) as a guide.

Use of Spectromorphology

As Smalley states, 'descriptive and conceptual tools which classify and relate sounds and structures can be valuable compositional aids' (1997, 107). I have not explicitly mapped animal behaviours and movements onto transformed sounds using these tools, but instead exercised my 'spectromorphological awareness' while composing; I used the tools as a reference while I

was manipulating the sounds and structuring the composition.

By using animal behaviours as an imagined cause for certain sounds, I facilitate the listeners' engagement with 'source bonding', described by Smalley as 'the natural tendency to relate sounds to supposed sources and causes, and to relate sounds to each other because they appear to have shared or associated origins' (1997, 110).

Smalley also states that the word bonding 'evokes a binding, inescapable engagement or kinship between listener and musical context' (1997, 110). This is especially relevant for *Our Ancient Woods* as it was composed to engage people with the musical context – nature in Britain and its varied inhabitants across the ages.

Nature Connection

The best way to engage listeners with the natural world is to create and nurture emotional bonds (Rapp et al. 2018). Evidence suggests that it is not simply time spent in nature that increases one's nature connection, but rather reflecting on the emotions that nature evokes (Passmore 2017). While the study of emotions towards nature is fragmentary (Jacobs and Vaske 2019, 65), research shows that a feeling of 'nature-connectedness', or an emotional bond with nature, can encourage nature protective willingness (Kals, Schumacher, and Montada 1999, 180). There is a strong causal link between a feeling of nature connection and nature-friendly behaviours (Richardson et al. 2020, 823); people are more likely to engage in difficult or inconvenient behaviour for causes that they care about (Frantz and Mayer 2014, 86), and since a considerable amount of decision-making about our behaviour is driven by emotions rather than rational thought, it is vital to 'go beyond filling information gaps to connect emotionally with target audiences' (Veríssimo, Tully, and Douglas 2019, 343). It has been argued that emotional affinity is as powerful as indignation and cognitive interest for predicting nature-protective behaviour (Kals, Schumacher, and Montada 1999, 197); these three methods – creating and nurturing emotional affinity towards nature, inspiring cognitive interest in the natural world, and stimulating emotional indignation about insufficient nature protection – have influenced the sonic content and compositional methods of *Our Ancient Woods*.

Emotional affinity towards nature can also improve human wellbeing. There is a strong relationship between nature-connectedness and positive affect (Clayton and Meyers 2015, 353), with consistent evidence showing the important role nature has in maintaining our mental health (Richardson et al. 2021, 8). The Biophilia hypothesis suggests that our wellbeing depends to a great extent on our relationship with the natural world (Wilson 1984). Studies show that even virtual experiences of nature have positive effects on mental health (Clayton and Meyers 2015, 349); evidence shows that auditory experiences of nature, such as listening to birdsong, can distance listeners from stress or cognitive demands (Ratcliffe, Gatersleben, and Sowden 2013, 226). Sonic explorations of real or imagined natural environments and creatures, like in *Our Ancient Woods*, therefore have the potential to grant similar stress-reducing and restorative benefits as physically engaging with the natural world.

Transmodal perception

In-person experiences with nature are powerful for creating and nurturing emotional bonds and improving wellbeing in part because they engage all five senses (Kals, Schumacher, and Montada 1999, 183); 'contact' – engagement through the senses – is one of the five pathways to nature connection outlined by Ryan Lumber (2016). A multi-sensory encounter with an animal, where one is invited to be physically close to or touch the animal, makes one 'likely to learn more, remember more, and make a personal connection that can spark interest, understanding,

and compassion' (Rapp et al. 2018, 411). These experiences, however, are limited by many factors, including location, accessibility, expense, season, time of day, the cautious or disruptive behaviour of both people and wildlife, and species extinction.

The use of digital technology to explore the natural world and conservation issues has the potential to facilitate creative experiences that would be difficult to achieve in the physical world (Ahn et al. 2016, 400). For example, using acousmatic compositional methods to create an experience of the natural world allows for the construction of impossible sonic environments that no longer exist in nature and cannot, therefore, be experienced physically nor recorded for soundscape performance and dissemination (Fischman 2008, 111). Digital technology also allows for the reduction or removal of human-generated sounds, which continue to spread to even remote natural areas (Dumyahn 2011, 1328), through careful editing, noise-reduction software, or even masking with other layers of sound.

The transmodal potential of sound, especially within acousmatic music, makes it an ideal medium within which to create virtual experiences of the natural world. As Smalley states, 'although acousmatic music may be received via a single sensory mode, this does not mean that the other senses lie dormant; in fact they spill over into sonic experience' (2007, 39). Acousmatic music's capacity for the evocation of image especially is recognised as 'a cornerstone of the medium's aesthetic potential' (Young 2007, 25). Transmodal perception is also deeply connected to how listeners experience space; our sense of sonic space is affected not only by spectral range, or how closely spectromorphologies seem to act to our ears, or how we respond emotionally to the sound, but is closely linked to our corporeal, multi-modal perception of the physical world (Demers 2010, 118).

Our Ancient Woods utilises electroacoustic music's potential for transmodal perception through the careful creation of sonic materials, spatial design, and even the choice of source recordings – animal sounds are clearly source-bonded and therefore not only infer spatial attributes (Smalley 2007, 38) but are also strongly related to visual and even tactile sensations due to our personal experiences with pets and wildlife.

Methodology

Our Ancient Woods was composed and disseminated using the following methodology:

- Recording: record a catalogue of sounds from animals at Wildwood Trust, a centre for the conservation of past and present British wildlife, experimenting with directional and in-enclosure recording techniques, noting the perceived movements and body language.
- Composition: develop these sounds in the studio, using the physical movements and behaviours of the animals as inspiration, with the aid of concepts explored by Smalley in 'Spectromorphology' (1997).
- Listening: explore the way that animal sounds and movements within the composition activate transmodal linking and contribute to how listeners experience space.
- Dissemination: Share and perform the composition both online and in real-world performance contexts and find a way to analyse whether people feel a greater connection to nature and/or desire to support current conservation efforts after listening.

Recording

Our Ancient Woods was composed using a library of sounds recorded during seven days of fieldwork at Wildwood Trust in November 2020. This sound library contains sounds from 27 species, both vocal calls and movement sounds, as well as 'ambience' recordings of rain, trees, and wild birdsong. During my fieldwork, I also took notes on the animals' behaviour and movement to use as an inspiration for gestures, textures, and structures during composition, as shown in Table 1. Undertaking recording fieldwork personally, instead of using pre-recorded sounds, also enabled direct experience with the spatial and temporal qualities of the recording location – Blean Woods, Wildwood Trust – which helped the subsequent work to be 'geographically anchored' (Keller 2006).

Animal Species	Behaviour Notes
Arctic Fox	Sleeping curled up in a ball. Sudden jump. Play and Noises when waiting for food.
Barn Owl	Stillness. Sitting tucked together, up high. Flight is perfectly horizontal, silent, and ghostly.
Boar	Nosing through the mud, lying down.
Common Crane	Calling in pairs. Elegant walk. Fluffing up feathers.
Eagle Owl	Stillness while sleeping. Head all the way round when I walk past. Responds when you hoot at her. Fluffing up feathers.
Eurasian Elk	Approaches when you pass. Slowly moving and chewing, eating leaves. Responds when you talk to her.
Eurasian Lynx	Lying hidden, waiting. Pacing in circle and growling. Watching warily, short tail moving.
Eurasian Otter	Sleek in water, jumping in after food. Noises when waiting for food. Emerges from the water, then re-submerges.
European Bison	Standing and watching. Slow and heavy walk. Huff and growling at me. Messy eaters and drinkers.
European Brown Bear	Adults are grumpy and sleepy. Lie down often. Growl because tired. Cubs are energetic, playing with each other. Running around in circles.
European Polecat	Curious, running around, following me. Play in the leaves, climbing and falling.
European Wildcat	Stretching. Pacing in circles when I approach. Meows at me.
Fallow Deer	Carefully watching, running at slightest movement. Skittish.
Grey Wolf	Padding around. Play bow, chasing each other, jumping over each other. Warning huff when matriarch sees me. Matriarch growls at her children.
Konik Horse	Approach when I walk towards them. Curious, snort at each other. Grazing.
Little Owl	Watching carefully, flies away when I approach.
Pine Marten	Very curious, erratic movements; running, climbing, jumping.
Raven	Sits and caws. Flies to new perch, sometimes to the ground. Rubs beak against wood, holds mate's beak.
Red Deer	Calm, watching carefully. Stag in rut charges at me and chases the does.

Red Fox	Sitting curled then running suddenly, staying hidden.
Red Squirrel	Hiding, then eating. Jumps towards me, curious. Short, sharp movements.
Red-Billed Chough	Flying all over the place.
Reindeer	Calmly grazing.
Rook	Sitting still, calling when I approach.
Soay Sheep	Chasing each other. Approaches when I walk past. Grazing.
Tawny Owl	Sleeping calmly.
White Stork	Elegant walk.

Table 1. Wildwood Behaviour Notes.

Composition

The sonic transformations undertaken on recordings from the sound library were inspired by the notes on animal movements and behaviours in Table 1, using Smalley's tools in 'Spectromorphology' (1997) as a guide, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Some behaviours have been translated literally into sound (for example, the water emergence and submergence at 6:05 is a sonic recreation of the otter's movement) and other behaviours have been translated more abstractly during sonic transformations. An example of this methodology, using the barn owl, can be seen in Figure 2.

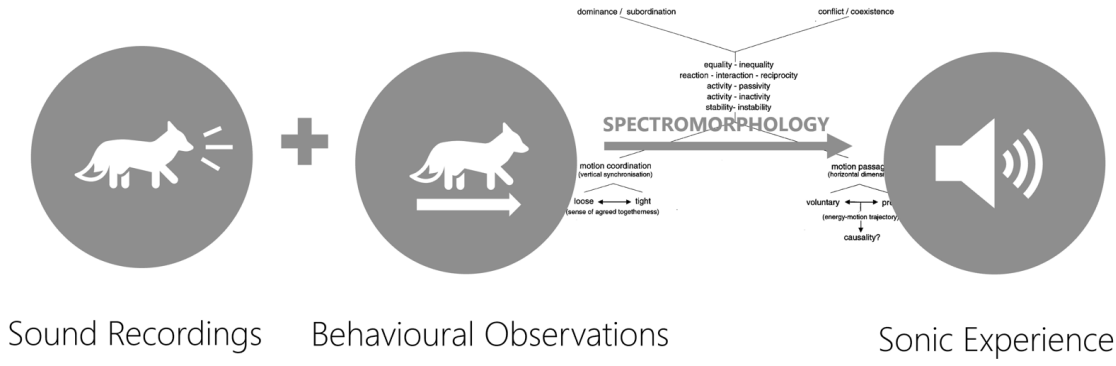


Figure 1. Composition methodology of *Our Ancient Woods.*

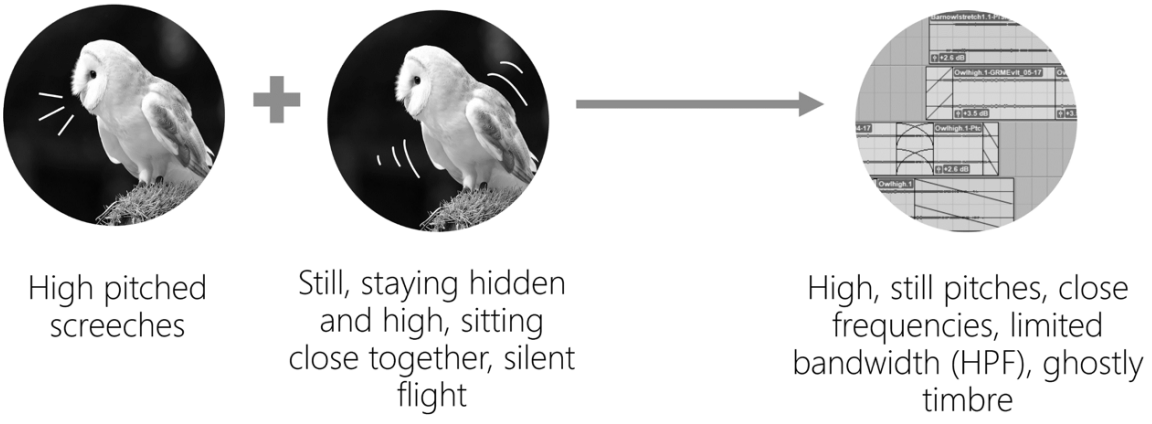


Figure 2. Composition methodology for the barn owl in *Our Ancient Woods*.

There are certainly more instances of sonic-behavioural linking in *Our Ancient Woods* than are stated below, but this article will only explore the processing that was consciously chosen during composition. Only the most relevant of Smalley's tools were used as a guide during the compositional process.

Motion and Growth Processes

> Quite often listeners are reminded of motion and growth processes outside music and the terms selected are intended to evoke these kinds of connections. (Smalley 1997, 115)

Several of Smalley's motion and growth processes, displayed below in Figure 3 and Figure 4, can be linked to animal behaviours I observed. The underlined words in these two diagrams were used in combination with animal behaviours to create sonic transformations, as shown in Table 2. The 'Time Featured' column of Table 2 marks one or two clear examples of the process in *Our Ancient Woods* – they are by no means the only instances when the process is featured in the piece.

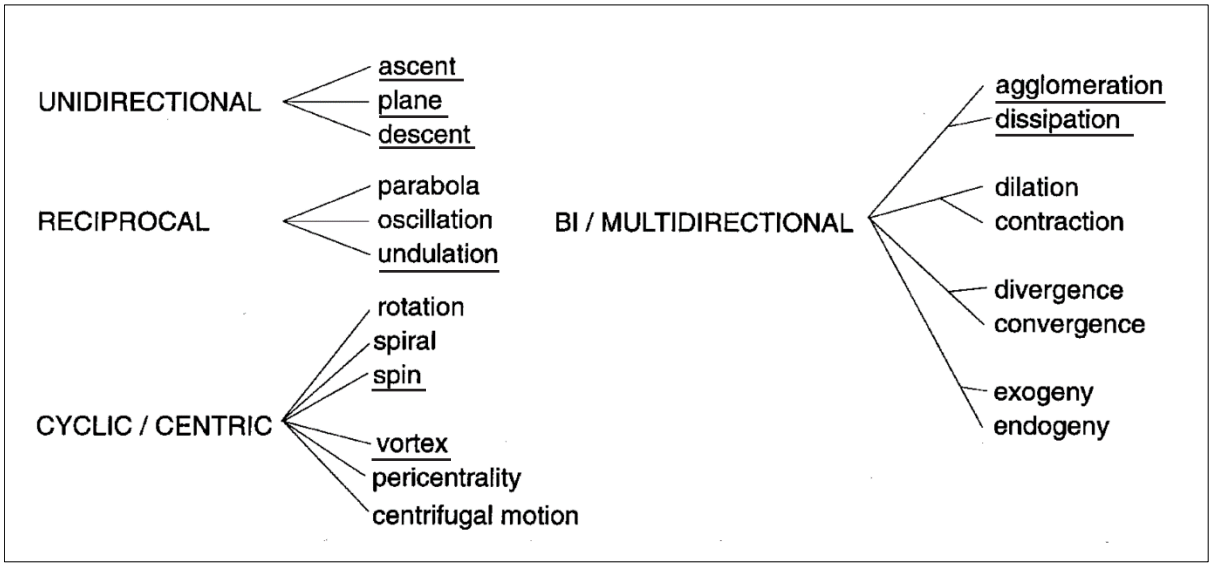


Figure 3. Tools used from Smalley's 'Motion and growth processes' diagram (1997, 116).

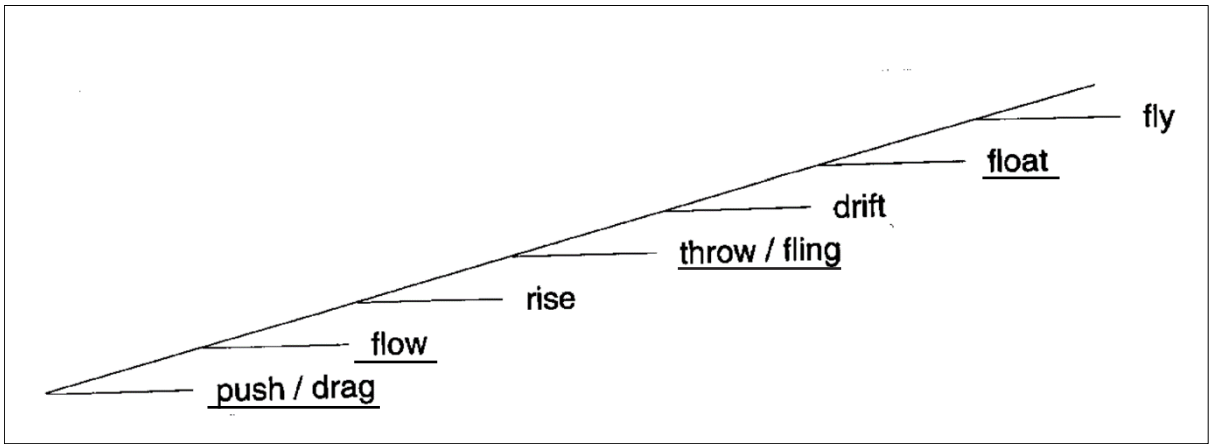


Figure 4. Tools used from Smalley's 'Seven characteristic motions' diagram (1997, 117).

Motion/Growth Process	Animal Behaviour	Sonic Manipulation	Time Featured
Ascent + Fling	Raven flying upwards to new perches.	Sounds of flight EQ'd to create the effect of sudden ascent.	0:37
Plane	Barn Owl flying horizontally.	Stable pitches created from barn owl screeches.	0:00
Descent	Raven landing on the ground.	Pitched processing to create sonic descent.	4:40
	Bear lying down.	Bass descending in pitch made from bear growls.	7:50
Undulation	Otter emerging from the water and then submerging.	LPF applied to recordings of otter moving and squeaking in water to emulate emergence and submergence.	6:05
Spin	Sheep chasing each other in circles.	Spinning doppler effect and tremolo applied to sheep and lynx calls.	5:10
	Lynx pacing in circles around enclosure.		
Vortex	All Animals gather wildly around keeper when they are fed.	Vortex of animal calls to suggest overabundance of life surrounding the listener.	0:12, 7:52
Agglomeration	Eagle Owl gaining size when fluffing up feathers.	Agglomeration of grains made from eagle owl calls, increasing in size.	2:13
Dissipation	Fox disappearing into the undergrowth	Movement sounds granulated and processed to dissipate	3:37
Push/drag	Boar and Elk wading through mud.	Unprocessed mud footsteps to create sense of environment.	1:45
		Processed to create short 'stuck' noise within a spectral enclosure that can't escape.	2:25
Flow	Otter's smooth movement in water.	Flowing sounds of moving underwater using otter recordings.	0:29
Float	Little owl flying away, other birds graceful flight	Removal of all low-frequency content, repetition of little owl screeches and other bird sounds over high-pass-filtered pitches	8:30

Table 2. Smalley's terms for motion and growth processes combined with animal behaviour as inspiration for sonic manipulations.

Behaviour

> The metaphor of behaviour is used to elaborate relationships among the varied spectromorphologies acting within a musical context. (Smalley 1997, 117)

Smalley's behavioural diagram (1997, 119), shown in Figure 5, contains several references to relationships I observed between animals and others of their own species, different species, and even human beings, as shown in Table 3.

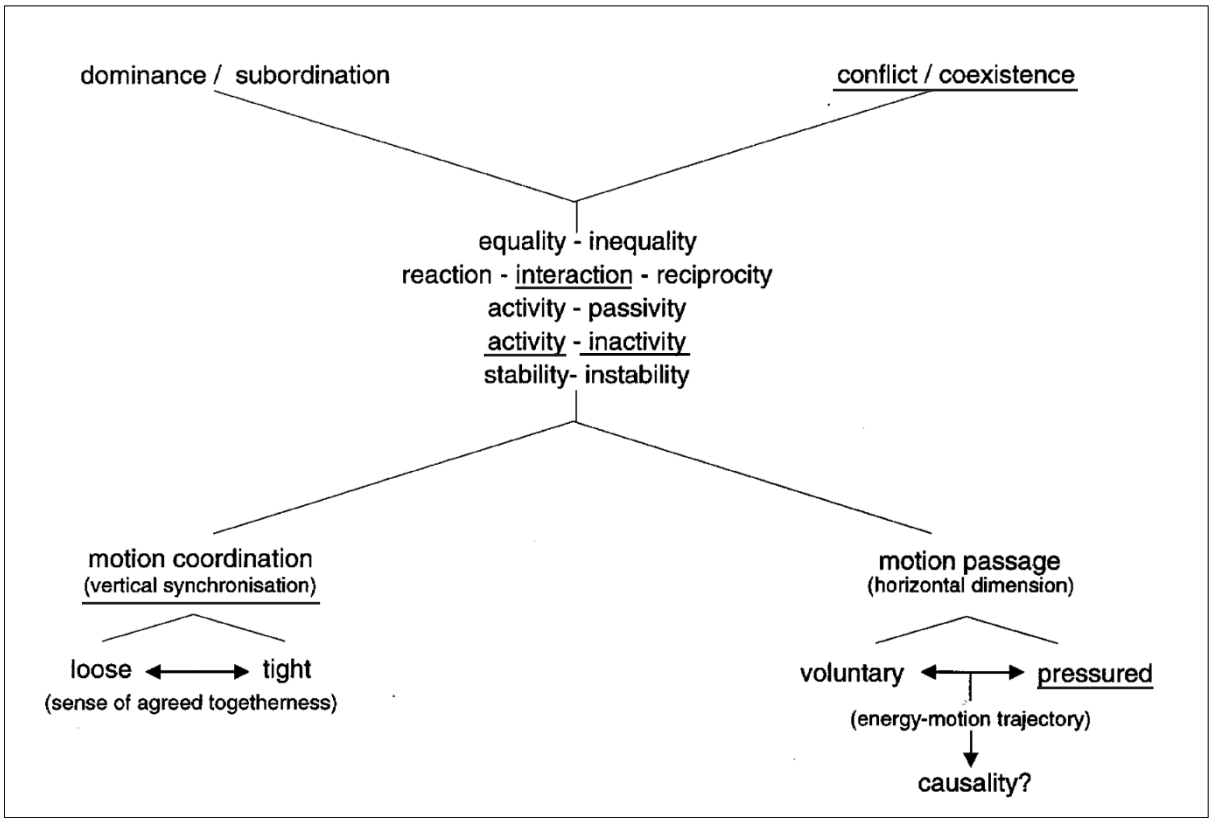


Figure 5. Tools used from Smalley's 'Behaviour' diagram (1997, 119).

Sonic Behaviour	Animal Behaviour	Sonic Manipulation	Time Featured
Conflict	Red Deer stag in rut charges and chases the does.	Stretched and processed to create dissonance and tremolo	5:40
	Wolf growling at her children.	Pitch-shifted growls to increase sense of aggression	5:37
Coexistence	All Wetland birds coexist in the same enclosure.	Combining raw wetland bird recordings together to create wetland environment.	6:08

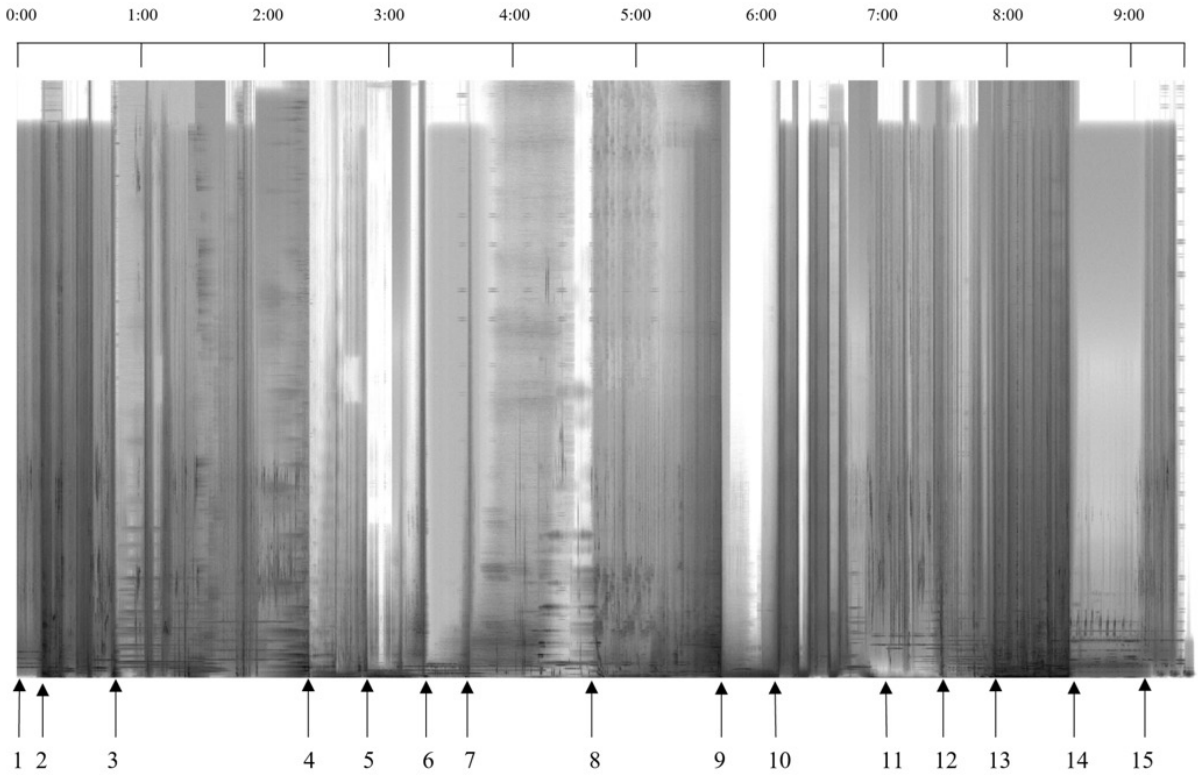
Interaction	Horses stomp and make noises at each other.	Placement of unprocessed recordings; for horses, interaction between each other, and for the elk, interaction between her and the listener, by having her approach before 'speaking'.	7:41
	Elk interacts with people, responds when you talk to her.		1:45
Activity	Pine Marten and Polecat running, climbing, jumping, making erratic movement	Foregrounded, unprocessed movement sounds	0:00, 9:16
Inactivity	Barn Owls sitting still for most of the day.	Stable pitches created from barn owl screeches.	0:47
	Bears preparing for torpor, very lazy.	Rooted bass made from bear growls	2:45
Motion Coordination	Cranes call in mated pairs.	Two processed pitches, made from the calls of a mated pair, played one after another in the same motion coordination as the unprocessed crane calls	3:15
Pressed Motion Passage	Otters jump into water to follow food given by keepers.	Placement of wolf growls and otter sounds to sound like the otter/listener is being chased into the water	5:37
	Wolf matriarch ordering around other wolves.		

Table 3. Smalley's terms for behaviour combined with animal behaviour as inspiration for sonic manipulations.

Listening

> Welcome to Britain, thousands of years ago. Walk through *Our Ancient Woods*, our rivers and wetlands, our open meadows, and dense forests, all thick with the sounds of nature. (*Our Ancient Woods* Programme Notes 2021)

Space is one of the most significant elements of acousmatic musical experience, whether listeners are familiar with the medium or not, and there is evidence to suggest that spatiality plays a central role regarding empathy processes during listening (Ratti 2017, 403). Space was therefore a fundamental parameter to consider during the composition of *Our Ancient Woods* – an exploration of the different spaces travelled through in the work is shown in Figure 6. Many spaces are designed to some extent through spectral range and can be clearly seen on this spectrogram.



1. Open space, foregrounded movement.
2. Surrounded by animals, moving terrains swiftly; from ground to water to air.
3. Stillness; birds, quiet stream, some rain, mud.
4. Low-rooted section, birds and other higher frequency animal sounds disappear.
5. Undergrowth space enclosed by bass and LPF filter.
6. Bass removed; feeling of being stuck in mud, stillness, spectral enclosure.
7. Abstract open space, foregrounded microsound.
8. Down to rooted bass; trees and birds to make a woodland. Other animals become clearer and louder, emerging from the trees, creating conflict.
9. Chased underwater; LPF to imitate underwater sound.
10. Emerges from water to hear wetland animals, then submerges again, finally emerging and walking through mud.
11. Foregrounded soft movement and bird sounds, hidden forest.
12. Space begins to open as bigger grassland animals appear.
13. Dense spectral space as listener is surrounded by moving animals.
14. Sudden spectral translucency, birds masked by filters, moved into hidden canopy.
15. Clearer movement sounds emerging into open space, until finally moving down to the ground.

Figure 6: Spectrogram (all channels mixed) of *Our Ancient Woods* showing the structure of spaces within the work.

Many of the sonic spaces in *Our Ancient Woods*, as mentioned in the programme notes, are strongly associated to the physical spaces animals inhabit in the real world, due to the fact that animal calls – and even some animal movement sounds, such as a bird flapping its wings – are so clearly source-bonded. Placing unprocessed animal sounds within a composition therefore has the potential to conjure images of the environment in which that animal usually resides; for example, the duck quacks at 6:10 create the image of wetlands and a horse whinny, such as at 7:33, may invoke the image of fields or grasslands. Combined with 'ambience' recordings of specific environments, like trees creaking or mixed birdsong for a wood or forest, this evocation of a natural space causes automatic transmodal linking (Smalley 2007, 39). Creating a sonic woodland space may cause transmodal responses such as imagining shades of green, the texture of grass and bark, feelings of exertion due to walking, etc., even though these senses are not directly activated. We recall and psychologically experience these physical actions due to *functional equivalence* – 'the close resemblance between the neuronal apparatus involved in actions and/or perceptions and in the imagined actions and/or perceptions' (Godøy 2004, 56).

The clearest example of using space and transmodal linking in *Our Ancient Woods* is the underwater section that begins at 6:05. The sonic content – otters swimming, with low-pass filters applied – creates an underwater space and automatically triggers transmodal linking; the spectral enclosure of low frequencies while underwater, plus the context of the sound of splashing preceding this section, causes the listener to make connections to their own experiences underwater. The longer the sounds remain low-pass-filtered, the greater the stress for the listener, as they may recall past experiences of holding their breath. When the sonic vantage point moves out of the water, this space is created not only through the re-emergence of high-frequency content, but through the presence of duck and goose calls and otter squeaks. Listeners may also connect this emergence with the physical relief of taking a breath, the release of pressure on the ears, and the reappearance of clear visuals.

Transmodal perception and proprioceptive experience also helps listeners to deduce the energy behind gestures and movements (Smalley 1996, 84). *Our Ancient Woods* features many unprocessed soft movement sounds, sometimes foregrounded, like the footsteps in leaf litter at 0:08. We know through our embodied knowledge of effort, energy, and tension that gentle sounds like these are made through gentle movements (Barreiro 2010, 39); making these soft movement sounds more foregrounded than in other listening situations – such as real life, where it is unlikely a wild animal would allow a human close enough to hear their footsteps so clearly – gives the impression of physical closeness to the listener. In addition, animal movement sounds are often soft due to an attempt to be secretive, so foregrounding these sounds gives the impression of witnessing something intimate and usually hidden to humans. (Sonic intimacy is often achieved through microphone proximity, so it was useful that many of the animals were close to the microphone during the recording process, and that the microphone was directional.) These gentle movement sounds resemble microsound, where sound particles are so short that their pitch becomes unclear (Thomson 2004, 207) suggesting closer links to physical sensations and touch than traditional notes (Demers 2010, 75). This heightens the sense of physical closeness and intimacy; touch is 'the most personally experienced of all sensations' and is often associated with intimate encounters (Hall 1966, 59).

Dissemination

Our Ancient Woods has been featured at various festivals, exhibitions, conferences, and albums both in the UK and abroad. (A full list of these performances can be found in Appendix 1.) The

next step is to measure changes in nature connectedness after listening to *Our Ancient Woods*. This will be done using an online survey during 2022 and 2023. The survey will use themes set out by the Nature Connection Index (NCI), a short and simple nature connection measure created to be clearly understood by both adults and children (Hunt et al. 2017). The NCI focuses on affective relationships with nature rather than cognitive evaluations (Richardson et al. 2019) and research shows that it can be used to detect an increase in nature connection by measuring pre- and post-intervention (Richardson et al. 2018).

As well as quantitative data concerning nature connection, participants will be asked to provide written qualitative data summarising in three words what they enjoyed or find most engaging about the piece. These three-word responses will be connected to pre-defined themes, the five pathways to nature connectedness: contact, emotion, meaning, compassion, and beauty (Lumber 2016), as well as a non-affective pathway, cognition. A brief explanation and an example word from the pilot study are provided for each:

- *Contact*. Engagement through the senses. (Immersive)
- *Emotion*. Affective engagement with nature. (Moving)
- *Meaning*. Using nature to communicate a concept (Inspiring)
- *Beauty*. Perceptions of positive qualities in nature. (Enchanting)
- *Compassion*. Feeling part of nature and being moved to care for it. (Precious)
- *Cognition*. Finding nature fascinating. (Intriguing)

These qualitative responses will be used to see through which pathway acousmatic music using animal sounds is most effective at facilitating nature connection.

A limitation to this study is that participation will appeal to those already interested in or connected with nature, and without further measures taken, it is difficult to know how short or long-term any increase in nature connection will last.

Conclusion

Nature connection, which is important for both fostering nature protective willingness and improving wellbeing, is nurtured by one's experiences with nature; virtual experiences can bypass real-world limitations to engage people creatively with the natural world and conservation issues. Sound, being not only an aural but a visual, tactile, and proprioceptive experience, is an effective medium through which to foster a sense of nature connection, especially within the realm of electroacoustic composition. Animal sounds have a long history in many creative areas of human culture, including electroacoustic composition, but outside the realm of soundscapes, animal sound recordings are not often chosen as the central source material for the purpose of engaging people with conservation. *Our Ancient Woods* is an attempt to use the electroacoustic medium to enhance the affective potential of animal sounds by combining them with animal behaviours and movements during sound processing, composing with transmodal perception in mind, and using space as a key compositional parameter. Through this compositional process, *Our Ancient Woods* has the potential to increase a listener's sense of nature connection.

Appendix 1

As of September 2022, *Our Ancient Woods* has been featured in the following festivals, exhibitions, conferences, and albums:

- 16 April 2021, MANTIS Festival, Manchester, UK.
- 9 September 2021, MeCCSA-PGN Conference, UK.
- 26 September 2021, REF – Resilience Festival, Foggia, Italy.
- 14 October 2021, Skipton Big Ideas Exhibition, Jersey.
- 19 October 2021, NWCDTP ResConf, UK
- 21 October 2021, The Sound of Colour, Jersey.
- 27 November 2021, MANTIS Festival, Manchester, UK.
- 7 January 2022, BFE/RMA Research Students' Conference, Plymouth, UK.
- 21 January 2022, FIXED.wav 2021 album, Empirica Records.
- 26 June 2022, NYCEMF, USA.
- 4 July 2022, ICMC, Ireland.

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Land, Spirit and Queerness

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ASTRACT

This article aims to link land, spirit, and queerness, to reclaim nature from a queer perspective. Firstly, I will briefly describe the neo-materialistic framework of my research, revealing the intrinsic queerness and spiritual quality of nature. I will then illustrate historical attempts to use and reclaim the land through the art movement known as Land art, with its focus on questions of site, frame, and the land, together with a more spiritual approach by Ana Mendieta. Lastly, I will review my art practice, which utilises (queered) Land art methods including walking, photography, mark-making, and sculptural forms, in order to queer and reclaim the land. I will also show that the reclamation and queering process is more successful when some of those methods are used together with creative writing and video.

KEYWORDS

Queering, Nature, Spirituality, Ecology

Figure 1. Still from 'A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions', 2022, Simon Olmetti

Land is a powerful and often troubled term which has historical, rhetorical, and political attributes. For this article, land is mainly considered as 'natural space', indeed as nature. The notion of nature and natural have always been a thorny one for queer people. For many centuries, being queer meant to be unnatural, perverted, and sinful (and still is in many parts of the

world). Historically, it was the city where queerness could express itself, survive, and at times thrive, the land instead often being a hostile or even denied space. I grew up in a small village in the Northern Italian countryside, and I have direct experience of what it means to be gay in a rural setting. To reclaim the land means firstly to investigate the meaning of nature, before tackling more directly modes of reappropriations.

Nature is a bitch!

The concept of nature is slippery and complicated, particularly in the Anthropocene[1]. Donna Haraway (2016, 30-57) understands nature as an entanglement of heterogeneous elements, a fertile space of/for collaborations and exchanges. She reminds us that if we want to survive on this planet marred by ecological catastrophe, we must 'stay with the trouble', embrace it and fuse/make kinship with other beings, in a sort of reciprocal entanglement, a 'becoming-with' or 'making-kin-with' between human, non-human and more-than-human in unpredictable ways and multispecies combinations. Through this reading, nature is a fluid, anti-hierarchical organism embedding multiplicity and convergence, so similar to the definition of queerness as a porous, constantly changing entity. As Eve K. Sedgwick (1994, 8) declares, queer is keenly relational and strange, it represents an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances. Jack Halberstam rightly declares that we need a new lexicon, or better a new attitude and behaviour when it comes to nature. In *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, Halberstam (2020, 7) indeed defines nature/wildness as a disorder of things, not in terms of the opposite of order, rather its absence, in an attempt to go beyond heteronormative desires of control. A reclamation of nature needs to chime with this disorder of things, and queerness has all the attributes for it. In contrast with heteronormativity, queerness and nature share the same fluidity, the same disorderly, porous, and promiscuous entanglement.

In her essay *TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings* (2015), Karen Barad speaks of matter as in continuous flux and becoming, of being in constant 'trans-formation', materiality being in fact 'trans' (Barad 2015, 410). She also adds that cells and particles, but also ecosystems if they're not too damaged, can regenerate themselves, re-constructing their bodies like self-generating Frankenstein (Barad 2015, 402). Through this reading, we are all trans, we all co-create ourselves, we are as much a construct as nature is, everyone is Frankenstein. Accordingly, all matter, nature included, is trans and queer. Therefore, the struggle between what is natural and what is unnatural loses meaning. If we apply concepts borrowed from quantum physics, we can easily see how limited a heteronormative idea(l) of nature is. Nature is in fact intrinsically queer, a permeable, ever-changing, constantly trans-forming entity entangled in multi-species and multiple ways.

It's tempting to say that it is the heteronormative idea of nature that is unnatural.
The act of queering then becomes a process that questions the centrality of heterosexual identity; it's a method of disruption, undoing, corruption even, of transforming and perverting the heteronormative structure of society. Thus, to queer ecology, as Mortimer-Sandilands describes it, means to 'to take dominant narratives of nature […] to create space for non-heterosexual possibilities' (2010, 22); it means to expand what becomes liveable for both humans and non-humans in their 'relational interconnectedness' (Morris 2012, 90). Queer ecology rejects heteronormative and traditional values connected with nature, to create new visions and experiences of being in nature. From this perspective, nature is not merely something beautiful to look at or to cherish for its pastoral beauty, or worse an entity to exploit for humans' enjoyment and consumption; it is instead a complex organism with which we can create forms

1 The term was apparently first introduced by the ecologist Eugene Stoermer in the early 1980s to refer to the growing evidence of the transformative effects of human activities on the earth (Haraway 2016, 44)

of relationship on equal and respectful terms (Anderson et al. 2012, 85). Therefore, an act of reclamation from a queer perspective means to treat nature more as a partner, an entity we can have an amorous or erotic encounter with, or at least a profound respect for. This is the way I have approached my reclamation through my art, particularly in my series *Cruising the Forest*, as I will describe in the second part of this article.

Barad also states that life is a form of electricity[2]. Nature then becomes an assemblage or accumulate of vibrant matter, a series of energy fields that we constantly interact with, creating kinship and new and trans-material with, in an endless attraction and repulsion of molecules and energy fields between humans and more-than-humans. Through this reading, nature is not only queer, but it also becomes a spiritual entity. As many non-western religions and philosophies have preached for centuries, through this vision we all become connected, humans and more-than-humans, we're all one, united, entangled; we are all, in the end, a form of energy, vibrating matter inter- intra- affecting one another. This view represents a form of spirituality which is linked to matter, the celebration of the body, of nature, and the links and relationships between all entities and beings, in contrast with one focused on sin, the mortification of the body, fear, and separation, attitudes often found in the main Abrahamic religions.

This (post-natural) vision of nature, which borrows from quantum physics, represents the framework of my research and art practice. I will now briefly introduce a historical art movement concerned with the land and its transformation/reclamation, before describing my attempts and art practice.

Land (and) art

Michel de Certeau famously conceived 'place' as a definite, specific location, whereas 'space', by contrast, was interpreted as an intersection of mobile elements and vectors such as direction, velocities, and time variables; in short, he defined 'space as practiced place' (de Certeau 1984, 17 cited in Mitchell 2002, 8). W.J.T. Mitchell, quoting Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, is interested in going beyond the binary created by de Certeau and instead connecting place, space, and landscape as a dialectical triad: if place is a specific location, and space a 'practiced place', activated by actions, movements and signs, then landscape is a site 'encountered as image or sight' (Mitchell 2002, 10). This means that a spatial practice, like a walk or a ritual, may activate a place, which in turn might become the object of depictions, fantasies and memories of an entire nation, although Mitchell stresses several times that no one of these terms (place, space and landscape) are logically or chronologically prior to the others.

> Landscape is a bag of tricks. (Mitchell 2002, 17)

In my view, this is this premise that underlines much of Land art.

Land art, also known as Earth art or Earthworks[3], was an art movement that in the 1960s and

2 Barad explains: '[Matter] is not inanimate, lifeless, eternal. Matter is an imaginative material exploration of non/being, creatively regenerative, an ongoing trans/formation. […] The electric body – *at all scales*, atmospheric, subatomic, molecular, organismic – is a quantum phenomenon generating new imaginaries, new lines of research, new possibilities' (2015, 411). Jane Bennett also considers matter as vibrant and with an agency of its own. See her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010).

3 In the book *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, in the footnote 1, the authors describe: 'The term "Land art", "Earth art" and "Earthworks" tend to be used somewhat interchangeably in contemporary art discourses. For us, Land art is the more encompassing term […] (In the European context, Land art is a much more prevalent term). Based on our research, the first occurrence of Land art as a categorical term was Gerry Schum's use of it as the title of his 1969 film. Initially, in 1968, Schum considered "Landscape Art" as a possible title, but changed to the shortened version after discussions with Richard Long, Jan Dibbets and Barry Flanagan […] Contrarily, according to Michael Heizer, "Land art" was coined by Walter De Maria in 1967' (Keiser and Kwon 2012, 17)

70s shifted the focus on nature as a place and material with which to produce art. The act of using art to affect or transform a (natural) place, or the use of natural material for art purposes in a specific location, activate that place into a space, or even generate a new landscape, a new site of encounter and vision of using or being in the land. At the time, leaving the artist's studio behind and going to the wilderness to create art was ground-breaking and bizarre. Some of the works of the movement's most well-known practitioners are vast in scale, such as Michael Heizer's 'Double Negative' (1969), two massive cuts on either side of a narrow canyon near Overton, Nevada, or Robert Smithson's famous 'Spiral Jetty' (1970), a huge spiral made of mud, salt crystals and rocks built on the shore of the Great Salt Lake, Utah. They often were called 'earthworks', and they entailed the movement of enormous amounts of soil or rock, or the transformation of a natural site into a vast sculptural object.

Although Land art is conventionally seen as part of Minimalism, it is more useful for this article to consider it as part of a wider practice of spatial concern, which included questions regarding the physical dematerialisation of the art object (typical of Conceptual art), together with concerns of organisation of space and the everyday life (closer to Happenings, Fluxus and Situationism) (Kastner and Wallis 2005,27-28). These projects concurred to a rethinking of social relations, space, and the body, leading to a kind of 'third space' or 'in-between space', similar to de Certeau's notion of space as practiced place, activated by social actions. This 'space activation' was crucial to Land artists, particularly of the first generation, who frequently wanted to address the representation of nature and the complex historical and social issue of specific places (Kastner and Wallis 2005, 28). It is hard at times to see evidence of this kind of preoccupations when confronted with the monumentality of the first-generation of Land artworks, but it's important to notice for example that Michael Heizer was familiar with the various ethnic cultures of the American Southwest, and Robert Smithson with the histories of specific sites and ancient myths (Kastner and Wallis 2005, 29). All these artists were indeed engaged with the politics of space, questioning for example who had access to those areas, and aiming to disrupt space (and time) with their artworks.

Connected to this notion of activation is also that of framing, of creating a new dialogue with the environment through a different/alternative physical framework, resting on the notion that seeing a portion of land from another perspective might generate new ideas, discussions, and relations. This again becomes particularly evident when the surrounding landscape is faced with or viewed from a large earthwork. This notion could also be connected to the process of queering, which becomes a form of framing too, of activating a space from a different perspective, experiencing the land in an alternative way. The process of reclamation therefore needs to go through a (new) framing device or perspective, through a new activation.

Framing also involves and reveals a different timeframe. James Crump, in his documentary film *Troublemakers: The Story of Land Art* (2015), addresses the big earthworks of the time as framing devices or orienting tools in the overwhelming vastity of the desert. He also speaks of temporal relevance, as these works are usually permanent or even, they will probably outlast humanity[4]. Being in the presence of these works means to face questions related to deep or even geological time, the time of the land, of its rocks and its slow, imperceptible mutations. It also means to confront our human insignificance. An example is Nancy Holt's 'Sun Tunnels' (1973-1976), whose structure made of four concrete tunnels in the Great Basin Desert, Utah, is positioned precisely to frame the sun as it rises and sets during the summer and winter solstices, while small holes pierced in the tunnels project in their interior the light of four different

4 The *New Yorker* in 2016 published an article about Land art and more specifically about Michael Heizer titled 'A Monument to Outlast Humanity', by Dana Goodyear. At: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/29/michael-heizers-city

constellations (Draco, Perseus, Columba and Capricorn) (Holt 1977). The accurate positioning of this work forces the viewer to confront the cyclical time of the solar year, but also a more cosmical, deep time of those constellations. The reference to Neolithic sites such as Stonehenge is evident, although Holt claimed she had no desire to make a megalithic monument, rather to bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale, giving a visual reference point in the too overwhelming landscape of the desert (Holt 1977).

In Britain, for geographical, historical, and cultural reasons, Land art developed and morphed into more diminutive, subtle, meditative tones. If many American Land artists seemed not to have any respect for the environment, as Hamish Fulton declared[5], British and European ones have had a more reverential approach and use of nature since the beginning. David Nash declared: 'I want a simple approach to living and doing. I want a life and work that reflects the balance and continuity of nature' (Beardsley 1998, 47). Not having the abundance and vastity of land of their American counterparts made artists turn inwards, and connect to the natural elements mainly in ephemeral, transient, non-invasive ways. Walking became the main process for many British artists such as Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, and Andy Goldsworthy, and their art practice a way of life. If landscape is fixed in the consciousness and fabric of the land, like in Britain, centuries of land shifting but also of idealising the countryside and its sense of place, the possibilities of using the land as art material become limited. Walking must have felt as a good solution.

Rebecca Solnit says that walking is how the body measures itself against the earth (2001, 31), engaging the body and the mind with the world, a sort of 'knowing the world through the body and the body through the world' (2001, 29). Walking allows one to know, read, breathe, and connect with the land as no other activity can do, as if touching or resting one's feet on its ground allows one to infuse with its soil and character. In her book *Wanderlust*, Solnit illustrates how walking, particularly in Britain and the United States, was central in forming both an idea(l) of landscape and an ecological movement, among other things.

Interestingly, Land art has evolved from the first huge earthworks in the American desert to practices of different sizes and concerns, including Eco and Bio art, which are more directly connected and concerned with ecology and our relationship with the planet.

Land and spirit

A more intimate and spiritual approach is that of Ana Mendieta, who combined her Latin American/Cuban culture with a contemporary (and feminist) practice, creating a sort of bridge between past and present, and between indigenous and Western culture. In 1961, Mendieta and her sister were sent as children from Cuba to the US, because their father was involved in counter-revolutionary activities and felt they were in danger. The two sisters were separated and placed in a series of homes for 'disturbed' or neglected children and then moved between different foster families (Tufnell 2006, 70). This experience of exile profoundly affected Mendieta.

In 1973, she began to work in the landscape, influenced by Conceptual and Performance art, but also Viennese Actionism and its use of rituals, theatre, and spectacle (Tufnell 2006, 70). Being raised in alienating circumstances, she wanted to find her roots and her connection to the earth as a personal and spiritual mother (Lippard 1990, 86). She worked with many natural materials including fire, leaves, gunpowder, grass, flowers, blood, water, wood, clay, mud, stone, and her own flesh, including elements of the Latin American culture she had lost as a child. Lippard

5 About Smithson, Heizer, and De Maria he said that they don't have any respect for nature and that he feels their work is 'inescapably urban' even though found outside the city (Beardsley 1998, 44).

(1990, 86) stated that when Mendieta worked in a place, she claimed that territory 'somewhat like a dog pissing on the ground'.

Mendieta called her work 'earth body art', thus making explicit the hybrid nature of her practice (Tufnell 2006, 69), a sort of bridge between Land art and Body art, demonstrating since the beginning her desire of mixing cultures and practices, of searching for a sort of cultural syncretism. Her most recognised work is the *Silueta* series, mainly made between 1973 and 1980, ephemeral traces in the form of her silhouetted body in the landscape made with mud, soil, and other natural elements, now long gone and 'reabsorbed' in the land; photographs are the only witness and remnant of the work. In this series, she used her body as a sculptural surrogate to create impressions of a primeval, goddess-like figure on the earth's surface, creating a dialogue between presence and absence, fullness, and lack, and past and present (Osterweil 2015).

There is a paradox of ancient, deep time meeting or even crushing with contemporary life. Indeed, the *Siluetas* recall Neolithic carvings, while simultaneously suggesting the outlines of modern crime scenes (Osterweil 2015). Howard Oransky, one of the curators of *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*[6]*, speaks of the artist's practice as a connection between ancient mythologies and her present body, preoccupations, and land.*

When Mendieta creates silhouettes with mud in the landscape, what we are left with is a photograph/video of her encounter with deep time, with millennia-old earth shaped by geological eons of construction, destruction and remodelling, layers on layers of time that stretches so far back that become incomprehensible for us humans. Indeed Osterweil (2015) says that Mendieta communicates our doomed love affair with time, reifying the encounter between body and earth into archetypal images. Her premature death, falling from a window in obscure circumstances[7] *and crushing on the land, is even more tragic and chilling if we consider her body lying on the earth as the last of her Siluetas*, her final mark on the earth surface, before passing to the other side.

Her land reclamation was intimate, spiritual, and ephemeral, yet very powerful and haunting. In contrast with many of her American contemporaries, Mendieta had a very respectful approach, a search for communion with the earth and nature.

I will now depict some of my attempts to queer and reclaim the land with my art practice, using Land art methods and following the neo-materialistic framework of my research.

Of cruising forests, ritual drawings, and queer rocks

A few months after starting my PhD, the COVID pandemic exploded worldwide. The limitations of lockdown, particularly in the first few months, were daunting. How to create work connected with nature or showing its queerness core, when I couldn't even go out to nature? Luckily, London has many green spaces, and Epping Forest at my doorstep was a huge help, relief, and escape. I started to go to the forest regularly, looking for connections, perhaps hoping to replace human relations or even touch for plant encounter, voices of the wind, birds, and insects, exchange of some form of energy or vibration. Humans didn't lack either, this big green lung scarred by too many paths have plenty of walkers in their muddy wellies strolling through it. However, we kept at a distance, safe not to breathe the same air. Often, I was alone, walking for hours in the dark, wet crevices of the forest's thick vegetations, parakeets filling

6 One of the few exhibitions focusing on Mendieta's films, it was co-curated by Lynn Lukkas and took place at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, during the autumn 2015. It then travelled to other countries, including in Paris' Jeu de Paume.

7 Many people believe her husband Carle Andre (a minimalist and land artist) pushed her from the window.

the air with their aromatic, foreign singing, sound of far sunny lands strangely juxtaposed to this cold latitude. I strongly felt that I was looking at the forest, and in turn, in some mysterious way, the forest was looking back at me, flirting, perhaps even hinting at something I couldn't understand but which was erotic and exciting. I decided to cruise with it, with my camera and with my walking, to let myself be lost in its fluorescent greens, and dark browns, and smell of mud and rotting leaves. Fresh air moved brunches and spoke an unknown but powerful language.

Following Mitchell's statement, walking in and cruising with the forest transforms a simple place into a 'practiced place', that is a space which in turn activates that site into a new image or fantasy, a queer one in this case, a fluid, entangled form of relationship between a human and a more-than-human entity. Like many Land artists have done before me, walking becomes a tool to (re)connect with the land, or as Solnit describes it, for my body to measure itself against the earth. Only through a direct, slow, and immersive experience, one can really know and understand a place or a process. My regular walks in nature made me intimate with the forest; my footprints in the mud, the wet particles of my breath, the sound of my movement, and the smell of my body was exchanged with the breath of the trees, the smell of its bushes, the healing sound of the birds, the mud stuck on my skin. The forest and I were now entwined, our particles mixed, copulating, and transforming one another to create new ones, the addition of our components more than its mere sum, forming trans new particles of human with more-than-human matter, hybrid formations for new chemical units.

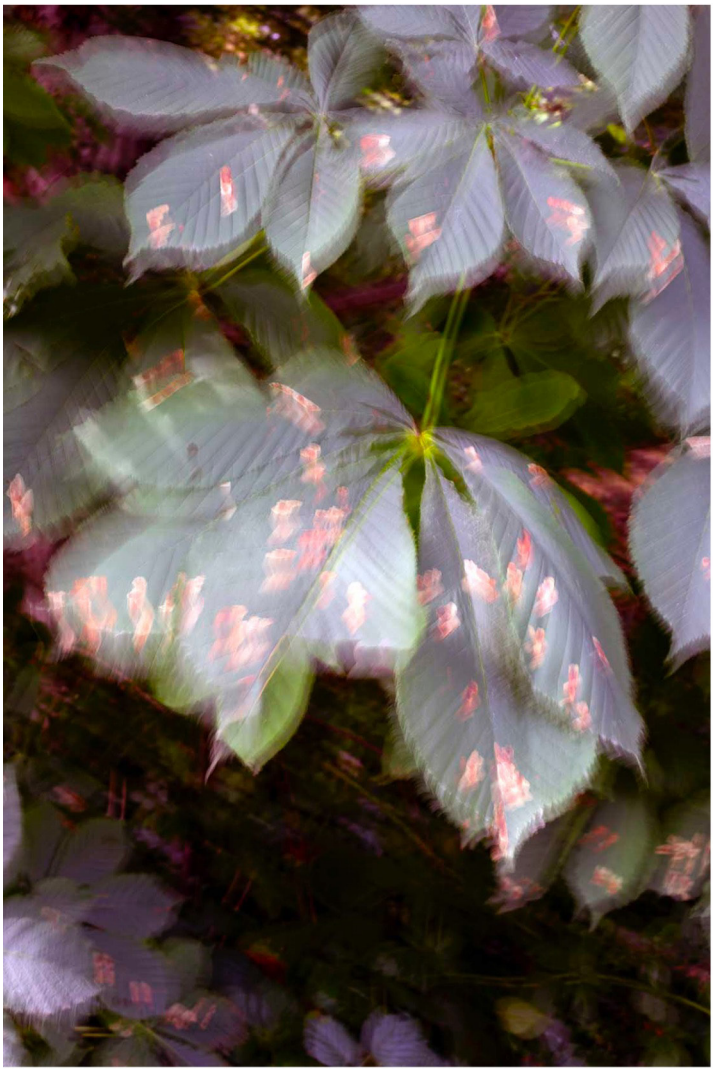

Figure 2. Untitled, from the series *Cruising the Forest*, digital photograph, Simon Olmetti

The pictures generated by this exchange process, a series of photographs I called Cruising the Forest, are fuzzy, colourful images suggesting the vibrating queer properties of nature. The blurriness implies movement, a sort of activation of that space; its altered colours instead depict a land of magic, of mysterious possibilities, of strange new encounters and beginnings.

I also see the limitations of this approach. The reclamation here is more metaphorical, this work representing my first attempt, a sort of 'getting to know nature' through a post-natural attitude. It's an attempt to show the un-showable, nature's queer kernel that perhaps can only be felt, experienced but never fully or truly

depicted. The queering is implied by the fuzzy, porous, odd quality of the images, together with its title referring to a sexual encounter and relationship with the forest.

At times my strategy was to create some sort of rituals in my home-turned-studio, trying to channel Ana Mendieta in the comfort of my home, a human being in lockdown recreating an artificial encounter with nature and spirit, house plants in a corner, central heating at full blast.

Susan Sontag would call it camp,

Treating nature as an extension of theatre,

Of being-as-playing-a-role

I would lay naked on a large piece of paper, trying to outline my body with paint, or charcoal, or graphite; using my hands or a brush, I would then drag the paint/charcoal/graphite to create shapes of different colours, in a repetitive, meditative state, as if dragging out of my outlined body negative energies, fears and anxieties, would rebalance my image and therefore myself.

The results of these big sheets of paper aren't always aesthetically pleasing, but I cherish the experience, the erotic feeling of my naked flesh on cold paper, my body dirty with charcoal and acrylic paint, the sense of freedom and yet contained and safe within the walls of my home. This work also represents my interpretation/reclamation/invention of a ritual, a spirituality made by me for me, a private act translated into marks of paint and charcoal. As with much of neo-paganism, Wicca, Queer Spirit, and other nature-based spiritual groups, there's no precise dogma or rituals to follow, instead anyone can create their own practice as long as the general

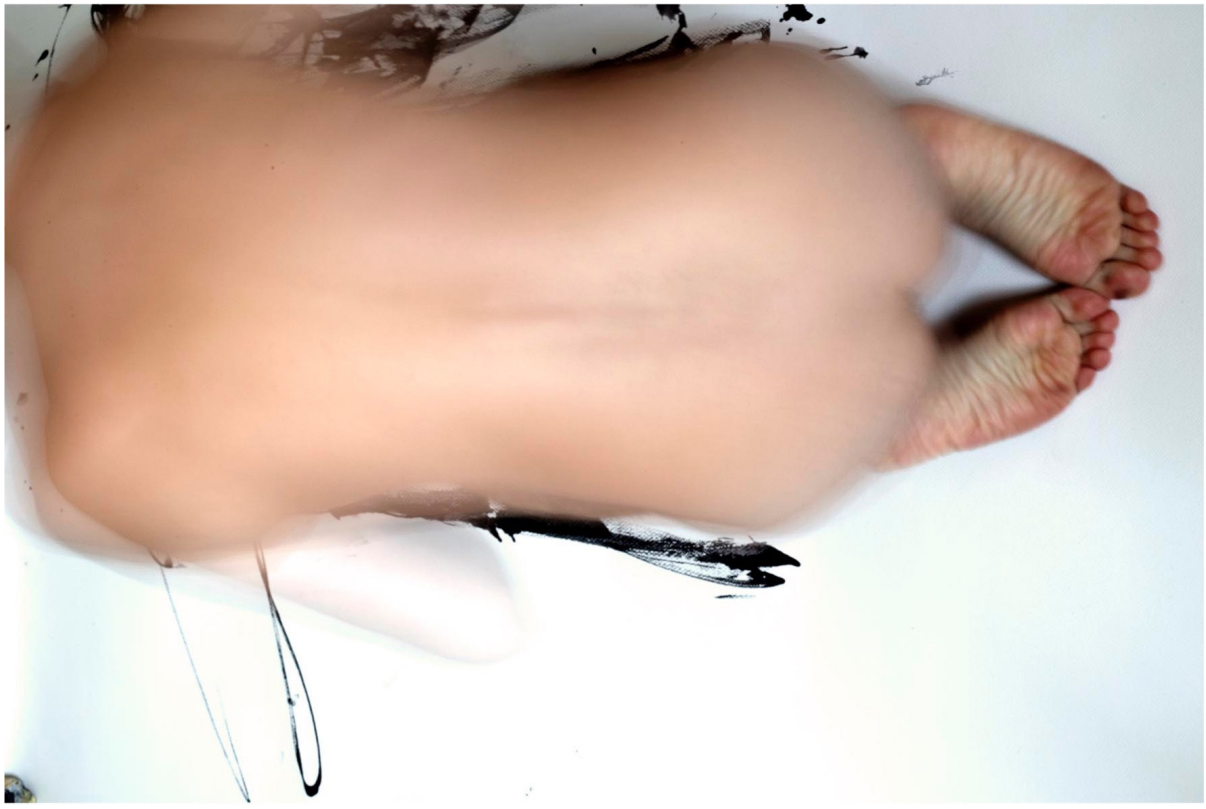

Figure 3. Untitled, photograph, graphite and paint on paper, 2020, Simon Olmetti

rule of creating no harm is followed. The aim of this process was mainly to experience spirituality through my body and an art practice.

This was also my attempt at channelling Ana Mendieta, using her method but queering it, colourful bright paint instead of mud and leaves, acrylic instead of natural elements, a camp effort indeed. I have also tried to recreate the same process in Epping Forest, but it's difficult to find secluded places without people, it's usually cold and wet, I'm probably in the wrong country for this. Or maybe I should be braver.

Figure 4. Untitled, from the series Ritual Drawing, graphite and water on paper, Simon Olmetti

Through these performative drawings, I have reclaimed Mendieta's way of working with the body and its outline yet using (perhaps misusing) other Land art strategies such as the concept of 'non-site', although again in a queer way. For Smithson the non-site, both the title of a series of his works and a concept, was intended as a dialogue or relationship between the artwork and its original physical place, or more generally the work of art as being an 'in-between' space, existing in a gallery space and yet related to a specific location. For Smithson, the Non-site series questioned notions of site and displacement, how the removal of a natural material like some rocks would leave a negative impression on its original place, and at the same time their installation in a gallery miles away would maintain a connection with it (Kastner and Wallis 2005, 31). With my work, I have experimented with a sort of queered version of the non-site, a looser and more fluid one, creating work mainly in a home setting that would act as 'nature', an artificial site or a 'non-natural' one and yet summoned as one through ritual, experiencing a Mendieta-style spiritual reclamation without being physically in the land, transforming the place I was in in a non-site, or an 'in-place-of' site, a metaphorical recreation of a site when going to nature and performing a ritual in it was difficult. Like in a spell or a magic object, the large piece of paper becomes the incarnation of the land, the same way a Persian carpet metaphorically represents a garden, a place that develops in a practiced space through the movement of my body in and on it, through my rituals and the outlining and mark making, which in turns gets activated as a new sight or vision, the metaphor of/for the land, or a sort of trans-land, something in between, a transformative (trans-formative?) process of creation and reappropriation, connecting to the land by proxy or magic, through the power of spirit.

Part of the charm of Mendieta's practice was in the fleetingness of her work, the fact that her marks would be quickly swallowed by nature without leaving any trace. In terms of reclamation, her short temporal span perhaps remarks the impossibility of really reclaiming the land, her practice was a very eco-feminist way of communing with the earth more than leaving a lasting mark. I build on her experience not to directly leave a mark in the land, an ephemeral gesture indeed, but to create an alternative queer version through paint and drawing. This work of mine is weak as an act of reclamation of the land; yet, as a reclamation of a queer ritual or spirituality, or in terms of experiencing queer spirit through art, it becomes rather successful. Through it, I have experienced an intimate connection with my body and, I dare say, with the cosmos, or at least a feeling of being one with everything, which represents a sort of reclamation of the land of spirit, so to speak, an important one as for centuries queerness was deemed sinful and rejected by all the main religions, and still is.

Lastly, as I have established at the beginning of this article, everything is a form of energy and interconnected. An action made in a place will affect other spaces by the logics of quantum physics and the entanglements of particles, it's the intention that counts and that will guide the process, as much of non-Abrahamic and nature-based spiritualities teach. Like with a Voodoo doll, an act of reclamation metaphorically performed on a piece of paper will affect the spirit of a place and perhaps a physical space too.

I have also tried to leave some marks directly in the landscape. When lockdown restrictions eased, I started going outside London, walking mainly along the Icknield Way, an ancient pilgrim path roughly connecting Norfolk with Avebury and passing north of London. I wanted to walk what is believed to be the oldest road in Britain[8].

I felt I was somehow retracing Long's or Fulton's steps, walking in search of some connection with nature but also with deep and ancestral time. Like Long, I couldn't nevertheless resist the urge for materiality, of creating or transforming something. Instead of moving heavy

8 As declared at http://www.icknieldwaypath.co.uk/

rocks or ordering stones in the form of a circle or spiral like he does, I decided to be more irreverent, to create little camp objects from natural material. Therefore, I started collecting pebbles and small rocks, taking them home, cleaning and painting them with garish, unnatural colours, for then taking them back to nature, positioning them like strange sacred objects along the way.

The idea of scattering around these sorts of queer seeds was very appealing to me, leaving a mark, a sign of the passage of a queer body in nature, representing even the pollution of the picturesque landscape that much has fomented a British ideal of nature, belonging and national pride. Unlike much of Land art, particularly of the first generation, my attempt was diminutive, small scales pebbles and rocks whose acrylic paint would probably fade away very quickly. In a way, I was again putting together some methods of Land art with more transient aspects of Mendieta's process.

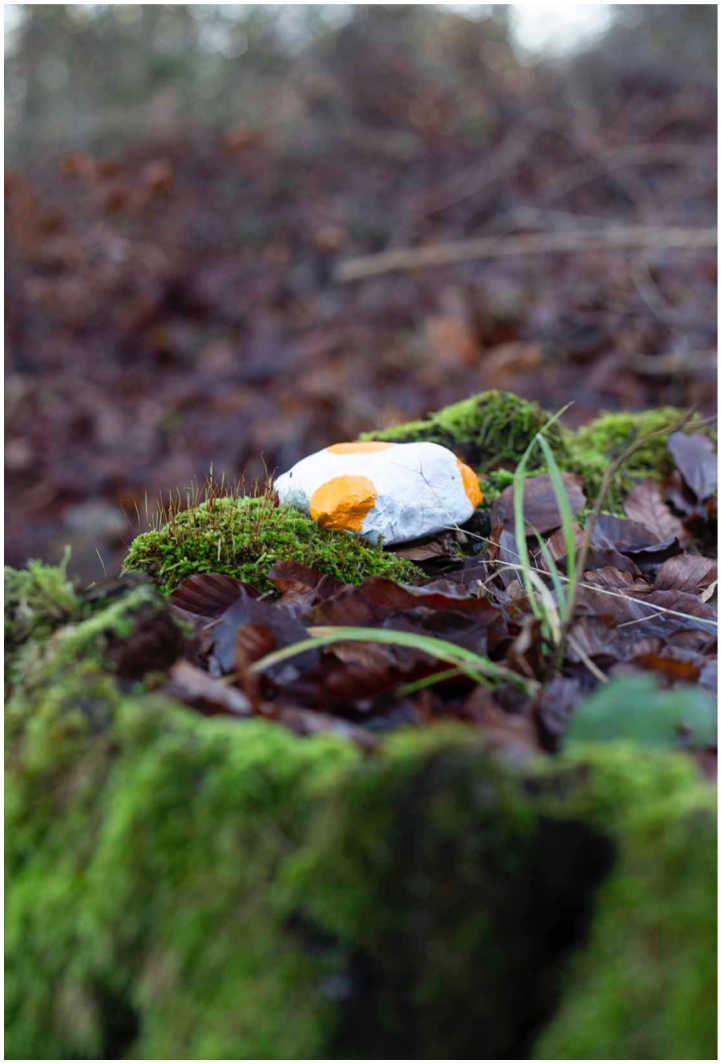

Figure 5. Untitled, from the series Queer Rocks, digital photograph, 2021, Simon Olmetti

In contrast with my 'ritual drawings' at home, leaving my queer rocks in nature was a way to directly intervene in the landscape, trying to alter and reappropriate it, albeit ephemerally. This time the spirituality of the gesture was more linked to ancient forms of spirituality, such as the positioning of rocks at the feet of sacred trees or close to a well in neopaganism, or on tombs in Judaism. The spiritual process was also associated with the cleansing and painting activity, a sort of meditative process, together with a transformative one, an alchemical-like principal of generating an artificial output from natural matter.

The activation of the space through my intervention generates a sort of micro queer commons, the reclamation of a place which becomes a space for queer people. A small reminder for passers-by that we belong to nature, we are part of it, and we can have a different, innovative connection and relationship with the earth.

Like with Long, Fulton, Mendieta, and many other artists whose practice is focused on the land, photography becomes the only witness and remnant of the work. However, the small scale of my rocks and their association with (alternative and ancient) forms of spirituality, might generate spontaneous or unpredictable acts, such as other people might be inclined to leave 'their' painted rocks in the same place, or instead someone might decide to take one of

my 'queered' rocks at home and give them a different new life or function. We can't know. What we can instead predict is the more pervasive encounter with nature. Nature will repossess and reclaim them, as it has done with Mendieta's mud outlines or Long's rearranged stones. In time my painted rocks will be covered in mud, the rain will dissolve their paint, the weeds will triumphally surround them. Queering is clearly a temporal and ephemeral activity. Yet, the seemingly disappearance of their queer status will energetically embed the land, or at least it will pulsate from the photographs I have taken.

I then started using creative writing as a way of queering and reappropriating which, albeit still ephemeral in the fact that it existed only in the pixels of my computer, nevertheless had a materiality in the fixity of writing itself, and in its potentiality of generating new outcomes through different media. Barad (2015, 388) indeed proclaims that imagination is matter, and vice versa. Writing felt like a liberating act, the emancipation of my voice. Additionally, these creative pieces could inspire or become part of a video or an audio piece, being printed in a booklet, written, or projected on a wall, included in a painting, and many other more uses. Suddenly the possibilities were endless, and my queering and reappropriation process could venture beyond the limits of reality, indeed utilising neo-material properties it could go beyond the visible and the physicality of matter to affect, change and transform reality through the particles of my voice, of thought and dream, through invisible vibrations yet nevertheless material, real, effective, and consequential.

One example is *A Womb of Divine Strange Inceptions*[9]. This video was inspired by a poem I have written while researching Queer Spirit[10] and by my many visits to Avebury in the last few years, a place dear to neo-pagans with its two huge stone circles and other Neolithic sites. The result is an overlaying of different footages, images that intersect, superimpose, blend with one another, creating a sort of dreamy effect; the audio instead is represented by my voice whispering the poem again ang again, ultimately overlaying my voice as well and generating a confused, obsessive litany, a kind of spell to reclaim that space and affect the viewers. The constant overlapping of images and sound resonates with the idea of the multi-layered structure of places like this, sediments of millennia of beliefs and matter, but also it hints at the porous property of nature, its sense of interrelation and oneness that can only be glimpsed through a rich overlaying of images and sound.

Uniting writing with video has proved to be a powerful tool to affect, transform, reclaim, and ultimately queer a space. In some instances, writing has inspired the creation of a video; often it has become part of its sound. Their power relies on the potentiality of these two media of creating new visions, particularly when joined together, word that becomes image and/or sound, giving it 'body', weight, form, and consequence.

This way of working can be linked to contemporary art practices using queer world-making or so-called 'worlding', a practice of creating utopic/dystopic realities that challenge our current reality system. Haraway speaks of SF, string figures, science fact, science fiction, speculative

9 This video has been selected for the Visions in the Nunnery 2022's exhibition. You can watch it on www.simonolmetti.com

10 Queer Spirit is a spirituality specifically made by and for queer people; it develops beyond the impositions of institutionalised religions, where queerness is at best tolerated, but never considered central or important. It is a practice which aims to enable the well-being of its participants, representing 'a return home', the (re)creation of a space for the fulfilment of life, desires, and sense of belonging, giving a role or a purpose to queer people often denied by the main religions. It is still built upon other spiritual and religious beliefs, mainly from Native, Indigenous, neo-pagan traditions, and other nature-based spiritualities, but it fosters its own rituals and mythology focusing exclusively on queer people and experience.

feminism, and speculative fabulation, as a way to collaborate 'with all those in the muddle', in the thickly present Chthulucene[11], as a way to 'stay with the trouble' and survive, even thrive, in this age of environmental catastrophe (Haraway 2016, 56). Creative writing/SF therefore becomes a way of thinking-with, becoming-with matter/nature in order to 'change the story', to re-think our relationship with the world around us, human and more-than-human, in an entangling with the 'other' in multiple tentacular ways. Creating new and alternative worlds make us humus, not human (Haraway 2016, 55), we become a fertile compost where new visions and alternativity can grow in multiple and unexpected directions. Queering ultimately becomes a process not only to reclaim the land, but also to understand our place as humans within the environment, not a hegemonic central one, rather one of collaboration, caring, and inter- intra- connection.

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11 Chthulucene is Haraway's alternative to Anthropocene and Capitalocene. It is 'made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet' (Haraway 2016, 55).

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Simon Olmetti is a PhD candidate in Fine Arts at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham. Building upon key theorists including José E. Muñoz, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway, his research focuses on queering nature through alternative spirituality using a multimedia art approach, linking Land art and Queer Spirit to gain new insights on nature and its reclamation from a queer perspective. Simon has gained an MA in Fine Art Photography from the University of Westminster, and studied painting and performance at various institutions, including Central Saint Martins and L.A.D.A. (Live Art Development Agency). Previously, he graduated in Business Administration at Bocconi University, Milan. He has exhibited in various group exhibitions including Visions in the Nunnery 2022, Bow Arts, and his first solo show at the James Hockey galley, UCA Farnham..

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Dystopian Images of Beirut in The Lebanese Oscar-nominated Film *Capernaum* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This paper[1] explores how Nadine Labaki's Oscar-nominated film *Capernaum* (2018), evokes a dystopian image of Beirut, often focusing on the struggles of the poorest inhabitants of the city, trapped in its slums. Prior to the film, this part of the city was an invisible place to many Lebanese (including the author who grew up in Beirut) as well as to a wider international community. The author analyses how Labaki's voice and directorial style offers new visibility to the people who inhabit this part of Beirut but legally barely exist. Labaki's grim representation of Beirut in *Capernaum* (2018) foreshadows the cruel life conditions that most of the people are facing now (2022) in Lebanon.

KEYWORDS

Child brides, Beirut, Dystopia, Film, *Capernaum*

Introduction

Modern Lebanon was founded in 1920 as a result of the French mandate within the region (Kaufman 2001). Prior to that date, Lebanon was part of many ancient civilizations and empires beginning with the myth of its Phoenician origins (2001) up until it became part of the Ottoman Empire which was dismantled after defeat in WWI (Atakav 2013). Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, is considered as one of the oldest cities in the world and according to Lebanese folklore it was 'destroyed and rebuilt more than seven times during its 5000-year-old history' (Raschka 1996). Lebanon gained its independence from France on 22 November 1943 and became officially a republic state headed by a Christian Maronite[2] president which is elected by the parliament for six years. There are 18 official religious sects[3] in Lebanon (Khalife 2015). Power-sharing in Lebanon follows a confessional system and is carried out based on a National Pact, which was an informal agreement set in 1943 to elect leaders based on their sect. This pact was rooted in a sectarian structure which dictates that the president of the Lebanese republic must be a Christian Maronite, while the president of the Council of Ministers is a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the parliamentary chambers is a Shi'a Muslim (Fregonese 2012). Thus, political power in Lebanon is awarded on a sectarian basis rather than meritocracy. Sectarianism would soon become one of the main instigators for the Lebanese civil war which lasted from 1975 till 1990 and lead the country into its darkest period (Khatib 2008).

1 Some of the material and analysis featured in this paper appears in more depth in my PhD thesis: Abdel Karim, M., 2023. Women's Voices in Lebanese Cinema: Crisis, Patriarchy, and Empowerment (PhD Thesis). Bournemouth University.

2 The Maronites are the largest Christian group in Lebanon who occupy 34 seats in Parliaments and the only sect eligible for the presidency (Khalife 2015).

3 Muslim sects include: Shiites, Sunnis, Alawites, Ismaili [Sevener] Shiites. Christian sects include: Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Catholics, Nestorians Assyrians, Chaldeans, Copts, Latins (Roman Catholics), Evangelical Protestants. Additionally, there is the Druze and Judaism.

Prior to the civil war, the country witnessed a prosperous period between the 1950s and early 1970s (Fregonese 2012) and according to Sinno (2020, 178) it was considered 'as the "cross-roads" *(silat wasl)* between East and West'. The French influence remained highly visible in Lebanon's capital, Beirut, which was referred to as the 'Paris of the Middle East' (Moussawi 2013), a cosmopolitan project (Fregonese 2012) and one of the most modern cities in the Arab world. According to Fregonese (2012) Beirut's cosmopolitan charm was noticeable through the luxurious seaside hotel district which attracted both Arab and western tourists and investors. Artists from different backgrounds; writers, poets, filmmakers etc. expressed their love for this city, often describing it as the city of culture, pleasure, sexual liberty, political activism, and resistance (Aghacy 2015). For example, Jordanian writer Al-Razzaz (cited by Aghacy 2015, 16) describes Beirut in his novel *Ahya' fi al-bahr al-Mayyit* (1982) [Alive in the Dead Sea] as 'a mirror of the aspirations and desires of Arab intellectuals and activists […]. It is a place that is supposed to realize their dreams and grant them political, social as well as sexual freedoms […]'. Other artists gave the city feminine qualities, after which it was fetichised and sexualized (Aghacy 2015). Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, famous for his poetry which is described as erotic, bold and controversial (Darwish 1998) with themes revolving around love, women, politics and Arab nationalism, wrote a poem in 1978 entitled *Beirut Set EL Donya* [Beirut, The Mistress of The World].[4] He imagined Beirut in a woman's figure and implored her to "rise from under the rubble like an almond's rose in spring" [my translation] after witnessing a lot of violence and destruction because of the civil war. However, in 1981, Qabbani was shattered by the death of his beloved wife Balqis who was killed in an explosion targeting the Iraqi embassy in Beirut where she was at the time (Darwish 1998). As a result, he wrote a poem in 1981 *Qasidat Balqis* [A Poem for Baqis] in which he refers to Beirut as 'the city that "everyday kills one of us"' (Sinno 2020, 188).

We may consider Beirut as a city of inspiration, beauty, and dreams for the youth and its people, but in a split of a second can also turn into a violent, destructive place which shatters the dreams and lives of all of those who reside in it. Aghacy (2015, 16) explains that 'Beirut is a locale open to countless and conflicting representations, alluring and abhorrent, menacing and protective, utopian and dystopian.' Sinno (2020, 189) adds to this that 'because place is contestable and is always becoming, any place can shift from utopian to dystopian as a result of the actions, biographies, and imagined communities of those who occupy it and the larger social structures surrounding them.' The terms utopian and dystopian are thus used in this context to describe real state of affairs or emotions and not imaginary worlds that do not exist, as these words have often implied. Ruth Levitas (2010, 9) associated utopia with desire and provides a new definition for the term 'Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being'. Claeye (2013, 145) views that:

> Utopias are linked by their commitment to a form of enhanced sociability, or more communal form of living, sometimes associated with ideals of friendship, while their dystopian counterparts are substantively connected by the predominance of fear, and the destruction of 'society', as a polar opposite of friendship.

People in Beirut and Lebanon as a whole, grew up embracing two contradictory beliefs: coexistence and sectarianism at the same time. The first leads to prosperous friendships and tolerance of the other, painting a utopian view of life in the city, while the latter, shatters and destroys those friendships and allows emotions such as fear of the other and violence to prevail, as it was the case during the civil war which turned the city into a dystopian hell. Therefore, one

4 Also known as 'Beirut, Lady of the World'

could say that Beirut can in fact be utopian and dystopian at the same time. Fregonese (2012, 317-318) indicates that 'Beirut is at once a city-refuge and a city-battleground' and relates that to the city's discrepant cosmopolitanisms. She further explains that 'Discrepant cosmopolitanisms occupy the space between the two extremes of that oscillation between conflict and coexistence' (Fregonese 2012, 322). Discrepant cosmopolitism can be seen in Beirut prior to the civil war. While the city was booming with foreign investors and tourists and witnessing a rapid economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, belts of misery and poverty were surrounding it as a result of subsequent waves of internal and external migration (Stafford 2019; Fregonese 2012). Lebanese people were migrating to Beirut from southern and eastern Lebanon in search of a better life in the city. While others arrived as refugees from Palestine and Syria to escape the conflicts in their countries and they all settled in the suburbs of Beirut forming poor slums which the Lebanese government refused to recognise legally or allow any significant improvements to happen (El Hajj et al. 2011). These belts of poverty which reflect the double side of Beirut became the place of origin for the inception of the Lebanese civil war which started 'with a shootout in Beirut's south-eastern suburbs' (Fregonese 2012, 325) and later spread to the whole country lasting fifteen years.

Post-war, efforts to rebuilt Beirut began after 1991. Yet, Beirut did not regain its glamourous reputation, despite sporadic and often short-lived improvements in the country, due to regional tensions, persistent instability, and the widespread corruption; a plague that has impeded its development. Beirut did, however, maintain a troubling bifurcate vision: a place where the wealthy Lebanese and tourists can enjoy its post-war luxurious newly built facilities such as the downtown area, the Zaitunay Bay and the opulent hotels nearby; and a place where poverty belts remain expanding around its suburbs without any management or support from the government (Hatoum 2006). This sense of Beirut as two entirely different visions, forms the heart of Labaki's *Capernaum*, offering a troubling landscape mostly focussed on the daily struggles of the dispossessed, and the cultural and moral struggles the city faces today.

Labaki's *Capernaum* (2018):

Labaki's film *Capernaum is* set in Beirut's poorest and most overcrowded slums and reveals how a failed state and political structure ends up marginalising its people and depriving them from their basic human rights. It provides an evocative vision of a dystopian Beirut that now appears prophetic as the entire city sinks into an abyss, enduring a financial collapse 'that the world Bank has said could rank among the world's worst since the mid-1800s' (Hubbard 2021). Labaki's representation of Beirut in *Capernaum* (2018) foreshadows the harsh living conditions that most of the people are facing now in Lebanon.

When *Capernaum* was released to the public in 2018, it received global acclamation and was nominated for an Oscar. However, it also received a backlash from some reviewers and audiences, who accused Labaki for 'poverty porn' in her film (Qureshi 2018; Stafford 2019). 'Poverty porn' as defined by Matt Collin (2009) refers to '"any type of media, be it written, photographed or filmed, which exploits the poor's conditions in order to generate the necessary sympathy" required to gain support for a given cause' (cited by Hester 2014, 212). However, Labaki replied to this accusation in her interview with Qureshi (2018) by saying:

> I cannot do anything toward cynicism, you know, toward people who just decide to be cynical toward me wanting to tell the story because I haven't lived ... of course I haven't lived their lives, but somebody needs to tell that story, somehow.

It is worth noting that Labaki conducted in-depth research while writing the script for the film and interviewed many families and children living in Beirut's slums. As a female director, Labaki's female subjectivity and personal empathy, specially being a mother, herself, appears to have a strong impact on the representation of these underprivileged people's lives specially the children neglected on the streets. In an interview with the guardian, Labaki (cited by Cooke 2019) explains that she felt responsible to be the voice of these kids begging on the street 'I thought: if I stay silent, I'm complicit in this crime – and it is a crime that we allow this to happen'. She describes in our interview that making this film was like 'going to war' due to various complications she and her production team faced on set (Labaki 2020). It is also worth mentioning that Labaki's husband [the musician and composer Khaled Mouzanar] produced the film after he mortgaged their home to finance it (Labaki cited by Cooke 2019). This proves how persistent Labaki was to bring visibility to these people's dire conditions and give them a voice for she (2019) believes 'cinema can effect social change'.

Labaki uses some of the techniques of the Italian neorealist tradition which was seen in the films of Roberto Rossellini or Vittorio de Sica (Weinberger 2007) by casting nonprofessional actors, and filming in the real slums of Beirut with real refugees and people who reside in those shabby areas. She is simply using the art of filmmaking to reflect the cruel, dystopian life of those people. Whereas Hollywood often uses science fiction genre to project dystopic narratives of worse near future catastrophes and world disasters (Mirrless 2015), Labaki illustrates through a social drama genre and a neorealist apparatus that dystopia for some people in Beirut is a present condition of everyday tragedy rather than an imagined disastrous future.

Capernaum (2018) captures the grim (or dystopian) reality of people living on the margins in Beirut city, invisible from the system, and treated as second class human beings. Labaki had a prophetic vision in making the film, and observed, in interview in 2018 that 'the dystopian images in her film are a reflection of Beirut as it is today' and this is projected through the title of the film (Qureshi 2018). Labaki said, '*Capernaum* in French is used usually in French literature to signify chaos, to signify hell, disorder' (cited by Qureshi 2018). The opening aerial shots on Beirut's slums work well in setting up the locality and context of the story and are used as a reoccurring motif throughout the film. Everything in this city seems to be dysfunctional and out of place through these frames. The children of the slums are filmed using the effect of a handheld shaky camera, playing war games, and running around the dirty ghetto streets, breaking glass, smoking cigarettes, and armed with wooden rifle-like weapons. Their looks and actions reflect the violence and chaotic nature of this place. The opening soundtrack of the film (*Eye of God*) composed by Khaled Mouzanar, accompanies the visuals, and creates a melancholic atmosphere. We are transported as viewers, through these shots, to gaze at those children who belong to a low social status from above. At moments it becomes a very emotional and uncomfortable experience gazing at these underprivileged children. Labaki's framing plays an important role in fashioning a form of political activism and bringing light unto this abandoned space. People live in that place but, in the eyes of the state, do not exist (i.e., without having identity documentation, such as a birth certificate, or any human rights within the state). *Capernaum* (2018) highlights the struggle that women and children specifically face in these marginalized communities in Lebanon such as, child marriage, human trafficking, undocumented children, child poverty and domestic workers' abuse which further reveals how grim these slums are. The narrative tells the story of a 12-year-old boy, Zain (Zain Al Rafeea), who wants to sue his parents for giving him life in this unjust and chaotic world. In her interview with Aridi (2018) for *The New York Times* Labaki mentions

> He's actually not only suing his parents; he's suing the whole system

> because his parents are also victims of that system – one that is failing on so many levels and that completely ends up excluding people.

The film begins with a symbolic trial court scene, where Zain is accusing his parents of bringing him into this world in front of the judge and witnesses, which serves to embody the extent of neglect these deprived children are feeling. The trial was inspired by the research that Labaki did prior to creating the film, and the interviews she conducted with these children living in the slums. Labaki tells Bradley (2019) in an interview:

> I used to always ask them one question. 'Are you happy to be alive?' And most of them would say, 'No, I wish that I was dead.' Some kids even committed suicide or tried to commit suicide. And they told me, 'I don't know why nobody loves me. I am beaten up every day. Why do people treat me this way?'

Zain lives with his parents and siblings in these very poor neighbourhoods that have formed belts of poverty around the city. They all sleep on dirty mattresses on the floor in a messy, overcrowded room which resemble the whole cityscape. He and his siblings are forced into child labour on the rough streets of Beirut, instead of attending school like other children their age, because they live in extreme poverty and their parents use them as a source of income. His favourite sibling is eleven-year-old Sahar (Cedra Izzam). Once their parents find out that Sahar has started menstruating, they decide to marry her to their landlord's son who is more than twice her age, in exchange for some chicken and the rent. Forced child marriage is very common in these marginalised communities despite the reality that these children are not emotionally nor physically prepared for this step. Labaki reveals this early on in the film through a scene where Sahar appears naïve about sexuality when she first acknowledges that she started menstruating. Talking about menstrual periods remains a taboo topic that is rarely discussed openly amongst families and rarely depicted in films. A woman's body is prone to stigmatization in the patriarchal Arab world (Haddad 2012).

Many girls do not get proper communication or education about their menstrual cycle prior to experiencing it for the first time, and their first experiences are usually accompanied with shame and fear (UNFPA 2021). In a dysfunctional family like the one Sahar belongs to, the parents lack proper communication with their children and abuse them physically and emotionally, therefore it becomes very hard for a girl like Sahar to receive any awareness or knowledge about her sexual health under such dystopian conditions. Zain who appears to intuitively understand what was happening with his sister better than she did, starts convincing her to conceal her menstruation from their parents, assuming that they will marry her to Assad (Nour El Husseini) once they knew. Sahar is vulnerable, innocent, and naïve, seeing to not mind being forced to marry Assad, their landlord's son, and the owner of a mini market where Zain works as a delivery boy. Ironically, she presumes that Assad is a nice guy only because he gives her free liquorice and ramen. A cheap packet of noodle is enough to win her heart. Vulnerable girls like Sahar, lack the proper education, and are taught from an early age that marriage is the only future for a woman and a prime achievement. Many young girls in low-income countries and poor families see that marriage would grant them a better life and facilities (Ouattara et. Al 1998). However, Zain warns her about marriage suggesting that she'll become Assad's property, and a prisoner in his house where he would have full control over her.

The scene is filmed in an insanitary toilet with pale earth colours which serves as an appropriate backdrop to explore these children's suffering and evokes the dystopian cityscape. The camera

movement is utilitarian offering a sense of realism, and the scene setting, and sound similarly evoke a sense of uncomfortable and unwanted intimacy. Sahar is pictured sitting on a dirty toilet seat while Zain was washing her under garments which got bloodied by her unexpected menstruation. Labaki skilfully presents a great delicacy in directing this troublesome scene without sexualising young Sahar remotely. Zain then, rolls up his t-shirt and gives it to her, but she confusingly asks what she should do with it. This small but nuanced detail further elaborates on Sahar's lack of awareness about what a menstrual period is or how to behave in this situation. Ironically it was her 12-years-old brother, who had to inform her about what she should do and how she could use his t-shirt as a pad. At that moment Sahar could not have access to feminine sanitary pads so her brother had to resort to his t-shirt as a temporary solution. Even though this film was done prior to Lebanon's economic collapse, it is worth noting that this scene foreshadows the period poverty reality that many Lebanese women and girls are experiencing during the political and economic crisis that began in 2019 following the October 17 uprising and is still ongoing till the date of writing this paper (2022). Due to this dire economic crisis in Lebanon, feminine hygiene products have become a luxury since their prices have skyrocketed, and many females who cannot afford them are resorting to unhealthy alternative means during their menstruation (AFP 2021a).

The film continues to capture the disheartening reality of these marginalised children through the eyes and point of view of Zain who is forced into child labour instead of attending school. The envious and resentful look he has on his face as he glances at a minivan dropping some of the children in his neighbourhood from school while he is amid preparing for some home deliveries reveals the unfair conditions that children like Zain are subjected to. This emotional torture on his face is a common feature in neorealism. When asked to join school, he was faced by a total rejection from his father (Fadi Kamel Yousef) who believes that it is best for everyone if Zain continues to work for Asaad to support the family rather than attending school. As a result of the dire economic crisis that Lebanon is currently passing through coupled with a pandemic, many children are forced to drop out of school or never attend in the first place. A UK-based charity, Save the Children, warned that:

> The social and economic crisis in Lebanon is turning into an education catastrophe, with vulnerable children facing a real risk of never returning to school […] More than 1.2 million children in Lebanon have been out of school since the country's coronavirus outbreak began … (AFP 2021b)

This risk is for both Lebanese children as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees whose families cannot afford sending them anymore to school or provide them the necessary tools they need for education. This is resulting in more child labour and more little girls forced into marriage (2021b).

Zain is iconic of these underprivileged children. He spends his day making home deliveries before returning to the rotten building where he inhibits a small room with his parents. He is filmed mounting the noisy stairwell which is filled with dirt and the sounds of crying babies. He then ascends to his family's room which appears as a kind of architectural symptom of the under-development, decay, and neglect throughout the poorer parts of Beirut. This frames the dysfunctional cityscape aerial shots. In one of the scenes, Zain and his family are pictured sitting down on the floor having a very humble dinner in a candle lit room. The scene is captured through a handheld camera with tight medium shots on the family members gathered for dinner. Throughout the shots, this family appears trapped and suffocating in such a small

space. Ambience sound reveals loud noise coming from outside their room, which may be generators in the neighbourhood and a car alarm. The candles are used as a substitute for the lack of electricity not for the purpose of making the dinner appear more romantic. This picture of a family having just bread and some dips for dinner with no electricity is becoming the norm for many Lebanese people nowadays due to the lack of the state's power supply. While some people can still afford paying money for privately owned diesel-powered generators to supply them with electricity, the rest of the population prefer to save the money to put some bread on the table. In the absence of electricity, summer and winter are particularly very harsh seasons to survive in Lebanon. Summer 2021 have seen people suffocate from the heat and some were pictured sleeping on their Balconies (Charaf 2021) hoping to catch a passing breeze, but in the winter, many could face the risk of freezing to death. News of people dying due to extreme cold conditions at the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon always made the headlines during the freezing winter season, but this risk is now threatening the Lebanese as well who lack the basic resources to keep themselves warm during the harsh winters (Chamseddine and Kabalan 2021).

As the narrative evolves, Sahar's destiny and inevitable fate is decided by her father agreeing to marry her off to Assad in exchange for keeping a roof over his family's head and some chicken. Both parents appear desperate after taking this decision which will put their daughter's life in danger as it is presented later in the story. Poverty is represented in this film as the main factor that forces the parents to sell an eleven-year-old daughter to avoid becoming homeless with the rest of their children. Sahar is turned into a commodity or a financial transaction. While researching for the film, Labaki (2020) found that the parents are as much victims as their kids in the sense that:

> the mother in most of the cases was already married at a very young age just like her daughter and … unfortunately in 75% of the cases and these are based on studies the child repeats the same pattern.

Zain gets furious at his parents for sending Sahar away and feels helpless after his rescue plan of fleeing the house with her came out as a failure. Sahar is a victim of the patriarchal institution which oppresses women especially the vulnerable like Sahar. As Caputo (2018, 202) notes, the patriarchal system allows for women and girls to be treated like 'property or commodities in a system that devalues and dehumanises children and infantizes women'.

Unfortunately, in Lebanon child marriage remains legal. A law that would criminalise child marriage in Lebanon was introduced in the parliament in 2017 but it was never passed (Schaer 2021). In the absence of legal protection, marriage practices for young girls are seeing a dangerous increase in 2020-2021 due to the pandemic and the dire economic crisis in Lebanon (Schaer 2021). As a result, many girls from poor families are forced into marriages which have a negative impact on their life and health. Lemmon and ElHarake (2014, 4) highlight the consequences of this practice and state: 'Child marriage harms women and girls: it is a practice that disrupts a child bride's educational and economic opportunities, raises her chances of exposure to violence and abuse, threatens her health and the health of her children.'

Child marriage appears to be more prevalent among the Syrian refugees (40.5 per cent) who arrived in Lebanon because of the Syrian war/crisis that started in 2011 in addition to Palestinian refugees (12.0 Per cent from Lebanon, 25.0 per cent from Syria) and a minority of Lebanese girls (6.0 per cent) according to a survey conducted by UNICEF in 2015-2016 about the prevalence of child marriage in Lebanon (Hutchinson 2020).

However, due to the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon and the covid-19 pandemic, more young girls will be sold as brides. This unfortunate fate awaits many underage Lebanese girls and there is no visible solution for the near future.

After marrying Assaad, Sahar gets pregnant and faces a pregnancy issue which makes her suffer an extreme bleeding and eventually dies since her husband and parents could not admit her into a hospital because she is an undocumented child. In our interview, Labaki (2020) points out:

> Children are born and dying without anybody knowing because they're not being registered because unfortunately parents have to pay money to register their children […] they are completely invisible from the system that did not find solutions for them.

Many Lebanese are dying at the doors of the hospitals nowadays not only because they are undocumented as the film represents, but because they do not have money to be admitted into private hospitals as the public healthcare system is on the verge of collapse due to 'lack of funds for equipment, staff and supplies' (Layton 2021). Bizri (cited by Layton 2021) mentions that 'Eighty per cent of people cannot afford to pay [for private hospitals] and if they go to public hospitals, they may not have the right equipment'. These are few examples of how the Lebanese state and policies have failed to provide the Lebanese with their basic needs to survive.

Prior to Sahar's death, Zain decides to leave his parents' shelter and meets Rahil, an illegal migrant worker, and a single mother to an undocumented baby, Yonas. Rahil offers him a temporary refuge at her home. However, after a while Rahil was captured by the Lebanese general security due to her illegal residency, leaving Zain alone with Yonas. In the absence of Rahil, Zain took care of her baby and tried every possible way to find Yonas something to eat so he wouldn't starve. This representation of Zain as a carer makes him appear like an 'ideal citizen' in a world where adults are not and resonates with Michel Foucault's (1994; originally 1984) idea of 'the ethics of care of the self' which engages with the idea of citizenship (Pullen 2007, 197). By referring to this idea Pullen, (2007, 198) states: 'Those involved in childcare may reveal evidence of the ethics of the self through following ethical ideologies in society to make oneself competent for qualified citizenship.'

Labaki seems to be making a statement that Zain, who is an undocumented child is very much worthy of a citizenship, and more importantly he is entitled to get his basic human rights and be recognized as an existing human being in the eyes of the society and the state.

However, when Zain found himself that he could no longer take care of Yonas because he is not in a better situation himself, he decided to sell him to a human trafficker, Aspro, who manipulated and convinced him that Yonas will be in good hands with a new family. Zain who did not know Aspro's real intentions believed that he was doing the right thing and what is deemed best for Yonas in the absence of his mother. In this chaotic dystopia, children and babies are sold cheaply and there is no concern for their health and wellbeing. They are brought up on the rough streets and the government does not intervene to protect them or offer any help.

Zain returns to his parent's place only to find out that Sahar has died due to the pregnancy complication. This traumatizing news fuelled him with rage as he instinctively grabs a knife and runs outside his building towards Assad's minimarket where he stabs him with the knife and gets captured by the police and taken into Juvenile prison. It is once he gets into prison that he decides to sue his parents for bringing him into this brutal world and which brings us back to

where the film started. When the judge asks Zain what he wants from his parents, Zain responds 'I want them to stop having children', this statement occurs after Zain knew that his mother (Kawsar Al Haddad) is already pregnant again. With this bold statement communicated by an innocent child, the film argues that those who are impoverished must stop procreating children. This may also imply that they should abstain from sexual intercourse. Since for example Zain's mother, cannot resort to abortion in case of an unwanted pregnancy because abortion is illegal in Lebanon. Any woman who attempts to abort illegally would face severe consequences and legal prosecution along with whoever aborts or assist her in the act (Kaddour Et al. 2002). Additionally, Kaddour et al. (2002, 57) argues that:

> In Lebanon, the extent of contraceptive use is determined less by individual preference and more by availability. Access to contraception varies widely according to region, income, peer and family approval, age, legal restrictions, and even the time at which a request is submitted.

It can be argued that a poor family like the one depicted in the film which can barely put bread on the table would not be able to afford buying any contraceptive method. However, there are NGOs who are dedicated to help the poor have access to free birth control (Ghali 2021), but this also depends on whether these people living in these marginalized communities are aware that these NGOs exist and can have access to them. Therefore, there are so many obstacles that may act as barriers for getting hold on contraception. Due to all that, Seghaier (2018) argues that the film transmits a message that sex, and pleasure are luxuries that the poor are not entitled to have. Furthermore, this reinforces the theme of dystopia, where pleasure is denied and prohibited.

However, in this dystopic Beirut there is still room for some hope, as the story of Zain unfolds on him receiving help from a lawyer named Nadine, played by Labaki herself who assists him in obtaining official identity documents. The ending of the film sees Labaki's directorial style alternate between a Hollywoodian tradition echoed in the happy reunion between Rahil and her stolen baby who was rescued from the human trafficker and an Italian neorealist tradition as revealed in the last medium shot of the film on Zain smiling for the camera as his photo of identification was taken providing evidence for his citizenship. This final shot could be also read as a reference to Fellini's finale in *Night of Cabiria* (1957), which cannot be seen as a happy ending, but rather an unresolved ending with a glimpse of hope, reminiscent of neorealist films. However, the way Zain's story unfolds does not reflect the reality of these forgotten children who will remain stateless for the coming years with no one to rescue them unless the Lebanese government or the international community find a solution.

Conclusion

Labaki's main target and mission was to give a voice for these children (Labaki 2020) and the film effectively critiques the failed Lebanese system which renders people invisible, on the margins, and highlights the issue and dire consequences of child brides, poverty, child labour and undocumented children. However, the film does not provide any solutions for these people besides prompting those who cannot afford having children to not have them. If *Capernaum* (2018) was to be filmed in 2021-2022 it would be deceiving if it focused only on poverty in the slums of Beirut, for the fact is that most of the Lebanese population residing in all parts of the country are now living below the poverty line, unable to make ends meet and lacking basic means of life to survive. Lebanon in 2022 has become a living hell for most of its population not just those living in the slums as Lebanon battles one of the worst economic crises in modern history.

In the wake of the Arab spring 2011, a civil uprising started in Lebanon on October 17, 2019, against the regime which has been leading the country into a void due to mismanagement and corruption. The situation deteriorated dramatically when an explosion which was considered one of the 'most powerful non-nuclear explosion of the 21st century' according to Dr Rigby (cited by Amos and Rincon 2020) occurred at Beirut port on August 4, 2020, due to the ignition of 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate which was stored unsafely in a warehouse for almost six years (BBC 2021). The government who was made aware about this possible danger months before, did nothing to prevent this catastrophe (Nakhoul and Bassam 2020) which claimed the lives of more than 200 people, injured more than 6500 and damaged 300,000 home (AlJazeera 2021). Beirut subsequently resembled a dystopia, emerging from an apocalypse after the port explosion.

Following, the port explosion was the almost total collapse of the Lebanese economy, which worsened further during the coronavirus pandemic (2020-) and the deterioration of the value of the Lebanese currency which lost nearly 95 percent of its value since 2019 (Chehayeb 2022). This have pushed an estimate of 78 percent of the Lebanese to live below the poverty line according to the UN (Chehayeb 2021). The annual inflation rate in Lebanon has reached a new high record, 224.39 percent, in December 2021 (Mahfouz 2022). The country is also witnessing mass exodus of its youth and working population since unemployment rates have been skyrocketing (Taha 2021) and those who have no means to leave are resorting to illegal migration on sea boats often facing the danger of dying in the sea or being captured and detained (Chehayeb and Marsi 2022, The Associated Press 2021). The Beirut that was once considered the 'jewel' of the Middle East, the hub of culture, festivals and tourism became a ruined ghost town that plunges into darkness and total silence at night due to electricity cuts caused by lack of fuel (Layton 2021). It has turned into a place where dreams are crushed and shattered with no visible solution for the near future.

Lebanon now is in a state of disorder lacking all basic human needs. Beirut is not a vibrant place anymore. It is a condition that represents a psychological state. The city initiates trauma and suffering for many of its citizens. Inhabitants of Beirut feel out of place and question their belonging. Beirut now, more than ever, has become '*Capernaum*', a state of chaos in stasis. The Lebanese population urgently need an 'honest rescue plan' a 'real change', and 'true justice' for all the crimes committed against them by incompetent Lebanese governments throughout the decades. This proves that *Capernaum* (2018), has become a portrait of almost the whole country not just the poor neighbourhoods and marginalized communities as this paper has argued. By utilising the power of cinema, Labaki has brought to light the unsightly realities of contemporary Lebanon that must be honestly confronted for the country to have any hope of recovery.

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Harvey Nichols Fashion Shows, Vintage Fairs, and the Holy Eucharist: Manchester Cathedral as Post-Secular Place

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ABSTRACT

In my studies of the public theology of Manchester Cathedral, one area of my research has been to understand how the space of a Cathedral has (and is) being reconfigured in a post-secular age. Jürgen Habermas coined the term 'post-secularity' in 2001 to describe the phenomenon of the breakdown between conceptual categories of the secular and the sacred. For Habermas, the secular thesis of modernity had in some ways failed, and the resurgence of religion in the public sphere presented and still presents challenges of how our common life can be built together in an age of pluralism and globalisation. I want to demonstrate in this paper the ways in which Manchester Cathedral navigates this post-secular reality and attempts to provide a sense of place in the context of increasing plurality in the region of Greater Manchester.

KEYWORDS

Cathedral, Post-secular, Jürgen Habermas, Public sphere, Sacred space

Introduction

I am a researcher at the University of Manchester doing a collaborative project with Manchester Cathedral entitled Critically Evaluate the Public Theology of Manchester Cathedral.[1] The project is an in-depth case study which analyses the continuing participation of Manchester Cathedral in the public sphere through its various activities and networks. When I read the description of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network conference and the theme 'dreaming of another place' I could not help but see the connections with the research I have been doing at Manchester Cathedral. This is because the current leadership and Chapter at Manchester Cathedral collectively dream of 'another place' and create networks and activities to help achieve their vision of a just and flourishing society. Manchester Cathedral's religious and theological vision is shaped by the belief that all of humanity is created and loved by God, and therefore all humans share in this common humanity. Therefore, the Cathedral's dreams of another place tend to centre around the values of inclusion and diversity. The Cathedral attempts to be a space of common ground, or an inclusive public place, that provides a sense of community and meaning in the context of Greater Manchester, which is a region characterised by the diversity of its citizens.

In this paper I will show how Manchester Cathedral navigates the social dynamics present within a post-secular environment as it attempts to be a common place for people of all faiths and non. I will firstly describe the concept of post-secularism as this provides a significant

1 I would like to thank the dean, Chapter, clergy, and other staff at Manchester Cathedral who have made this project possible. The information and data presented in this article are either from sources available in the public domain or have been acquired during recorded interviews. All the data used from recorded interviews has been used in accordance with the written consent given by participants.

context for understanding the enduring presence of Cathedrals, and religion more broadly, in British society.[2] I will then demonstrate how Manchester Cathedral's post-secular character blurs the lines between the sacred and the secular, insider and outsider, and dominant public spheres and subaltern counterpublics. Finally, I will discuss the implications and potentials for post-secular institutions that aim towards facilitating common spaces.

Religion in the post-secular public sphere

One of the key questions that I seek to address in my research on the public theology of Manchester Cathedral is to ask what the public sphere is, how it should be fostered, and what role religion should play within it. The work of Jürgen Habermas is foundational for the interrogation of the concept of the public sphere and the role that religions can play in public life.[3] However, in order to understand Habermas's argument for the continuing significance of religion in democratic societies we need to attend to his concept of the post-secular.

Habermas coined the term 'post-secular' in his 2001 speech *Faith and Knowledge* (Habermas 2003). He used this term to describe the continuing, and somewhat surprising, significance and presence of religion in society despite the impact of secularism, particularly in the West. The secular thesis in its most basic form predicted that the more enlightened we became as a society, through scientific rationality, the less religious we would become (Graham 2013, 12).

For example, in 1959 the sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote:

> Once, the world was filled with the sacred - in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the reformation and renaissance, the forces of modernisation swept across the globe and secularisation, a morally historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether, except possibly in the private realm (1959, 32-33).

However, there is common consensus among sociologists that these predictions have proven to be incorrect. In Europe, whilst church attendance might be declining, the deinstitutionalisation of Christianity has led to the emergence of a plurality of forms of religious adherence and practice. For example, the rise in the language of people identifying as 'spiritual but not religious' and the emergence of new religious movements demonstrate an increase in fascination with the sacred without being mediated by institutional forms of belief and practice. In addition, the rise of fundamentalist radicalisation demonstrates that religion is not disappearing from public view (Habermas 2008b, 18).

These realities led Peter Berger, who was once a proponent of the secular thesis, to argue:

> The world today, with some exceptions [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled 'secularization theory' is essential mistaken (1999, 2).

It is important to note that we cannot reject the secularisation thesis altogether as religion,

2 Given that my research question is about Manchester Cathedral, much of my research is understood within and applied to a British context. I hope however, that readers who read from another context will still find this paper relevant.

3 Habermas's 1962 book *The Structural transformation of the public sphere* lays the foundation for his subsequent political philosophies.

despite its new visibility, is not visible in the same way as in previous eras. As Elaine Graham reminds us, 'The "post" in "post-secularity" does not mean "not secular" but names the instability of the label secular' (2017, 38). Graham further argues elsewhere that both the church and wider society are caught between two experiences: secularism and the new visibility of religion (2013, 3). For Habermas, this does not mean insignificance of religion, nor does it indicate the potential for religions to dominate the public sphere. Rather, the new visibility of religion requires the need to understand the proper significance of religion within democratic societies (2008a, 5-8).

Particularly in his later work, Habermas has been keen to find the proper place of religion in a healthy and flourishing public sphere. For Habermas, the public sphere is the realm in which individuals gather as citizens to reason and debate, with the intention of achieving consensus about issues of public concern, in order to influence the political realm. Importantly, the public sphere must be free of control and domination by the state, a religious group, or any other faction. Yet for Habermas, there is a tension between secular, naturalistic world views, and religious world views that are represented within the public (2008b, 1-4).

Habermas argues that increasingly, in part due to the recent advances of brain research, robotics, and biogenetics, there is a 'hard' secularism that adopts a naturalistic worldview in which understandings about action and communication are understood through objectifying categories of natural science. On the other hand, despite the spread of these naturalistic worldviews, religious communities and traditions seem to be revitalised, and increasingly engaged in political arenas. He argues that a more generous approach to religious traditions understands them to be part of the history of reason, and thus has the capability of communicating with the secular what might be missing in purely naturalistic forms of reason. He states:

> Even today, religious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering. They rescue from oblivion the dimensions of our social and personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalization have caused utter devastation (2008a, 6).

Thus, Habermas's philosophy is agnostic in that his arguments about religion in the public sphere do not depend on any metaphysical claims. Rather, his post-secular approach seeks to understand how the religious and the secular can interact with one another to foster moral energy in the public sphere (2008b, 209-248).

Therefore, the post-secular theory recognises the continual presence of religion within society, despite it taking different forms to previous eras. As a result, this post-secular environment demonstrates the need to develop practices and theories through which religious and non-religious participants in the public sphere can be open to joint discovery of meaning through dialogue and interaction with one another. This is the context in which I want to analyse Manchester Cathedral as a post-secular place. While Habermas and others might theorise about the role religions should play in the public sphere, it is important to attend to those religious institutions that are already involved in public life to see what may be learned about religions in the public sphere.

Introducing Manchester Cathedral

It is perhaps surprising that despite the frequent claims that we live in an increasingly secular society, Cathedrals still play a significant role in public life. For example, Simon Oliver argues:

> When bombs explode on our streets, a member of the Royal family dies, a nation remembers its war dead, or a national charity wants to celebrate the anniversary of its founding, we default to a more substantial and enduring 'middle', the Cathedral, which […] provides an expression of unity and hope that exceeds the chaotic pluralities of modern society. It is a genuine via media, lying comprehensively in the middle of public and private, sacred, and secular, heaven and earth (2017, 31).

This assessment from Oliver is no less true of Manchester Cathedral. Manchester Cathedral is a small Cathedral in comparison to other Cathedrals such as Lincoln Cathedral or Norwich Cathedral. In fact, it is one of the smallest Cathedrals in this country, both in terms of its physical size and with a comparatively small staffing body that oversee its operations. Yet, despite its size Manchester Cathedral is a busy Cathedral, in that it not only attracts visitors and tourists into its doors daily, but it frequently plays host to a range of public events and activities. For worship, the Cathedral is used for regular Eucharist services, daily morning and evening prayer and choral evensong services. It is used by prayer groups and is often used by other church-based organisations for their events.

The dean frequently hosts forums in which discussions and debates about prevalent social issues, such as racism and hate crime, are discussed. For example, on 28 October 2021, the Cathedral held their inaugural Thomas Clarkson day, which is a now annual event celebrating the abolitionist work of Thomas Clarkson, who gave a speech in Manchester Cathedral campaigning against the transatlantic slave trade. The speech led to tremendous support from the city and was thus a momentous milestone in the history of the abolition movement. This event focused on the roles religions can play in tackling modern racism in contemporary society with a keynote lecture given by a professor from the University of Manchester, Dr. Andrew Boakye. The event also focused on the continuing problems of modern slavery. Therefore, the Cathedral was filled with stalls from organisations that are involved in various ways in working against modern slavery in British societies.

Further, the Cathedral's social justice activity consistently takes a thoroughly interreligious character, in which people from different faith backgrounds, and those who do not adhere to any religion are invited to participate. The dean of the Cathedral, Rogers Govender, explained to me, using the topic of climate change as an illustration:

> Climate change affects all people. Not just Christians or Hindus or Muslims. It affects all of us. So, all of us have got to tackle it together because it is part of our common interest and need to preserve our environment for the good of everybody: for the common good. I think if we understand religion in a tribal and insular way then I think we have misunderstood religion and God.

These events and activities give a limited picture of the types of events that the Cathedral is used for and the character of the Cathedral. However, the Cathedral is also used for what some may refer to as more 'profane' events. For example, the Cathedral has used the space as a concert venue for rock bands, solo artists such as Alicia Keys, orchestras, choirs, and other types of musical ensembles. The space is sometimes used for whiskey, rum, and gin festivals. Harvey Nichols has used the space for several fashion shows there in which a catwalk has been erected down the middle of the Cathedral Nave where the models display the garments. There are quite often vintage fairs, where the Cathedral is turned into a kind of marketplace filled with

different stalls from individuals and businesses.

There are many other types of commercial events that the Cathedral hosts. When I asked Govender and the director of development and fundraising if there were any limits to what the Cathedral could rent the space out for, they said 'we will not accept anything that is dehumanising or goes against the Cathedral's values of inclusion and diversity'. For example, Govender said to me in another recorded interview 'we will not host any organisation or event associated with racism or homophobia'.

In recent years some Cathedrals have made their way into the news because of the commercial activities that they have hosted within their walls. For example, in August 2019 Norwich Cathedral erected a fully sized helter-skelter in its nave which some have deemed to be an unprofessional move by the Cathedral team.[4] Another example could be seen in July of 2019 when Rochester Cathedral installed a crazy golf course down its central aisle, which also received criticism.[5] However, Manchester Cathedral under the current leadership has been using its space for 'secular' commercial activities for the last twelve years. The first event of this kind that took place was in November 2009 when the band Grizzly Bear performed a rock concert.

In the following sections I will argue that Manchester Cathedral's decision to host commercial events is deeply significant in its attempts to foster a common place within Greater Manchester, as it blurs several traditional lines often operational between different groups of people. I will demonstrate how the Cathedral, in this way, blurs the lines between the sacred and the secular, insider and outsider, and divisions between dominant publics and subaltern counterpublics.

Cathedrals and commercial activity: Blurring the lines between the sacred and secular

This recent turn to the use of Cathedrals for commercial purposes can only be understood once one understands the financial context in which Cathedrals operate. Cathedrals in Britain largely depend on tourist donations and regular congregation-based offerings in order to cover their costs. However, with increasing costs associated with maintaining a building as old as a Cathedral, visitor donations and congregational offerings are not, for many Cathedrals, meeting the financial needs of the buildings. Manchester Cathedral is no exception to this reality. While some Cathedrals have a large portfolio of other properties that keep the income flowing in (or are at least available to sell in order to meet the financial needs of the Cathedral), Manchester Cathedral does not. The increasingly troubling financial situation led the current Dean of the Cathedral to create and fill a position at the Cathedral titled 'the director of fundraising and development'. The position was filled by Anthony O'Connor in September 2008. Among exploring other income streams, such as grants, O'Connor networked with several businesses in the city and advertised the Cathedral as a venue for commercial events.

On one level, we could simply see these activities and events nothing more than good business opportunity for the Cathedral. We could reduce it to a needs-must relationship whereby the Cathedral team tolerates these activities because they make the Cathedral financially viable to continue its 'real ministry' of prayer and worship. But I want to argue that this is not the case. In part this is because the post-secular reality that I have outlined at the beginning of this article does not allow us to reduce activities to purely secular or purely sacred. Instead, these commercial events contribute to the task of building a community of diverse people groups

4 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-49292493
5 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-49162116

within the city.

It is important to note, however, that the contemporary post-secular context is not the first in which Cathedrals have been used for 'profane' activities. During the medieval period Cathedrals would be used as a place for dances in the evening, and a marketplace during the day. This was before the Gothic Revival of the nineteenth century era when they filled Cathedrals with pews and reduced its activity to the purely sacred (Muskett 2019, 93-94). It was at this point that church halls were built outside of liturgical areas in order to keep mundane activity out of the sacred spaces.

As Anthony O'Connor said to me:

> The Victorians then came along and the filled these churches with pews and basically made it so that you came in and you sat, and you faced east, and you had your heads down praying. What we are trying to do is to really look at bringing the medieval concept back. Where churches are places for the community and the centres of our community, so they come together to work. On a Saturday then they would come and have a dance on a Saturday night, and they would come together and pray on a Sunday morning.

It is important to note that part of the reason that the medieval churches could conduct themselves in this way is because religion permeated every area of life for English citizens at that time. In our post-secular context however, this is not the case. Still, I think the recovery of the medieval approach, rather than the Victorian approach, in this post-secular Cathedral is also an attempt to resist the boundary-marking practices developed in the Victorian era. As Judith A. Muskett (2019) argues, part of the reason that the Victorian church adapted the spaces to only be used for 'sacred' activity, was to establish firm boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Therefore, while the turn to the medieval approach should not be understood as an attempt to go back to some golden age of Christendom, it should be recognised that the Cathedral is attempting to blur the lines between insiders and outsiders, public and private, sacred and secular, that were established in the Victorian period.

It is this dissolving of fixed binaries that is characteristic of post-secular religious organisations generally, and Manchester Cathedral specifically. The Cathedral becoming a common place in this way is thoroughly post-secular because through these activities, it refuses to accept the common assumption that the secular and the sacred should be kept strictly separate. While the Cathedral team recognises a difference between sacred and secular activities, Manchester Cathedral demonstrates the potential for overlaps of both. While Cathedrals are often referred to as both sacred spaces and common ground, these commercial events demonstrate the blurring of the lines between these aspects.

'Manchester Cathedral is your Cathedral': Blurring the lines between insider and outsider

Part of the reason for this turn at Manchester Cathedral is because the current Cathedral team has a particular vision and understanding of what type of place it should be in the context of the city of Manchester. During a round of interviews that I had with the Cathedral clergy, one phrase that was often repeated about the aims of Manchester Cathedral is that it aims to be 'a Cathedral for people of all faiths and non.' The Cathedral aims to be a spiritual hub for the city, that is inclusive and welcoming to all, regardless of personal beliefs. Further, the Cathedral

team want those in the city to understand that the Cathedral does not simply belong to the Established Church, but that it also belongs to those in the city.

The opening of the space in this way generates a sense of place in which diverse varieties of actors claim ownership of a specifically religious building, that is being used for a wide range of purposes, with the common theme of being an open, inclusive, and common space for all people. As a result, the lines between insider and outsider are blurred because the Cathedral does not require specific identity markers, such as religious adherence, in order for somebody to claim ownership of the Cathedral in some way.

One key example of the blurring of the line between insiders and outsiders is the use of art, and art exhibitions in Cathedrals. Cathedrals can host art exhibitions and have space to inquire and explore in the context of diverse community what the art itself is trying to teach. This is in part, because the Cathedral is a piece of art, in that it is an embodied reminder of the realities of life that go beyond what we can articulate only in words. Classical Christian theology argues that one aspect common to humans across all times and cultures is that we are oriented towards the beautiful. It is within the pursuit of the beautiful that we construct common meanings and visions of flourishing. Art is often the embodied expression and interpretation of these visions and meanings.

This is in part why, Nicola Slee argues, sponsorship of the arts is an ancient practice in the Church. She writes:

> Church sponsorship of the arts is, we might say, one very ancient example of public theology that seeks to create spaces for interaction of culture and religion in which both may be challenged, enriched and broadened […] Church buildings themselves are spaces in which the arts live and thrive and mingle, and they are significant public spaces in which conversation around the art can take place and analysis of the values enshrined in the works of art can be encouraged and in which the divide between insider and outsider can be blurred (2015, 25).

However, the blurring of the line between insiders and outsiders can sometimes produce tensions and moments of negotiation when the space is needed to be used for multiple activities at the same time. For example, during the summer of 2021 I attended a Sunday Eucharist service with some family and friends. I emailed one member of the clergy ahead of time just to let them know we were coming to the service, and they informed me that the service would be slightly different, due to an event happening in the evening. The Nave, which is usually used for Eucharist services, was out of bounds that day, because the space was being used in the evening by the National Youth Music Theatre who were putting on a production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. As a result, the congregation were situated in the Cathedral's Regiment Chapel, a small chapel on one side of the Cathedral. The congregation were less spaced apart and the clergy at the front were much closer to the attendants. Further, the type of organ that was used was different. In short, the liturgy remained the same as it would have been in the Nave, but the way the liturgy was performed had to be adapted.

Thus, for the space to function in multiple capacities, there must be negotiations, compromises, and efforts made from both the Cathedral team and those using the space. In this case, the liturgy had to take place in another chapel, but the set-up crew for the performance could not work during the Sunday Eucharist liturgy. This is a small example of the everyday negotiations

that take place at Manchester Cathedral, but such interactions build the networks and relationships with the Cathedral and the city and blur the lines between insider and outsider.[6]

Host to the counterpublics: Blurring the lines between the dominant public sphere and subaltern counterpublic spheres.

However, the desire to be a common place and to blur the lines between insider and outsider can potentially, though perhaps unwittingly, still lead to forms of exclusion. To illustrate this point, an analysis of a critique of Habermas' work from the perspective of feminist theorist Nancy Fraser (1990) demonstrates how exclusions can be present even in attempts to be public. In his original portrayal of the history of the public sphere, Habermas suggested that the public sphere was exclusionary in terms of race and gender. For Habermas, the public sphere in its original construction was dominated by males, specifically white, European males (1962, 33). However, Fraser argues that this construal of the public sphere is to already subscribe to a notion of publicness that is masculinist. The result of which is to forget the ways in which women operated within competing public spheres, and to idealise the exclusionary liberal public sphere, which she argues is exactly what Habermas does (1990, 60-61). Because Habermas constructs the public sphere in such a way that the exclusions that took place in the bourgeois public spheres' emergence are accidental, he fails to recognize how the public sphere itself was a 'masculinist, ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class' (Fraser 1990, 66).

This is significant for my analysis, because it raises the question of whether institutions, such as Manchester Cathedral, that aim to be a common place do so with the same kind of homogenising presuppositions present in Habermas' theory? Because attempts at publicness can already assume forms of publicness that exclude minority groups and their understandings of reason, the good, politics, the social, etc. the question is raised whether the Cathedral's attempt to be a place for people of all faiths and non depends on the absorption of difference? i.e., does the Cathedral's blurring of the lines between insider and outsider do so at the cost of particularity?

However, I would argue that while this is a risk for institutions that aim towards finding common ground, it is not the only possible outcome. Attempts to form a common place can often lead to the exclusion of those who do not or cannot conform to dominant understandings of what it means to be human and to flourish in society. However, these groups do not simply dissolve because they are not accepted by dominant public spheres. Instead, these excluded people groups generate counterpublics that are governed by their own forms of reason.

I will quote Fraser (1990) at length here to show how these counterpublics form:

> This history records that members of subordinated social groups-women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. Perhaps the most striking example is the late-twentieth century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic, with its variegated array of

6 For more on the theme of contestation and negotiation in Cathedrals see Calvert (2019) pp. 523-540

> journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places. In this public sphere, feminist women have invented new terms for describing social reality, including 'sexism', 'the double shift', 'sexual harassment', and 'marital, date, and acquaintance rape'. Armed with such language, we have recast our needs and identities, thereby reducing, although not eliminating, the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres (1990, 67).

Thus, publicness can take numerous forms, and reason can be understood in a plurality of ways. It is my view that Cathedrals have the potential to use their space and power to convene together these subaltern counter publics, so that they may interact with other competing publics. In a sense, if the earlier quote from Simon Oliver is correct, Cathedrals can also act as a genuine middle between counterpublics and dominant public spheres. To put it another way, the Cathedral's theological commitment to our common humanity should not lead the Cathedral to believe it can subsume all of humanity into one overarching theory of what it means to be human. Instead, the Cathedral's commitment to common humanity can be ground upon which practices, with various visions and perspectives about what it means to be human, can be articulated and listened to. In this way, Cathedrals can potentially provide platforms and arenas in which the questions and perspectives raised in and through these counterpublics can be discussed and explored with diverse people groups.

Following from the above view that Cathedrals can be host to counterpublics and subaltern publics, Cathedrals can uniquely make room for various kinds of expressions and modes of reasoning often accepted by the most dominant public spheres. For example, Habermas assumes a narrow understanding of publicness as debate and dialogue. Even where Habermas allows for religious reasoning to be included, he does so with the view that both the religious participants and secular participants should thoroughly translate the religious argument into secular terms. However, this too narrow focus on 'rational debate' excludes other forms of knowledge and reason. For example, David Tracy argues that engagement with 'classics' whether they be in the context of religion, music or art, etc. enables us to discover together about our shared humanity, and to join in the task of meaning making. (Tracy 2014, 333-334).

Pushing the boundaries of what should be considered a 'classic', Stephen B. Roberts (2017), in an article entitled 'Beyond the classic: Lady Gaga and theology in the wild public sphere', argues that Lady Gaga acts as a public theologian in that through her music she generates and participates in a subaltern counterpublic sphere. Specifically, the public sphere she aims for is one that does not fit within the heteronormative dominant public sphere(s). Songs such as 'Born This Way' are 'classics' in that they articulate a vision of human diversity and beauty that a 'wild public' connects with (Roberts 2017, 163-187). Cathedrals are uniquely placed to be able to host an artist such as Lady Gaga and to subsequently explore the meanings of the music and the visions of human flourishing present within it.

These practices of engaging with 'classics' and art are significant in the engagement and hosting of subaltern counterpublics because subaltern counterpublics often articulate their social visions and understandings through the use of art. Importantly, the exploration of art, from all publics, as I have argued above, blurs the divides between insiders and outsiders. Thus, the use of Cathedral spaces for commercial purposes demonstrate that Cathedrals can host various events, with different purposes, for a variety of publics, which blurs distinctions between insiders and

outsiders, without necessarily absorbing the particularities of those who claim ownership of the Cathedral. Cathedrals, in short can host subaltern counterpublics which seek to articulate their own visions of human meaning and flourishing in ways that are not always deemed meaningful or reasonable by the dominant public spheres.

Post-secular activity and the building of social capital between the Cathedral and the city.

So far in this article I have tried to articulate an understanding of the present roles of Cathedrals, and specifically Manchester Cathedral, in their cities and the way that they seek to be a common place for a wide public in the context of post-secular societies. I want in this final section to make connections between the discussion of the nature of the public sphere and the roles that Cathedrals have in post-secular societies in order to demonstrate that Cathedrals have the capacity to generate a sense of place that multiple diverse publics can use in order to articulate their own perspectives on social issues and the continual task of living together in the context of diversity and pluralism.

As I have demonstrated, Habermas has been concerned to articulate a theory of the public sphere through which a flourishing public sphere can be developed for individuals to gather as citizens and discuss issues of common concern. Yet, one aspect of the possibility of generating a flourishing public sphere that is perhaps underappreciated by Habermas in his work is the necessity of social capital being generated between various groups.

Social capital is not a term exclusive to relationships between religious organisations and secular organisations together. As Robert Putnam, who is one researcher who has contributed to the concept being more widely adopted and used in different fields of study, describes social capital in this way:

> Social capital here refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (1994, 167).

However, while the term is used broadly to describe features of social organisation within society, applying this concept to religious communities that desire to engage in the public sphere is crucial. This is because religious communities and organisations are often viewed with suspicion. Niclas Berggren and Christian Bjørnskov conducted a study analysing the negative correlation between social trust and the importance of religion. They argue:

> The main reason to expect a negative effect, of the kind we have identified, is that religions may cause division and rift, both in that religious people may distrust those who do not share their beliefs and who are not subject to the same enforcement mechanisms as they are, and in that non-religious people may regard with suspicion those who take religiosity seriously (2011, 474).

Further, the mistrust and suspicion are not simply shared by religious communities and non-religious communities. Rather, subaltern counterpublics are also suspicious of dominant publics which have excluded them previously. If, as I have argued, Cathedrals are to be a common place in our contemporary post-secular environment then social capital must be generated in order for meaningful dialogues to take place between diverse people groups.

As Geir Skeie has argued, one way that social capital can be generated is through mutual participation in cultural activities (2019, 1-15). I suggest that Cathedrals hosting commercial, and supposedly 'profane' activities, contribute to its wider work of building a sense of place for different people groups, as Cathedrals such as Manchester Cathedral continually demonstrate its value as an inclusive space for multiple groups with multiple purposes. The openness to such activity has arguably generated trust between the Cathedral and inhabitants of the city, so that those who do not necessarily participate in the worship life of the Cathedral still see the Cathedral as its own.

When I talk with Cathedral staff at Manchester, one of the most significant events that gets brought up consistently is a memorial service that took place one year after the Manchester Arena bombing. The Cathedral was approached by key authority figures in the city to host this event because it has built a reputation over time as being a hospitable place that stands for peace and inclusion. As Jeremy Gregory writes:

> The Cathedral's position in the life of the city remains strikingly strong in the twenty-first century (arguably even stronger now than at some times in its past) and aspects of its contemporary role and symbolic influence, seen for example in the special services to mark particular Manchester events, such as those after the 2017 Manchester Arena bomb, echo the civic responsibilities and aspirations of its fifteenth-century founders (2021, 3).

I am arguing here that the Cathedral, through hosting multiple events of many different kinds, has generated social capital between various people groups who claim some sense of ownership of the Cathedral, seeing it as their Cathedral, and not simply the Church's Cathedral. As a result of this the Cathedral has built a reputation of being a welcoming and inclusive place and has therefore become a favoured space for the city to use for events that promote unity and peace. In a moment of great pain and grief in the city of Manchester, the Cathedral was turned to because it was seen to be a common place in which the needs of this diverse city could be met when it mattered most.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to demonstrate how and why Cathedrals do, and should, play a continuing role in post-secular societies. Cathedrals are post-secular places, which blur the lines between sacred and secular, insider, and outsider, and often do this by hosting a variety of different events for different purposes within their walls. Further Cathedrals can play host to subaltern counterpublics, which blurs the lines between these and dominant public spheres. Rather than compartmentalising the work of Manchester Cathedral into strict boxes of religious, social justice, and commercial events, we have seen a blend and overlap of all these aspects of its work. Manchester Cathedral operates as a post-secular place where many different groups in its city can claim ownership is possible. It is my contention that Manchester Cathedral represents the productive possibilities of our contemporary post-secular environment whereby 'another place' can be collectively dreamt of in the context of discussion, debate, art, music, the Holy Eucharist, vintage fairs, and Harvey Nichols fashion shows.

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Redesigning Online Places for Consumer Wellbeing Using Unconventional Interaction Design Elements

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ABSTRACT

My research focuses on developing and providing design solutions that promote digital wellbeing for consumers and mitigate noisy experiences within digital interfaces. In this project, *noise* is defined as the high volume of sense-stimulating activity (such as pop-up notifications). I explore the design challenges associated with noisy digital experiences such as attention recruitment, distractive and 'cold' generic interfaces, screen time overuse, touch-poor and mindless interactions. I provide solutions to how these challenges could be addressed by exploring three interactions elements of visual attention, mindfulness, and touch, and testing them by developing prototypes. This project also aims to raise awareness between consumers, IT and software developers, UI and UX designers of designing more ethical and mindful online places for users.

This practice-based project adapts a Research through Design approach and uses Design Fiction methods. In response to design challenges, I created three fictional prototypes and near-future scenarios. The prototypes that I will present during the session include a mindfulness intervention tool that tracks screen time called *Birds*; a fictional *Yoshi Phone* with a monochrome hand-drawn interface; and *Shapie*, a shape changing communication device. I will also present the user manuals and the narratives for each prototype.

The fictional narratives will then be distributed together with the diegetic prototypes and an online questionnaire to industry professionals such as UI and UX designers, software developers and engineers to gain feedback. The insights collected from the industry professionals will be analysed and presented as part of the results of this study. I predict and recommend that noisy digital experiences can be mitigated by implementing mindful elements, purposefully using colour and shapes, hand-drawn interfaces, and touch-rich interactions, when designing noise-free digital interfaces.

KEYWORDS

Practice-based research, research through design, design fiction, unconventional interaction design elements, noise-free digital interfaces, consumer wellbeing

Introduction

Unethically designed technologies are likely to captivate consumer attention but at the expense of their wellbeing; therefore, it is a challenge for designers to design ethical technologies which have the opposite effect (Harris 2016). In the context of designing digital interfaces, it is important to create aesthetically pleasing interfaces, but also with critical and ethical awareness (Stopher et al 2021). I also speculate whether unconventional design approaches such as development of hand-drawn interfaces, mindful and touch-rich interface interactions and using design fiction to develop these dimensions can address the design challenges related

to unethically designed technologies. In the sections below, I explore three interaction design elements separately: visual attention, mindfulness, and tactility, and the design challenges related to each element. I also provide proposals on how to tackle these challenges. I then present methods and briefly describe the process used to develop these dimensions. At the end of this paper, I outline the next steps.

Visual attention

Attention is one of the most studied subjects in cognitive psychology research (Kramer, Wiegmann and Kirlik 2007). In this context, attention is a cognitive and behavioural ability to process visual information (James 1890). This process includes selectively paying attention to specific details by ignoring and tuning out other information. Economist Herbert Simon speculated that information overload will consume human attention and attention will become a scarce resource (1971). The term 'Attention economy' (Simon 1971) was coined to describe the management of information, because it is based on a concept that attention is a scarce commodity, and even a currency. According to recent research, consumers have a limited visual processing (Bays and Husain 2008; Cowan 2010) to an extent where a product or visual stimuli is competing for their attention over others (Florack, Egger, and Hübner 2020). This prompts the question of what happens to consumers when they are exposed to too much information. Information fatigue syndrome was coined by psychologist David Lewis, who found that research participants, when inundated with data, made more errors while performing tasks, misunderstood communication, and became snappy with their colleagues (Murray 1998). In this context, information fatigue syndrome is defined as consumers' suffering from being bombarded by the enormous volumes of streaming data such as infinite social media posts, pop-up notifications and ads, which have no purpose, meaning, or value to the users. According to this study, users who are paying continuous attention to social networking platforms and are experiencing information and communication technology overload, are subject to fatigue, stress, psychological, and physical strain (Lee et al 2016). This concludes that information overload negatively affects attention by causing fatigue and damages the ability to process data, which also has a negative impact on consumer wellbeing.

'Time Spent Well' became the next significant tech debate in 2018. It was sparked by a viral presentation at Google, 'A Call to Minimize Distraction and Respect User's Attention' (Harris 2013). This movement influenced large information technology companies such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Instagram, and Apple to incorporate 'Time Well Spent' like features. This also led to the co-founding of the Centre for Human Technology. CHT is a non-profit organisation which 'is dedicated to radically reimagining our digital infrastructure'. For example, their activities include activism such as testifying at the US Senate about the dangers of the use of persuasive technology on Internet platforms and supporting the development and release of the Netflix-documentary The Social Dilemma (2020), which explores the threats of social media for consumers. According to Case (2016), technology should not capture the user's attention unnecessarily or remain in the centre of the consumer's attention, but rather calmly exist in the user's periphery most of the time. This demonstrates that there is a major unresolved issue in the way current technologies, which are developed by large IT companies, are designed. This could be addressed by radically reimaging the interface, which would have a peripheral role in a consumer's life and should be designed with the effect on the user's attention in mind. However, a recent study outlines that there are 367 tools for digital wellbeing such as apps and browser extensions that help consumers to protect their attention from online distractions (Lyngs et al 2019). Some unconventional ones are even supported by large information technology companies such as Google. For example, an experimental digital wellbeing initiative, which was developed by Google Creative Lab, with open-source design interventions and experiments, allows designers to upload their own digital wellbeing interventions and users to test them. The features allow users to reflect on their digital habits and set digital wellbeing goals such as productivity, unplugging, minimizing distractions and creating healthy digital habits communally. This shows that there is potentially a market for unconventional digital

wellbeing tools that aim to minimize distractions, which potentially can be promoted and supported by large information technology companies. This also provides a validation for practice-based research.

Attention recruitment, distractive and cold 'generic' interfaces

As stated by Nir Eyal (2014), push notifications are designed to be addictive and distracting. He explains that habit-forming technologies and addictive apps are created by using the hook model. The hook model consists of four steps that influence the user's behavior to use the app: internal and external triggers, action, reward, and investment. In this scenario, the user might experience internal triggers such as boredom and fear of missing out and the push notification is designed to act as an external trigger for the user to act. The notification pops up on the screen and the user is hooked to enter the platform and check the notification on the app. The action is simple and leaves the user anticipating reward. According to Eyal (2014), the user is motivated to expect this because of the varying rewards that wait for the user on the app. The user can gain three types of rewards: rewards of the tribe, the hunt, and the self. They may temporarily fulfill the user but leave the user wanting more. The engagement and 'a bit of work' done by the user on the app are associated with the user's investment in continuing to return to the app. According to recent research, there are over 5 million apps combined on the Apple App Store and the Google Play Store (Statista 2020). Recent data from eMarketer also shows that the average smartphone user spends 90% of their mobile phone time on apps. From the point of a UX and UI designer, it could be argued that it is hard to design a digital application that stands out in this competitive product market and effectively engages with the consumers. I suggest developing apps without the habit-forming model would be an ethical approach, but possibly not successful in terms of consumer engagement because it would not 'hook' consumers to constantly use them. There is a need for more research in this area to investigate whether this challenge can be mitigated.

In addition to addictive and distractive notifications, another issue related to noisy digital interfaces is 'colour induced attentional recruitment'. Colours communicate the importance of the signal instead of detecting objects and are the first elements that grabs users' attention (Ramsøy 2017). If the user is exposed to lots of colour and contrast such as the iOS home screen of the device, apps, and notifications, the user is under a constant state of attentional recruitment. This research suggests that the underlying issue of the notification overload, app and device overuse is the colourful setup. I suggest that the use of colours and shapes are another important aspect when designing digital interfaces and that app developers use colour and shapes deliberately to 'grab' users' attention. In summary, the purposeful 'misuse' of the colours and shapes by app developers can cause addictive behaviour patterns and cognitive overload because colours impact users' emotions and behaviours. This indicates a need for redesigning the user interface for healthier use.

In addition to the issues of distracting interfaces that compete for the user's attention, there is an issue of generic 'cold' interfaces. In this context, 'cold' interfaces are the overuse of generic digital UI elements. Therefore, I refer to generic interfaces as 'cold'. Free UI kits, which are provided for designers and app developers by large IT companies such as Apple, Google, and Microsoft are very useful for effective and fast app prototyping. However, they seem to all share the same issue of genericness. This raises questions concerning the use of generic digital elements as standard, a norm that might negatively contribute to a 'cold' user experience. I suggest that warm hand-drawn interfaces can potentially mitigate noise withing digital interfaces. In this context, warm interfaces refer to hand-drawn UI elements. Padfield and Pakalkaitė (2019) explore whether hand-drawn digital interfaces could potentially be a better solution for the design of a digital application. These findings suggest that hand-drawn

interfaces, such as hand-drawn typefaces, icons, and interactive buttons, can provide a better and more emotionally engaging experience for users with mental health challenges. Recent research supports this hypothesis, with studies demonstrating how the viewing of artworks such as hand drawings enhances the wellbeing of adults with mental health conditions and exploring whether this concept could also be applied to the design of drawing elements for digital interfaces (Tomlinson et al 2018).

Proposal: Development of hand-drawn interfaces

According to Pakalkaitė (2021), hand-drawn digital interfaces constitute a new concern in UI and Human-Computer Interaction research. This research poses possibilities for hand-drawn digital interfaces to promote digital wellbeing largely by mitigating 'noise' in the digital interface, and potentially providing a more user-friendly and emotional experience for consumers more broadly. I think that the only way to generate new knowledge is to apply the concept of hand-drawn interfaces in practice by designing a prototype. Therefore, I propose to design a feature phone with a hand-drawn interface for this project. The interface design of this feature phone will have a monochrome colour palette, hand-drawn typeface, icons, buttons, and navigation system with modes to communicate a low-noise concept.

Mindfulness

According to Kabat-Zinn (2018), mindfulness is the ability to intentionally shift focus and attention to internal and external stimuli at the present moment. Mindfulness itself originates from ancient Buddhist teachings, but its principles and practice have been applied non-religiously to improve wellbeing in the Western world. A positive connection between emotional wellbeing and the practice of mindfulness has been established, as recent research suggests that mindfulness is greatly associated with an improved sense of wellbeing, enhanced attention, better decision-making, and even satisfaction with one's life and overall happiness (Brown and Ryan 2003). Mindfulness as a subject has been widely researched and applied successfully by academics in a comprehensive scope of scholarships from psychology and healthcare to design and art, and it has been even recognised officially as a separate field of science. The research around the positive impact of mindfulness has significantly increased since the 1990s and interest has been growing since. Nonetheless, the potential benefits of mindfulness should be critically analysed. Some researchers have argued that mindfulness meditation can have a negative impact because the practice of meditation can possibly distort one's view of oneself, evoke fits, and even cause depersonalisation disorder (Castillo 1990). However, the likelihood is that these outcomes would be found predominantly in people who already have severe mental health issues.

Mindfulness and Technology is an emerging design and research area that promotes bringing the user's self-awareness to the present moment instead of losing oneself in a technological device. It aims to create a balanced relationship with technology and encourages the mindful use of technology for consumers. Mindfulness also has emerged amongst the rising and future-shaping consumer trends, which promote wellness within the IT tools market (Well to Do Global 2018). Alternatively, Jeff Wilson (2016) points out that wellness and mindfulness have become 'a mechanism for selling products' for large corporations. The motives behind mindfulness as a rising trend within the wellness industry must be questioned and, so far, is under researched. Currently, mindfulness is already a fundamental factor in the successful intervention of addictive behaviour patterns, from mental health disorders to tech overuse, and in HCI in a very comprehensive range of fields: health, mental health, productivity, entertainment, lifestyle. Online mindfulness-based mobile applications as wellbeing interventions have

been effective in coping with information overload and self-regulating tech use. Alexis Hiniker (2017) conducted a study on how mindful use of media could be supported within families (parents and their children) and explored and tested this in terms of what methods would be the best to facilitate it. The findings of his study concluded that mindfulness was one of the most effective approaches for HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) behavioural interventions (Hiniker 2017). Therefore, recent research supports the argument that the use of mindful tech tools by consumers has important implications for emotional wellbeing and technologies that can effectively support emotional wellbeing and offer significant benefits to the consumers. This is why I suggest that mindfulness-based mobile and web applications could be introduced to track screen time to benefit users.

Screen time overuse and mindless interactions

Excessive screen time is associated with detrimental wellbeing, physical and mental health issues (Hale and Guan 2015). Recent research suggests that an average adult can spend up to 11 hours on a screen a day. According to health professionals, the recommended screen time limit is 1 hour for small children and 2 hours a day for older children and adults. This data suggests that adults overuse digital screens by up to five or six times the daily recommendation. Excessive screen time is also associated with the displacement hypothesis. It suggests that the use of digital screens replaces real-life activities which positively contribute to wellbeing. These findings should be considered carefully when designing digital interactions because of the potential risks to consumer wellbeing. Alternatively, moderate screen time might be positively contributing to wellbeing because it enables and empowers users 'to pursue their goals, be more active, feel connected to others and enjoy life' (Przybylski and Weinstein, 2018). The researchers found that high levels of daily screen-time particularly on weekdays and extremely low (or no) daily screen time was linked to lower levels of wellbeing. Additionally, one-hour of smartphone use a day was associated with optimum wellbeing. In conclusion, this data suggests that the relationship between digital screen time and wellbeing is curvilinear, therefore, it supports Przybylski's and Weinstein's (2018) digital 'Goldilocks hypothesis'.

Another important research and design inquiry is whether digital wellbeing is much more than just reducing Screen Time (Lukoff 2019). The term digital wellbeing itself suggests that there are issues around balancing a relationship with technology in a digital world. Digital wellbeing has recently emerged as a new domain of research. According to Kirby et al. (2018), it is referred to as 'an extension of the concept of wellbeing centred around the use of the online and digital world'. Jisc (2019) establishes the term digital wellbeing further as 'the capacity to look after personal health, safety, relationships and work-life balance in digital settings'. Therefore, it could be argued that digital wellbeing is not limited to reducing screen time. Jisc proposes that fostering digital wellbeing could include designing IT tools that promote participation in social and community activities, negotiation, and conflict resolution; manage digital overload and distraction; assist users in maintaining a healthy lifestyle (personal health, fitness, diet, mental health), 'act safely and responsibly in digital environments and with concern for the human and natural environment when using digital tools' (Jisc 2019).

In this context, mindless interactions are defined as interacting with the digital device unintentionally and losing track of time, which leads to excessive screen time and overuse. The concept of 'scrolling fatigue' has been introduced to describe the negative effects of the phenomenon of infinite feed features on social platforms, which is associated with overuse. In this context, scrolling or swiping fatigue describes the endless options provided to the users by algorithms in apps such as those used for dating or viewing images. A swiping mechanism within a digital application works in combination with behavioural reinforcement psychology, where a user

is rewarded by the action of swiping and with 'matches' or attractive images. Such rewards increase swiping behaviour, producing maladaptive behaviour patterns (Fullwood et al 2017), which could potentially have a negative impact on consumer wellbeing.

Proposal: Development of mindful interactions

In this context, noise within digital interfaces are the digital experiences that allow users to use screen time excessively and mindlessly. Therefore, I speculate whether the application of mindfulness could be used when mitigating noise within digital interfaces. In this project, I propose to develop a mindful screen tracker. The timer would allow the user to set intentional screen time goals and to track these goals. Also, I suggest using low-noise, hand-drawn visual clues to communicate time to the users. This technology could be developed further as a digital application and/or used as a special mindfulness feature when developing a feature phone. This also provides validation for practice-based research.

Touch and tactility

One of the features that distinguishes humans from other animals are hands and tool-using behaviour. Humans have a somatosensory system which allows us to experience a wide range of sensations such as different temperatures, textures, vibrations, and much more. A sense of touch is controlled by a complex and enormous network of touch receptors and nerve endings in our skin. Human hands and fingers have an especially high density of those receptors and nerve endings; therefore, we can interpret and process encoded tactile information using them. The sense of touch allows us to master complex skills such as playing musical instruments, creating paintings, and performing medical procedures. Touch also plays a significant role in consumer wellbeing. Research suggests that humans have developed a daily 'need for touch' and a lack of fulfilment of tactile needs is associated with lesser wellbeing (Peck and Johnson 2003; Patrick et al 2007). Relatedly it has been established that children learn through sensory play, because touch and exposure to a wide multitude of textures help to develop language and motor skills, to experience and learn about the world (Minogue and Jones 2006). Diversity of type, scale, and material is crucially important to sensory learning, as its function is to produce diverse knowledge about physical relationships and mechanics in the world, in a variety of circumstances (Lederman and Klatzky 1987). As such, limiting interactions to two-dimensional surfaces may result in a decreased ability to recognize 3D objects in the future and overall haptic perception, as well as affecting other linked cognitive development (e.g., language). Touch deprivation is also related to the current COVID-19 pandemic. To decrease the viral spread of COVID-19, the population kept themselves safe by wearing personal protective equipment, self-isolating and social-distancing. There is a large amount of research which proves how this pandemic has negatively affected our wellbeing. It can be deduced that humans are 'creatures of touch' because we need tactile experiences for our overall wellbeing.

Touchscreen technology went mainstream and has become a new norm in our everyday lives since the development of smartphones and the release of Apple's iPhone. Our sense of touch allows us, using touchscreens, to complete simple tasks. According to these studies, tactile need unfulfillment is related to increased smartphone use, whereby consumers 'high in the need for touch may demonstrate an overuse of a smartphone's touch screen to satisfy this need' (Lee et al 2014; Elhai et al 2016). This suggests that the touchscreen has become 'a digital surrogate for human tactile need fulfilment' because touch deprivation and tactile unfulfillment negatively impact consumers' touchscreen overuse (Barrios-O'Neill and Pakalkaitė 2022). The use of touch and tactility are also used in designing effective interventions to improve wellbeing and solve design challenges such as touchscreen device overuse. One example is

the trend of designing feature phones such Mudita and Punkt Phones with tactile keyboards. Two of Mudita's Pure Kickstarter campaigns have already exceeded their goals to produce and distribute them. Another interesting application of tactility is in the feature phone Punkt MP01 which has simple, more tactile and grippy hardware that encourages the user to interact with the device via a tactile keyboard. The first edition of Punkt MP01 was so successful that they released the second edition Punkt MP02, but with additional features such as connection to the Internet. Punkt MP01 has a minimalistic user interface with no app icons which allows the user to take a break from being overwhelmed by hyperconnectivity to the digital world.

Touch-poor interactions

In this context, touch-poor interactions are ones which lack ergonomic and elastic design. Recent studies also show that holding and using a touchscreen device for too long causes injuries such as arm, neck, hand, shoulder, finger, and thumb tension, pain, and even inflammation (Kim et al 2016). Touchscreen technology overuse in children is related to weaker muscular development, inability to grasp and write with tools, poorer verbal communication, and language acquisition (Intolo 2019; Toh et al 2017). Beyond the repetitive mechanics of mindless interaction simply leading to overuse of body movements, there may also be underlying issues with ergonomic design, where devices are not optimally designed to align with human anatomy. For example, Fellowes company suggests that current computer controls are designed for a horizontal hand position, which is prone to injury, instead of a vertical hand position, which is a better solution for human anatomy.

Screens and their devices are generally static themselves, and lack elasticity, therefore it limits the way we interact with the device. The only movement is happening within the interface. The way users control devices have been adapted from the keyboard, mouse, hand controls, and interfaces of personal computer keyboards, without considering the ergonomic impact on the consumers. Glassy smoothness is the main texture used to create the screens of touchscreen devices, which are currently mass reproduced. General textures such as roughness, hardness, softness, flexibility, grippiness, etc. are not often incorporated in devices. Experimentation with more diverse textures, however, is not new in HCI research, including in academia and within small tech companies and design firms.

According to Danielle Barrios-O'Neill and Joskaudė Pakalkaitė (2022), touch-rich describes hardware interface design which is rich in tactile information, and they explore whether touch-rich interactions mitigate noise within digital interfaces. I speculate whether designing touch-rich interactions can play a major role, when developing noise-free digital interfaces and redesigning online spaces. Barrios-O'Neill and Pakalkaitė (2022) explore how to produce touch-rich experiences and proposes design considerations for texture, elasticity, gesturality, and interpolation. My focus is on elasticity and elastic design and how it can potentially mitigate noisy digital experiences in my doctoral project. Elasticity describes design concepts for interfaces able to convert or transform, can be deployed in multiple ways or flexibly, can be more organically shaped and asymmetric, can integrate with other surfaces or materials, and can be adapted for better ergonomic fit. Elastic design in this context refers to design concepts that open or disrupt rigidities in design aesthetics of leading devices, which tend to be rectangular, flat, unchanging, hard, and self-contained. Elasticity describes design concepts for interfaces able to convert or transform, can be deployed in multiple ways or flexibly, can be more organically shaped and asymmetric, can integrate with other surfaces or materials, and can be adapted for better ergonomic fit. Samsung Galaxy Z Flip and Fold3 smartphones are recent examples of elastic design because of their ability to be flipped and folded like a compact mirror and a book.

Proposal: Development of touch-rich interactions

In this project, I focus on developing touch-rich interactions in the form of a prototype that employs elastic features. I propose that designing a communication device that could have

abilities to change shape/have a shape-shifting interface could be an alternative to touchscreen devices. This also would be the first application of the touch-richness concept in practice, therefore, designing a prototype is necessary. This also provides validation for practice-based research.

Methods: Practice-based research

Practice-based research is an academic research approach which contains a practice element as part of the research project, often used in arts and design disciplines (Candy 2006). Whether practice-based research is a valid way of doing research instead of traditional research methods has been debated. In this context, I refer to traditional research as a written thesis. However, Bruce Archer (1995) proposed that in certain circumstances the only way to find out is to explore and test the concept via practice-based research. Since then, practice-based research has become a recognized and accepted form of research, supported by academics working on the development of the practice-based research theory field. According to Linda Candy (2006), practice-based research also can be used in a doctoral project to develop original claims and generate new knowledge which can be communicated through creative outcomes together with the supporting written description. She also highlights that the understanding of the significance and originality of a doctoral project, and the contribution of it to new knowledge can only be obtained through those creative outcomes (Candy 2006). In my opinion, the only way to develop noise-free digital interfaces is through practice-based research by exploring the propositions of whether noise within digital interfaces can be mitigated by mindful interactions, touch-rich interactions, and hand-drawn interfaces. I also propose that a complete understanding of the development of noise-free digital interfaces can only be demonstrated by developing these interfaces and by this, I am referring directly to the development of mindful interactions, touch-rich interactions, and hand-drawn interactions, along with a written element to the project. Therefore, I selected practice-based research because providing a written element without the practice element would be incomplete and fail to provide a full understanding.

Research Through Design

Research Through Design is a design-based research approach, which has frequently been used in academic environments as well as interaction design and HCI fields (Stappers and Giaccardi 2016). Research Through Design is also a recognized way of designing products and services as it focuses on the design of the artifact and its main elements as a way of generating and communicating new knowledge (Stappers and Giaccardi 2016). The main goal of my study is to develop design solutions (noise-free digital interfaces) to the problem (noisy digital interfaces), which suggests that my project needs to provide prototypes. I therefore chose the Research Through Design approach because the focus on designing prototypes aligned with the aims and objectives of my study. However, the Research Through Design approach is still in its formative stage meaning there are various models and practices within this approach (Stappers and Giaccardi 2016). For that reason, I must choose the most appropriate method for the project based on its unique set of design challenges and solutions. In my source review, I presented design challenges and proposals as well as explored how design fiction allows designers to design prototypes with ethical awareness. I also proposed using design fiction to develop noise-free digital interfaces as well as raise awareness, test ideas, and address any implications. Therefore, I selected the method of Design Fiction because it allows the designer to innovate alternative solutions as well as develop diegetic prototypes such as Yoshi Phone, Shapie, and Birds.

Design Fiction

Design fiction is a design research tool for creating ways to test, explore, and prototype future scenarios (Grand and Wiedmer 2010; Bleecker 2009). Expert-led design fiction as a service-based approach is used to critically explore possibilities of desirable futures within large tech companies (Pasman 2016). There are also several ways of creating design fiction. After reviewing these, I chose the methodology used in 'The Poetics of Design Fiction' (Markussen and Knutz 2014). The decision behind this choice was that the methodology in their study was adapted and performed from creative specialties such as photography, illustration, and design, which are the most relevant to this study. Also, this project is an example of how an illustrator can successfully produce a design fiction. They also used design challenges and proposals in their methodology which aligns with my source review. My methods include developing 'What if scenarios', diegetic prototypes, and fictional narratives.

Yoshi Phone

The 'What if scenario' for the Yoshi phone is 'What if a feature phone could have a hand-drawn interface?'. This scenario was then used to sketch and explore the look of the Yoshi Phone. 'Yoshi Phone' is the feature phone with a minimalistic hand-drawn user interface, which is gentle on users' attention (Figure 1). After the 3D prototype was designed and printed, the next stage was to develop the interface design for the feature phone. Instead of apps, the feature phone has modes based on activities/places associated with the tasks. The menu of this phone has different modes: Basics, Home, Work, Commute, Wellbeing, and Offline, which offer the user tasks most likely to be associated with the location. The Yoshi Phone has two views that users can select: Icon View and Non-Icon View. These views communicate low-noise digital interfaces. Non-Icon view provides a less distracting experience. Yoshi Phone also does not show time. The interface design for the Yoshi Phone has been hand-drawn and scanned in. The hand-drawn interface has been placed on the 3D prototype to simulate the way this fictional prototype works. The final prototype will also have stickers to simulate the screen interface. I also created a user manual to communicate how Yoshi Phone works.

Figure 1. Joskaudė Pakalkaitė. 2020. Yoshi Phone [manipulated photographs]

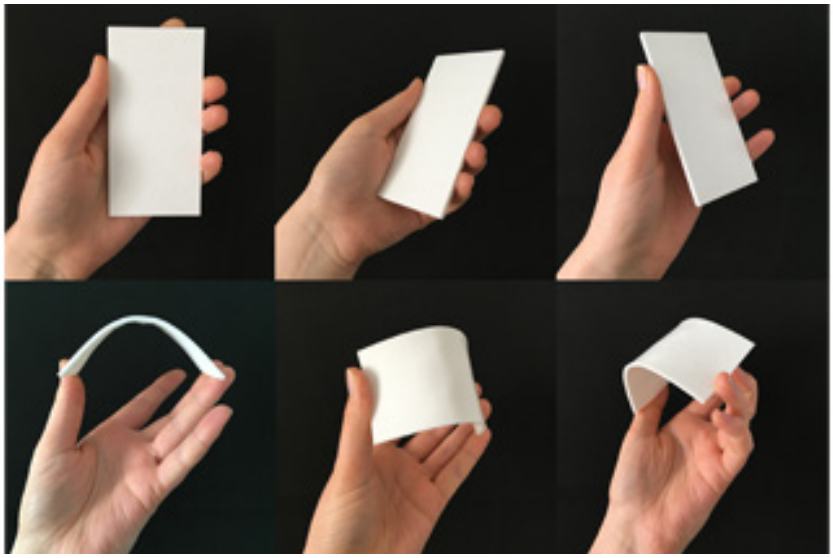

Figure 2. Joskaudė Pakalkaitė. 2020. Shapie 3D prototype [diegetic prototype]

Shapie

The 'What if scenario' for the Shapie is 'What if a communication device could change shape?'. This scenario was then used to sketch and explore the look of the Shapie. 'Shapie' is a touch-rich portable communication device that comes with elastic properties and abilities to change shape. I then designed Shapie and printed 3D prototypes. Shapie has six properties that make it stand out from other communication devices. Shapie has a thin body, it can stick and unstick from surfaces, become soft and hard again, be bent, change shape, and return to its original shape, be folded, and unfolded, when needed (see Figure 2). After the 3D prototype was designed and printed, the next stage was to develop the interface design for the feature phone. The interface design for the Shapie was hand-drawn and scanned in. The drawing was then edited on Adobe Photoshop. The hand-drawn interface was placed on the 3D prototype to simulate the way this fictional prototype works. The final prototype will also have stickers to simulate the screen interface. I also created a user manual to communicate how Shapie works.

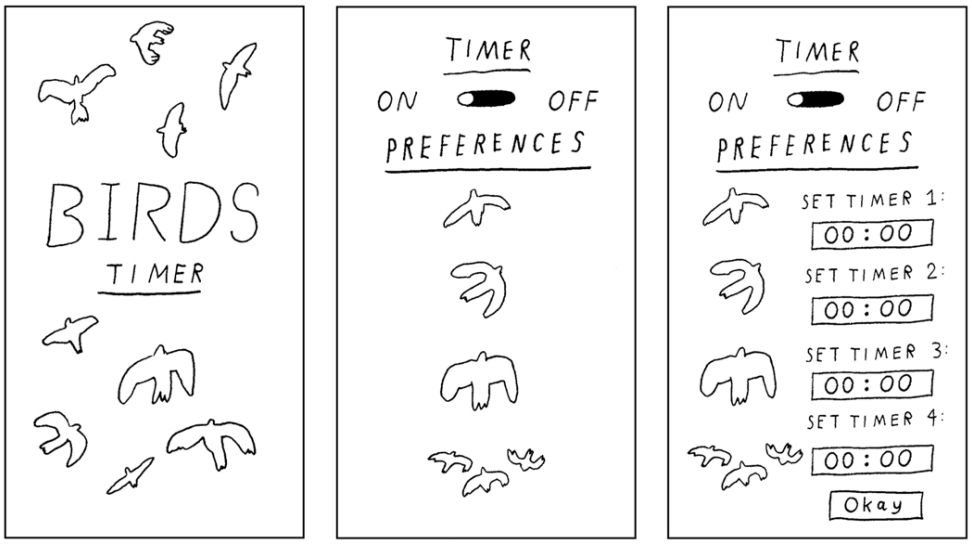

Figure 3. Joskaudė Pakalkaitė. 2020. Birds digital application [diegetic prototype]

Birds

The 'What if scenario' for the Birds app is 'What if images of birds could communicate overuse and interrupt overuse of the device?'. This scenario was then used to sketch and explore the look of the Birds app. 'Birds' is a mindful timer digital app, which allows users to set screen timers and be gently alerted to the set time limits of their digital sessions by the hand-drawn images of birds (Figure 3). The fictional app is designed as if it is available to download on the AppStore. Users can set up to four timers for their session to track and set intentional screen time use. The images of birds alert the user to remaining time online. Three timers gently remind you about remaining time, but after the fourth timer, the device shuts down. Users can set the timers, and switch timers on and off on the app. I also created a user manual to communicate how the Birds app works.

Conclusion and next steps

I predict that online spaces can be redesigned for consumer wellbeing by implementing mindful elements, purposefully using colour and shapes, hand-drawn interfaces, and touch-rich interactions. I also suggest that these unconventional design approaches can potentially stimulate and raise awareness of large IT companies to develop better IT tools. During the beginning of my project, I built relationships with UI, UX designers, hardware and software developers, and engineers, whom I approached to be the research participants. In the next stage, after the Design Fiction narratives by George Foster are illustrated, they will then be distributed together with the user manuals and a survey to industry experts to gain feedback. The insights collected from the industry professionals will be analysed and presented as part of the results of this study.

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Dreaming of a better office: architecture and labour

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ABSTRACT

Taking up the MeCCSA 2021 conference theme 'Dreaming of another place', this article investigates the dream of, and path toward, a better, more humane, and more dignified office. Driven by Harry Braverman's assertions regarding the centrality of control over the labour process to the continued success of capitalism (*Labor and Monopoly Capital,* 1974), this article situates the office as a place and space defined by the necessities of global capital. Looking forward to a better place, this article suggests a regime of vertically integrated unionisation of those involved in the creation and use of office spaces (designers, architects, builders and office occupants) as a way to insert the needs and wants of all workers in a process previously held by capital. By uniting the voices, creativity and interests of all working people involved in the creation of office spaces, perpetual issues such as lack of personal privacy, minimal daylight, limited natural air and cramped, noisy conditions can be addressed at their source, and the dream of a better office brought to fruition.

KEYWORDS

Office Design, Capitalism, Labour Process Theory, Architecture, Labour

Dreaming of a better office

2020 and 2021 witnessed a substantial rise in interest and analysis of commercial office spaces, in their design, their use, and their potential futures. Many critics have predicted an imminent demise of office spaces. Others have suggested that the future office will look and feel radically different from the office of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This apparent eagerness to critique the present and look forward to the future of commercial offices, however, seems not to be matched by an equal willingness to examine the historical roots of such spaces.

'Dreaming of a better office', and the paper from which it emerged, are rooted in doctoral work at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, exploring the relationship between commercial office interiors and the process of doing labour. This research questions the canonical history of office architecture, complicating a remarkably standard narrative through investigation of how capitalist labour processes and economic necessities have moulded forms of conventional office interiors. Stemming from the observation that despite technological innovations and workforce changes the predominant office design is one of the open-plan, this doctoral research seeks to answer why such a layout has remained dominant, despite a consistent dislike of such designs by workers and quantitative indications of their relative inefficiency. More broadly, this doctoral work seeks to answer three overarching questions: What is the history of commercial office interiors? Why are these spaces so miserable? And what can be done to make them better?

MECCSA's 2021 conference theme, 'dreaming of a better place' presented a unique framework for elaboration of this research on commercial offices – bringing to the fore how historical and current misery in these spaces has developed, what the dream of a better office future might look like, and how this dream might be made real.

This article begins with a summation of office historiography, before introducing the concept of Labor Process Theory and the insights which this socio-political framework can provide on the development of commercial office interiors. In line with the 'dreaming of a better place' conference theme, this article concludes with analysis of how society can collectively move toward the realisation of a better, more humane, more enjoyable office future.

The history of the office

Absent robust understandings and utilisations of the historical realities and developments in and within commercial offices spaces, many present conversations regarding the future of these spaces appear less-than-substantial. A working knowledge of the history of the office, its physical developments, and ideological changes has the potential to form a solid foundation on which more robust explorations of the future of these spaces can be based.

The office as a unique and concrete entity is largely thought to have evolved at the turn of the twentieth century (Duffy 1997, 19). As the scale of business grew, so too did the volume of accompanying paperwork (Chandler 1999, 77-8). With more paperwork came more workers, and thus a need for a space in which these individuals could toil. Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Administration building is a frequently used as an exemplar of this style of office design (Robertson 2021, 46). The Larkin building featured large spaces filled with rows of identical workers, sitting in identical chairs which were cantilevered from, and permanently connected to, matching desks (Quinan 1987, 62; Saval 2014, 66-7; Liming 2020, 30-3). The atmosphere of the Larkin could best be described as quasi-industrial; custom built metal chairs and desks situated within a cavernous main hall, adorned with key motivational words (Quinan 1987).[1]

In many ways the Larkin Building and Larkin Company operations appear to have been early forerunners of contemporary mega-offices such as the Googleplex and Amazon's Seattle headquarters. Within the Larkin space the company provided a canteen at which all employees, including the president, dined, an employee lounge, 'betterment' classes, sophisticated air conditioning and purification systems, and even a miniaturised Buffalo Public Library (Quinan 1987, 79-84). The comfort and respect of such amenities, however, may have in part been contradicted by the functionality and appearance of the physical interior and furniture. While aesthetically pleasing, Frank Lloyd Wright's primarily metal office chairs display few features designed for comfort, and one particular three-legged example became notorious for its instability, even leading almost to the point of inciting worker revolt (Quinan 1987, 62).

From Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin building, offices, alongside the scope of capitalism, continued to grow, frequently ever upward, with office spaces occupying the majority of buildings such as the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Plaza (Duffy 1997, 22-3; Haigh 2012, 89; Saval 2014, 36). Constricted by available technology, these spaces were fairly narrow and uniform, until, many office histories suggest, the middle of the century when, spurred on by the German *Bürolandschaft* [Open Office] ideology, offices became wider, deeper, less regimented, and more modern (Saval 2014, 132; Caruso St John Architects and Mozas 2017, 18). This Mid-Century era of office design is frequently represented by buildings such as Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building, Gordon Bundhsaft's Lever House, and Eero Saarinen's Bell

1 'Intelligence', 'Enthusiasm', 'Control', 'Economy', and 'Industry' among others.

Labs, General Motors, and John Deere headquarters (Haigh 2020, 56). These iconic spaces, humanised by the addition of softer furnishings and lighting, more sophisticated heating and cooling systems, and the presence of home-touches such as potted plants are argued to have been designed both for maximal productivity and better retention of top employee talent (Forty 1989, 143).

However, much like the frequently unseen and un-spoken of negative implications of the Larkin's design, the "softness" within these mid-century office spaces may be viewed as a double-edged sword; such designs facilitated a depression of white-collar salaries,[2] and may have provided 'cover' for the continued application by management of prescriptive and controlling work ideologies and patterns (Forty 1989, 143).

The next waypoint in many histories of the office is Herman Miller's Action Office. Created by Robert Propst in 1964, Action Office was a modular furniture system designed to facilitate evolution of the workplace and enable more streamlined working practices (Propst 1968). Action Office comprises interlocking, modifiable panels of differing heights and matching accessories, allowing employees, or office managers, to construct and reconstruct private workstations without the need to employ specialist decorators or construction crews (Kaufmann-Buhler 2013, 36-7; Saval 2014, 208-214; Caruso St John Architects and Mozas 2017, 60).

Many histories of Action Office, Herman Miller, and the office more broadly convey a standard series of events following the release of the second iteration of Action Office, Action Office II (AO II). This narrative suggests that despite many well-intentions of Propst and the Herman Miller team, as the concept of the modular office with moveable partitions became popularised, it likewise was altered by market forces, leading the Action Office concept to evolve into one of the best known, and perhaps least liked office designs - the cubicle (Duffy 1997, 58-60; Haigh 2012, 270). A familiar cacophony of grey, cubicles took the forms of Action Office, and removed any vestiges of flexibility, permanently dividing up office spaces, standardising what many argue was intended to be a customisable and fluid system (Saval 2014, 242-9; Kaufmann-Buhler 2013).

The canon of office history suggests that as more aspects of white-collar work became increasingly driven by technology, this work also became more creative, necessitating more face-to-face contact and different office designs (Duffy 1997). In contrast to the divisions put in place by cubicle dividers, the new technology-driven office of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries were comprised of wide-open spaces, with few divisions between discrete desk areas. The openness of turn-of-the-century office interiors was intended to foster teamwork and the development of new ways of working to go alongside new technologies and technical methods of undertaking white collar work (Duffy 1997, 50-1).

Despite its brief existence and a proliferation of employee complaints, Gaetano Pesce's New York Chiat/Day headquarters are an oft-referenced exemplar of 1990's and early 2000's interior office design. One wall of the office space featured floor-to-ceiling with pillows, another filled with protruding LED lights. Desks appeared to be constructed from found materials and doorknobs were coated with dripping red wax. Replete with blindingly chaotic colours and off-the-wall forms (including an open mouth technology check-out centre), Chiat/Day's 1994 office space also did away with employee privacy and assigned spaces.

The twenty-first century has seen the rise of office 'hotelling', utilisation of office spaces without

2 Indeed, as Adrian Forty highlights in *Objects of Desire* during this time salaries for blue-collar jobs frequently exceeded white-collar office work (Forty 1989, 140).

assigned or permanent personal spaces. Offices designed around a 'hotelling' or 'hot desking' model feature offices with interchangeable, de-personalised desk spaces. Within 'hotelling' offices it is expected that employees will store all personal affects in lockers and move between desks as needed on a daily or even hourly basis (McGregor 2015).

From the Larkin through to contemporary hotelling spaces, this history portrays the development of office interiors as directed and progressive; with successive designs building upon one another and steadily and simultaneously becoming more comfortable, more humane, and more productive. In this historiography designs are motivated by changes in technology, and service new ways of doing work forming in response to new technologies.

Historiographical inferences

While it is remarkably standardised and helpfully concise, there are many elements of the oft-repeated history of the office which are in need of close, critical analysis. Above all else, the historiography's assertion that historical office designs succeeded in improving working standards, conditions, and productivity, remain to be fully unpacked, particularly as these claims frequently do not appear to be significantly substantiated or evidenced. Despite such issues, the standardised history of office interiors allows for a sufficient cultivation of understanding regarding the forms and transformations of office architecture and design, while at the same time exposing an intriguing dialectic.

First, the condensed history of the commercial office seems to hint at the remarkable similarity of the office spaces it discusses. From Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building to the Googleplex, despite changing building materials and workplace technologies, many of the sites frequently discussed in the historiography feature wide-open, exposed spaces complete with identical rows of desks, with little auditory or visual privacy afforded to most workers. Absent from the history are significant signs of change or alteration, or movement toward another base layout.

Additionally, and in contrast to the stasis of the designs themselves, the rationales behind office layouts seem to have morphed and altered with time. From the Larkin's necessity for smooth movement of paperwork from one worker to the next, to the requirement of open spaces for communication between co-workers and execution of teamwork in Eero Saarinen's buildings, the rationale for the open office seems to have changed according to prevalent ideas about what work is, and how it should be done.

Together, these two trans-historical observations mean the existence of a relatively static physical office design being presented both historically and in the present under a revolving door of rationales and reasonings. This juxtaposition, and a lack of forthright discussion regarding its implications, suggest that forces yet-to-be explored may be at play both in terms of the stunted change present in physical architecture and design, and in the need to re-present and re-sell such a design under different, and frequently contradictory frameworks and rationales.

It's capitalism

Doctoral research into the labour process suggests that one such force influencing the shape and tenor of interior office designs may be the operations of business and labour within and under a capitalist economy. As the office as a discrete category of space arguably arose from structural changes within the capitalist system, and as almost all offices today operate within or in relation to capitalist economies (Braverman 1974, 12-3), capitalism itself proves a pivotal touchstone and reference point for the study of the office. As offices are not simply sites within which work transpires, but are places designed and built for the undertaking of work and

extraction of labour, exploration of how management under capitalism interferes materially in the labour process remain crucial.

Exploration and investigation of the labor processes within offices and their relationship to design can be built upon a field of study which will here be referred to as Labor Process Theory. Labor Process Theory is a Marxist strain of socio-political thought which argues that capitalist control over the circumstances and practices of labor is a necessary part of the contemporary capitalist system.

Labor Process Theory posits that when companies began paying employees by the hour, day, or week instead of per piece of work completed, a crisis was created within capitalism (Braverman 1974). This crisis meant companies could no longer be assured they were getting more value out of their workers than what they were paying each individual laborer (Braverman 1974). Because under wage labor conditions workers are paid regardless of how much work is achieved, company management necessitated a mechanism which would ensure that workers were completing at least enough work to cover the cost of their wages, and ideally enough work to generate profit for the company (Braverman 1974). Labor process theorists suggest that such a mechanism is control by capitalists and company management over the way work itself is done – over the process of doing labor (Braverman 1974, Edwards 1979). By controlling *how* work is done, companies could be assured that a base line of productivity and profit was achieved (Braverman 1974, Edwards 1979).

Control over the labor process can take many forms – it can manifest as a detailed set of instructions, overly specific ways of doing tasks, greater managerial, or enforced company norms.[3] Control over the labor process might also be understood vis-à-vis architecture and design; through the creation, maintenance and propagation of physical workspaces, such as offices, which encourage continual managerial oversight both of employees and of particular work tasks. While the former has been well explored in Marxist, sociological, and economic literature, the later remains relatively untheorised and unexplored.

Application of labour process theory to the architecture and design of office spaces raises the possibility that the particulars of office designs are not only linked to specific work tasks, or the vague nature of work in any given time period but are being driven by more fundamental underlying needs of the capitalist social and economic system. The open office may exist and persist not because technology workers must communicate constantly, and in person, nor because this design is the most cost-efficient way of situating workers, but instead because the open office design enables management to observe and dictate exactly how work is done. The fundamental capitalist need for control over labor, the labor process, and laborers may lie behind the hundred plus year history of remarkably similar office interior design. Further, this overarching need may explain the physical and visual similarities behind and between otherwise radically different workspaces – why both offices and factories alike are largely composed of wide open, observable spaces with limited natural light and fresh air, and limited to no personal auditory of visual privacy.

Continued existence of inhumane offices

A fundamental need for managerial control may explain the initial appearance of the open

3 Nontangible elements of control are well-covered by Richard Edwards in *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (1979), Michael Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979), Andrew Friedman's *Industry and Labour: Class Struggle at Work and Monopoly Capitalism* (1977) and Harley Shaiken's *Work Transformed: Automation and Labor in the Computer Age* (1986).

office, during the turn-of-the-century era when this category of work and workspace was still coalescing. While many architects and designers have set off with significant ambitions to revolutionise and even humanise office spaces, these attempts have frequently resulted in an intensification of many of the worst aspects of offices.

Robert Propst's attempts to modularise and personalise office interiors through the Action Office ended up birthing the cubicle (Saval 2014). Propst's introduction of modularity and flexible, non-permanent walls at least open doors, if not paved the way for the less-than-wall partitions of the cubicle to become common place. Many of the selling points of the Action Office system, the ease at which individual offices could be reconfigured, the potential financial savings of a DIY office system, and the durability of the materials, would be seized upon by Herman Miller competitors in the creation of their own similar systems. It did not take long for these business-friendly elements of Action Office to become divorced from the more expensive and, from the perspective of management, less necessary human touches such as colour and personalised configuration. Beyond the example of Action Office, the introduction of Bürolandschaft brought open-plans to highly paid white-collar workers, and Gaetano Pesce and Chiat/Day's attempts to modernise workflows and processes arguably led to the rise of hotelling and diminution of persistent personal space.

The office's relatively brief history is dotted with examples of well-meaning designers and architects setting off to solve the issues of the office, only for the legacies of their designs to be perhaps even more dehumanising than the originals. The application of Labor Process analysis to the realm of office design suggests that such interventions have failed because they are treating a symptom, rather than a disease. Attempts to better the office through design alone attempt to ameliorate the material circumstances caused by large-scale needs and mechanisations of capitalism without addressing or acknowledging capitalism itself. And in so doing, the architects and designers of office spaces seem to find themselves fighting against what can only be described as a behemoth without the ideological, political, or social support needed to do so successfully.

Towards a better office

The potential inevitability of the open office and more fundamental issues regarding the necessity of managerial control over labour could be understood as gloomy and demotivating – a locked system in which all those who work, and all those who design places of work are trapped. However, recognising the capitalistic roots of demoralising and dehumanising office design may equip those who design, study and work within these spaces with powerful tools to reimagine, reinterpret, and reshape offices moving forward. In this sense, the centrality of the Labour Process, and of Labour Process Theory to commercial office interiors cannot be overstated, as these ideological tools and frameworks provide the scaffolding from which the dream of a better office can be made real. Such tools can be divided into three roughly organised categories of action and resistance.

Abolish capitalism

First and foremost, the potential close connection between many of the worst and most dehumanising elements of office design and any operation or need under capitalism signals that office designs may be fundamentally changed by replacing capitalism. Progress toward a social and economic system which eschews a fundamental need to use, abuse and exploit the majority of the population in order to build wealth and comfort for the 1% may also mean progress toward radically different office designs. Collectively working toward a social and economic system which allows, and in fact encourages, respect of the individual human worker should

in turn support the design and creation of office spaces built around the needs and wants of the individuals using these spaces, rather than those of the individuals profiting from their use.

Unionisation

Wholesale revolution should not be seen as the only systematic step which can be taken toward the improvement of interior office architecture and design. If it is accepted that the roots of inhumane office designs lie within capitalism, pushback against poor office design can be organised through the same methods which are used to fight other ills under capitalism – specifically, unionisation. Unions, broadly speaking, return power to working people. Collective organisation allows for the creation of a bigger, stronger voice for labour when face-to-face with management or directly in conversation with capitalists.

With regard to office spaces, unions can begin appropriating power and control away from corporate developers, foremen, owners and managers, and towards workers themselves. With specific regard to office design, unionisation has the potential to take several forms. Unionisation in the sector primarily might take the form of office workers organising and fighting for offices with individual and persistent private spaces, for access to natural light and air, for personalised climate controls, and for desks and chairs that are comfortable and easy to use.

As has been previously raised within this article, however, offices are not only a final site of labour. These spaces are also part of the labour processes of builders and architects. This means that in addition to the demands of office workers unions upon office spaces, builders unions too might organise to encourage or demand spaces which are built using safe materials, built to realistic timeframes, and built using highly-skilled and well-paid labour. Further, architects' unions might demand that they be permitted to design interesting and beautiful and creative office spaces, and that they be encouraged to take their time on designs, ensuring the creation of the best spaces possible.

Beyond organisation of trades independently, office workers, office builders, and office designers might organise to support each other's demands, creating a bigger workforce from which to bargain and influence design, construction and use of office spaces. Such cooperation between independently organised and operated unions within a single trade sector can be understood and encapsulated as the possibility of vertically-integrated unionisation - of a deliberate coordination of all those involved with office spaces; an office ecosystem in which the architects, interior designers, builders and office occupants are first, all unionised, and second, working in unison with each other, engaged in continuous dialogue about what designs, materials and techniques not only make for the best end building, but also for the most humane and enjoyable work experience at every stage.

Reframe the problem

In addition to concrete and economic strides which can be made in pursuit of a better office, a broader theoretical reframing of the problem of inhumane and manager-centric office designs also has potential to contribute to progress. By reframing the problem of office design away from physical, particular designs, and instead toward the broader political circumstances surrounding the design process, important strides can be made toward the dream of a better office.

Such a reframing first requires, as Peggy Deamer poignantly argues in *Architecture and Labor* (2020), for those within the architectural profession to recognise that architects serve as 'wage labour for the capitalist' (2020, 24) – that architectural work does not, and cannot, escape from

the pressures and machinations of capitalism. All dehumanising offices exist in part because an architect designed them. Such inhumane designs cannot continue to be built, designed, or redesigned if architects and interior designers refuse to be involved in these projects. 'Work that one does not believe in can't get done if we refuse to do it: refuse to design prisons, refuse to design detention centres, refuse to design border walls' (Deamer 2020, 68) and refuse to design dehumanising offices. As Deamer concludes, 'Just refuse to do work you do not believe in' (2020, 68).

Refusal to participate in socially and morally unacceptable designs is, then, a crucial first step toward a more ethical architecture and a more ethical ethos surrounding office spaces. This refusal is, at its core, a politicisation of the architectural profession; 'An ethical architecture profession…cannot avoid taking political positions' (Deamer 2020, 100). An ethical architecture must take a stand not just against specific design details of specific office buildings, but against the entire system from which such designs are birthed and replicated. Reframing the problem of office interiors requires recognising the role which architecture plays at all stages of the labour process, and specifically the labour impacts of office buildings, of the conditions which architects are damning office workers, including, frequently, other architects to because of their designs.

Current realities of a better office

For many, the dream of a better office may seem to remain just a dream, with the promise of more personal space and privacy unrealisable under and irreconcilable with capitalism. However, the existence of buildings and spaces which contain many more humane office features, while not perfect examples of a dream office, remain waypoints to which designers and scholars can turn for physical inspiration and critical, socio-political analysis.

In Sweden, where architects are unionised and where office workers councils are consulted in the design of workspaces, attention can be turned to the SAS building (van Meel 2000). SAS provided most individual workers with a standardised office, complete with doors that shut, windows that opened and furniture that could be moved at will (Duffy 1997, 13-4). Office cells were connected by broad promenades which stretched the length of the building, letting in additional light (Duffy 1997, 38-9). Such spatial features stand in remarkable contrast with many offices within the United States and United Kingdom, where privacy, space, and natural light remain scarce commodities for non-executive workers.

Inspiration can also be found in Germany, where once again office workers are well represented throughout the building design process, and where until recently worker protections vis-à-vis environmental factors such as distance to windows and access to natural light and air were quite strong. The Edding headquarters well illustrate the potential fruits of this employee-centric consultative process. Similar to SAS, all employees received a private office in Edding's 1990 building, complete with opening windows and natural light (Duffy 1997, 123-9). Private spaces are directly abutted with shared working spaces, mostly in the open, but including some walled-in conference areas (Duffy 1997, 123-9). Further, all the offices at Edding are the same size, providing parity within the company and allowing for very easy and efficient reallocation of spaces (Duffy 1997, 123-9).

While still containing faults, and still immersed within a global capitalist economy, the physical structures of Edding and SAS illustrate the potential impact of greater worker participation and control over design of office spaces. These spaces, as well as the systems and processes behind them provide proof that unionisation and pushback against unrestrained capitalism can work

regarding the improvement of office architecture.

Conclusion

Beginning with a summary of the development and evolution of office interior design, this article has laid out the convergence and impact which examination of the Labor Process offers study of the built office environment. Stemming from this relationship, it has suggested that commercial office interiors look and feel the way they do for a very particular reason; that office spaces are not simply precision tools for the execution of specific work tasks, they are also crucial infrastructure in the execution and reproduction of capitalism. Further, this article has outlined three primary ways in which progress can be made toward the dream of a better office: through the abolition of capitalism, through worker unionisation, and through a reframing of the 'problems' of interior office design as political, rather than physical. This article concluded with brief discussion of contemporary office spaces which embody the promise of a better office, shaped under differing socio-economic norms and relations.

While the short-term outlook for office spaces may remain grim for those who must inhabit these spaces day in and day out, filled with forced home-working, increasingly viable computer spyware, and looming forced transitions to fully open-plan spaces, understanding the sociological, political, and economic roots of this bleak future offers the glimmer of a better office future.

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Researching Place during a Pandemic: Unintentional Ex Situ Listening

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ABSTRACT

Research practices were adapted and adjusted to continue researching place during the global pandemic. This paper explores this pandemic impact through reflecting on the researcher's experiences of carrying out doctoral place-based research during 2020. Whilst developing a socio-sonic-mobile methodology, a key adaptation has been to configure technology differently to enable remote research. These conditions force the researcher into an extreme 'unintentional ex situ' position. Within these methods and emerging practices, the mediating technology and 'unintentional ex situ' researcher positionality is entangled in complex ways. In order to explore this entanglement, a sound collage was created from the behind-the-scenes audio material recorded whilst carrying out research remotely. The reader is invited to listen to this Unintentional Ex Situ Listening sound piece before critical reflections are shared about participatory, remotely-supported research practices. Applying the idea of audio recordings as 'self-reflexive narratives' (Anderson and Rennie 2016), three journeys are identified from the researcher's experiences of making and listening-back to this sound piece: the research, methods and research practice journeys. The sound collage is offered as a way of sonically exploring the ideas and dynamics surrounding 'in/ex situ' in research and opening up questions about the impact of the pandemic on research practices.

KEYWORDS

Place, Listening, Research Practice, Pandemic, Methods

Introduction

During the global Covid-19 pandemic, we were all been forced to adapt, adjust and change to varying degrees.[1] Within UK academia, adaptations included moving to online teaching and finding safer ways to carry out research that minimise risk, to us and others, and adhere to shifting lockdown restrictions. As we continue adapting and adjusting to different crises, how can we begin to understand the impact of the pandemic on research practices? And specifically, for those interested in place, how has researching place during a pandemic changed our research practices? This paper will explore these questions through examining and reflecting on the researcher's experiences of carrying out doctoral place-based research during 2020. This PhD project uses listening activities to explore residential experiences of urban seaside gentrification and displacement injustices on the UK south coast. A digital pivot was undertaken in order to carry out sensory research with residents living in three seaside sites from July-November 2020. Combining mobile and sound methods, a socio-sonic-mobile methodology has been developed that was responsive to changing lockdown restrictions and sensitive to a range of

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participant circumstances. Residents undertook individual listening walks or listening-at-home activities supported remotely by the doctoral researcher, which generated material and formed the basis for online or telephone follow-up interviews. Therefore, in this case, one of the main adaptations was the use of technology to enable enforced remote research, which positioned the researcher 'unintentionally ex situ'.

Within these methods and emerging practice, technology and the 'unintentional ex situ' researcher positionality are entangled in complex and interesting ways. To explore this entanglement, I created a sound piece from the behind-the-scenes audio material recorded whilst carrying out research remotely. I offer this sound collage as a way of bringing alive this 'unintentional ex situ' listening practice and researcher positionality. This paper draws out reflections on pandemic research experiences from the perspective of the researcher and raises questions about the mediating role of technology, participatory dynamics and researcher positionality in sensory and place-based research. Before offering this listening opportunity to the reader, I will position this research practice within existing literatures of sound and mobile methods (new mobilities paradigm, acoustic ecology, sensory ethnography and sound art). I will then provide an overview of my socio-sonic-mobile methodology that was adapted for researching place during a pandemic. The reader is invited to listen to the Unintentional Ex Situ Listening sound piece, which aims to take listeners through a sonic journey of the research methods and plays with the continuum of 'in/ex situ'. A transcript and text description of the piece is included to aid accessibility for all readers and recognise aural diversity (Drever 2019). This will be followed by reflective discussion that examines the piece as a 'self-reflexive narrative' of the researcher (Anderson and Rennie 2016) and how the participatory aspects of the research were enhanced by the pandemic conditions. Discussion will be structured around three journeys: the research journey; the methods journey; and the research practice journey. Concluding remarks will summarise the reflective learning we might gleam from these sonic explorations on the impact of the pandemic on place-research practices.

Place-based sensory methodologies

Methodologies that focus on researching place through the senses have a long history of positioning the researcher 'in situ'. This includes sensory ethnography (Pink 2009), acoustic ecology (Schafer 1994; Westerkamp 2002) and urban ambiance studies (Thibaud 2013). In the early stages of developing a socio-sonic-mobile methodology for investigating urban seaside gentrification, my doctoral project focused on the use of soundwalks as a way of exploring residents' experiences of their changing neighbourhoods. This section will therefore provide an overview of these foundational literatures from which a Covid-induced digital pivot has been made. Looking at sound and mobile methods, I will discuss the continuum of 'in/ ex situ' within research practices as well as the notion of field recordings as 'self-reflexive narratives' (Anderson and Rennie 2016).

This doctoral research project is informed by the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry 2006) in the way it conceives of place, approaches the topic of gentrification and utilises methods. Following in the lineage of Doreen Massey (2005, 141), place can be understood as 'the coming together of the previously interrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing' and bound within this is an 'understanding how 'things' in movement combine to constitute place and the perception of place' (Pink 2011, 34). In methodological terms, a distinctive feature of mobile methods is the idea that movement itself might somehow be fundamental to finding out things (Smith and Hall 2016, 156). Walking interviews are increasingly used to explore the link between self, place, and how places are created by people's movements (Evans and Jones 2011, 850). Walking interviews situate the research, most often both the

research participants and researcher, in context within the physical and social space of the study (Fincham et al. 2010, 4-6). Walking through the sites under investigation brings proximity to the topic as well as creating an informal environment that allows participants to recollect and articulate their experiences (Fincham et al. 2010, 2). Mobile methods crossover and complement sensory approaches. Walking is 'necessarily multisensory' (Murray and Järviluoma 2019, 5) and considered an embodied practice that creates multiple readings of the city (Certeau 1984). Within mobile methods, researcher and participant positionings can be situated across a continuum of 'in/ex situ' with a variety of technology usages for capturing data, which includes drawing maps, audio-recordings, photos and/or audio-visual and geographical information systems (GIS) taken by participants or researchers.

Soundwalks hold a degree of synergy with mobile methods, using the practical methodology of movement to re-localise our listening perspectives (Chapman 2013). Soundwalks as a research method offer an intriguing mix of 'simplicity and complexity' (Behrendt 2018, 252). In its broadest sense, they 'combine a specific form of human mobility – walking – with a specific way of sensory attention – listening' (Behrendt 2018, 252). There are a variety of soundwalk purposes and practices within the field of sound studies, which has witnessed renewed interest since the sensorial turn and corresponding notions of embodiment and emplacement (Bull 2018; Gallagher and Prior 2014, 267). Many of the foundations of soundwalks were laid by the World Soundscape Project providing an epistemology in listening, methodological toolkit, terminology, different listening practices and soundwalks (Bull 2018, xxii; Schafer 1994; Westerkamp 2002). Within acoustic ecology, soundwalks aim to increase people's awareness of their own sonic environment (Arkette 2004, 160; Bull 2018, xxii). More recent developments that combine sound and mobile methods include urban ambience studies commented walks (Thibaud 2011) and sensobiographic walking (Järviluoma 2021).

Taking into account all the variations that have developed within research and arts-based practices, Frauke Behrendt (2018, 252) argues that overall soundwalks constitute a 'spatio-temporal, embodied, situated, multi-sensory and mobile practice'. This focus on being physically situated is common throughout soundwalk approaches. When used to generate, for example, knowledge through ethnography or art practice through field recordings, there is commonly a focus on sensing the environment through the researcher/practitioner being physically 'in situ'. This relates to wider onto-epistemological underpinnings for place-based sensory research, such as discussed by Sarah Pink (2011) when exploring notions of embodiment and emplacement within a theory of place:

> Thus, we might start thinking of the body as part of a total environment and recognise that the body provides us not simply with embodied knowing and skills that we use to act on or in that environment, but that the body itself is simultaneously physically transformed as part of this process. (Pink 2011, 347)

Within Pink's approach, multi-sensoriality is integral to both taking part in research and a researcher's craft, including the idea of the emplaced researcher (Lacey et al. 2019; Pink 2009, 2; 2011). Soundwalks within arts-based practice similarly place an emphasis on what can be generated through bodily sensations (Brown 2017; Mohr 2007; Westerkamp 2002). Isobel Anderson and Tullis Rennie (2016) are sound artists who purposefully create narrated audio recordings to make explicit the presence of the recordist. They view field recordings as 'subjective, expressive, meaningful and personal to the recordist, rather than purely objective documents of sound environments' (Anderson and Rennie 2016, 222). Chiming with Pink's

emplaced ethnographer, they prominently place the recordist physically in the 'field' and approach field recordings as 'self-reflexive narratives' (2016). Audio capture of soundwalks are therefore documents of their makers, which they argue is an alternative form of knowledge (Anderson and Rennie 2016, 224). Making explicit the capturing process raises interesting questions about the intersection between sound walking and technology, which will be explored through reflecting on 'Unintentional Ex Situ Listening' sound piece.

Given this focus on being physically situated as a researcher/practitioner within sensory place-based methodology literatures, how can we make sense of research that is forced to be undertaken remotely? Researching place in a pandemic necessitates negotiating national lockdown restrictions as well as university policies that limit travel, fieldwork and face to face research activities. The only way to carry out research in this context is from afar, using configurations of technology that connect with people and places separate from our own researcher location. These specific research conditions challenge the notion of fieldwork and conventional positionings of the researcher 'in the field'. The extreme 'unintentional ex situ' researcher positionality engendered by the pandemic has so far been relatively absent in existing discussion within place-based sensory methods literatures. There are many examples in creative, mobile and participatory approaches of researchers removing themselves from the research activities in order for participants to have more control, power and/or creative time away from the researcher (Mannay 2016; Pauwels 2010). This includes photo voice (Wang 2006), participatory video (Butcher and Dickens 2016) and participatory mapping projects (Herlihy and Knapp 2003). In this doctoral project, the pandemic forced the development of what might be deemed 'participatory soundwalks', supported remotely by a researcher to explore a resident's relationship to a place. The practical dynamics of this removed researcher positioning will be discussed in the next section, before using the *Unintentional Ex Situ Listening* piece to further explore questions of 'in/ex situ' practices.

Unintentional Ex Situ Listening Methods

This section details the socio-sonic-mobile methodology developed within this doctoral project, which draws on the above sound and mobile method. This methodology is guided by a participatory ethos (Bergold and Thomas 2012), which helps us pay attention to researcher and participant positionality, roles and relationships. Listening and sound are threaded throughout the research process, making all forms of listening explicit. Figure 1. lays out the key components and procedures of this method. It shows the points of convergence and the areas of choice for participants. There are four parts that all participants experience: a deep listening exercise, an immersive listening experience away from the researcher, a way of capturing this experience, and detailed discussion with the researcher about the experience. There are two main options that a participant chooses: the type of listening activity and how they capture their observations about the experience.

In addition, the participant chooses where they do the listening: either the route taken around the neighbourhood as a listening walk or where in their home they listen. As part of the decision over capturing tools, participants also decide what technology to use, for the capture and to communicate with the researcher. Enabling participants to have these choices in the data production is part of the participatory ethos of the methodology. But it also creates the requisite flexibility for conducting research within a pandemic, allowing activities to take place during varying states of lockdown restrictions and perceived risks of movement. Whilst being responsive to government policy, it supports participants to make their own assessment of risk, allowing those shielding or uncomfortable with walking around the neighbourhood to

participate from their home.

Twenty-two seaside residents were recruited across three neighbourhoods in Brighton, Worthing and St Leonards-on-Sea through a mixture of online social networks and targeting streets with a postcard mailshot. For more accessible communication purposes, I refer to this soundwalk method as a listening walk. The listening walk option was chosen by nineteen residents, roughly split in half between option A and B (see Figure 1). Three residents chose to do listening-at-home activities and recorded their observations themselves. This has amounted to: 10 commented walk audio recordings, 17 participant recorded audio recordings, 235 participant photos, 53 participant video recordings, 22 pages of drawings and five pages of notes.

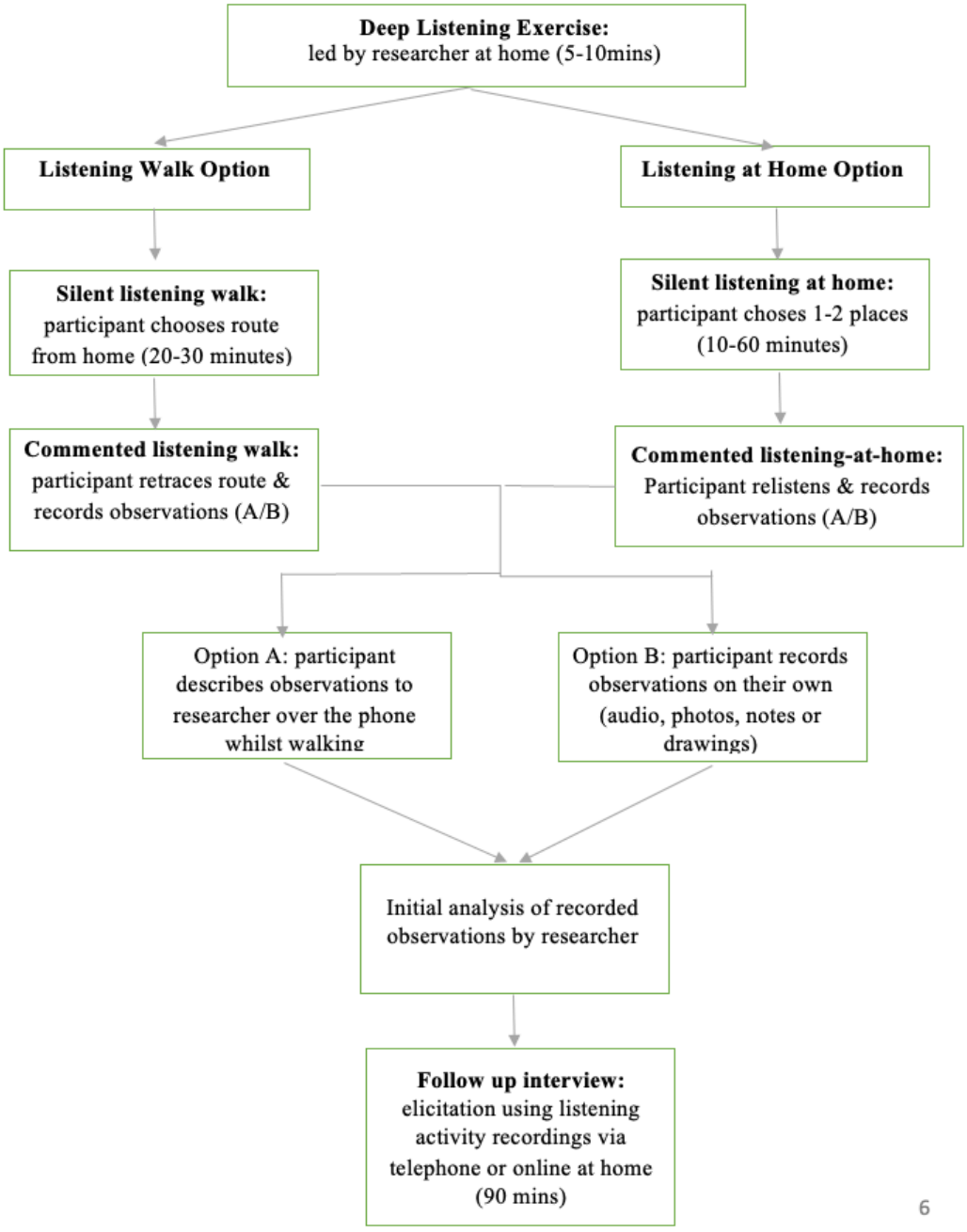

Figure 1. Listening-Walking-Elicitation Method

Balancing accessibility for participants and the need to record data for elicitation and analysis purposes was a challenge in developing the method. Figure 2. shows the technology set up. The equipment and software options were developed using the principle of supporting participants to make use of technology they already use and therefore familiar with. This was a way of minimising risks over data security as well as maximising accessibility. Technology is always part of research practice, but it is often an understated companion in the form of a Dictaphone or laptop. The specific pandemic conditions therefore created different technological configurations, which in this project I was completely dependent on and therefore significantly impacted my research positionality and practice. The distinct qualities of sound walking as a 'spatio-temporal, embodied, situated, multi-sensory and mobile practice' (Behrendt 2018, 252) still hold for the research participant, but are mediated by technology for the remote researcher. Playing with the continuum of 'in/ex situ' positionings is one way of exploring this mediation through technology, which the sound collage and reflective discussion explores from the perspective of the researcher.

The practices that emerged from being in an extreme and 'unintentional ex situ' position as a researcher are entangled with the technology that enables and mediates this positionality. This also extends what can be considered 'the field'. In an attempt to explore this entanglement, and keeping listening at the heart of the project, I created a sound piece titled Unintentional Ex Situ Listening. It uses audio recordings that can be considered behind-the-scenes material. Samples have been clipped from audio recordings which do not make up the core research 'data' analysed in the project but are still part of the field recordings. The 'field' in this project extends from the participants' neighbourhoods through into the researcher's domestic space. Absent from Figure 2. are the places within which the technology operates. Participants' devices moved between their homes and their neighbourhoods, whilst 'my laptop' remained static throughout, located in my domestic space that had been transformed into my lockdown academic workspace. This sound collage includes the sounds of the technology (e.g., dial tones and distortions), my own voice with anonymised participant voices (taken from distorted recordings or layered) and the intermingled soundscapes of participants' rooms and my own (where the interviews took

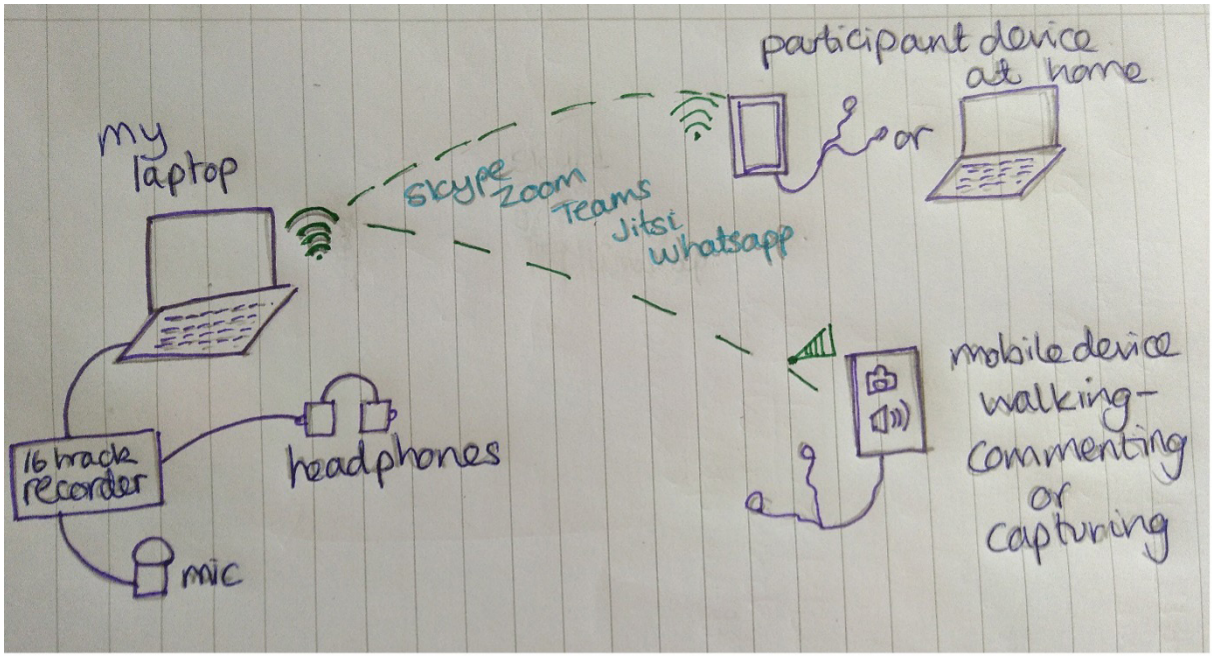

Figure 2. Drawing of researcher & participant technology (drawing by author)

place).

Drawing on Anderson and Rennie's (2016) idea of field recordings being 'self-reflexive narratives', the piece is created as a linear narrative. I have purposefully made use of my researcher voice to guide the listener through this narrative. It takes the listener through the sequence of the method from the deep listening, through the listening walk (option A) and interview. In this way the flowchart visualisation in Figure 1 has been used as a score, which the piece aims to bring alive. This piece and the following reflective discussion share the researcher's experiences of researching place remotely during a pandemic. Although necessarily entangled with the participants' positionalities and experiences, within the scope and purposes of this paper, I focus on the researcher's perspective rather than the participants.

Unintentional Ex Situ listening sound piece

You are invited to listen to the sound piece by clicking on the link below:

https://soundcloud.com/user-334536613/ex-situ-listening

A transcript and description of the audio is included in the Appendix as well as included in stamp-marked comments on SoundCloud.

Reflective discussion

Listening to this sound piece with the accompanying score (Figure 1), there are two main parts to depict methodological progression. Part One (00:00 – 01:52) is the deep listening exercise and commented listening walk option A. Part Two (01:53 – 05:16) is the follow up interview. There is a clear difference in the amount of space given to the visualisation of these parts in Figure 1. and the amount of time given to these parts in this 'audiolisation'. Five boxes (Figure 1) were required to adequately depict all the different elements of the listening activities and only one box to communicate the well-known interview method. Yet when explored using a self-reflexive narrative approach to field recordings (Anderson and Rennie 2016), Part One takes only 1.5 minutes in order to illustrate the limited involvement of the researcher in these activities and also the intensity of experiencing listening walks remotely. It was only through creating this piece that I was able to sonically explore these 'unintentional ex situ' researcher dynamics and better understand the research practices that emerged for researching place during a pandemic. This section will therefore apply the idea of self-reflexive narratives to critically reflect on this creative process. Three journeys are identified and discussed in turn: the research journey, the methods journey and the research practice journey.

The research journey

Research design is an involved process including in-depth planning, care over ethical considerations, negotiation of ethics committees and the generation of multiple planning artefacts (e.g., ethics applications and interview schedules). This is illustrated in the beginning invitation of the sound collage 'to close your eyes' (00:00-00.08), which is sampled from a pre-recorded deep listening exercise made for a pilot workshop. The tone is calm, measured and deliberate, but we then hear a change in the background atmosphere for the next question. This question is sampled from a listening walk recording made before a Brighton resident took to the streets to silently listen on their own. From my voice recorded using a typical researcher's piece of equipment, an audio recorder (Zoom H2n), we shift to a voice recorded using the same recorder, but this time connected to headphones, a multi-track recorder (Zoom R16), two laptops (mine and the participant's) and Zoom software. The introduction of this technology (as illustrated

in Figure 2) is made clearly audible as we next hear the beginning Skype calling tone (00:26), which is followed by a series of different dialling tones and a phone interference sound.

This beginning sequence illustrates my researcher experience of moving from the planned and controlled through anticipation to immediate stumbles and exasperation with the technology not working and/or participants' different uses of it. In this sampled instance, the failed Skype call made through the laptop was to a participant in St Leonard's who resorted to phoning me on my mobile due to software issues. This broke us out of my carefully arranged set up. Part One continues with this feeling, progressing through another jauntier Skype tone into a chorus of hellos. An upbeat tempo moves us through these greetings, my prompting questions and a roar of distorted participant observations, before an abrupt quiet and tentative goodbye. Listening to this first part, we are made aware sonically of the raw, messy form that 'data' presents itself. Our careful research design is disrupted by the unplanned and unintentional as we try to operationalise our methods.

Part Two, in contrast, moves into a calmer atmosphere where my researcher voice is more present and the tone of interactions friendlier and relaxed. It starts with the now familiar Skype-calling tone (01:53-01:58), but the sounds of technology are less explicit throughout. The technology is made audible mainly through my own voice: narrating sharing the screen (02:10-02:20), leaving the call open during the break (02:27-02:30) and mentioning screen fatigue (04:32-04:35). During the break section (02:28-04:30), we hear the sounds of more familiar research technology, that of shuffling paper and scribbling pen. These sounds illustrate the progression through the research stages of starting to organise material and make sense of it. These sounds in this way 'audiolise' the 'initial analysis' box in Figure 1. as I circle important pieces of 'data' that I wish to ask the participant about and analyse in more detail.

We can therefore see the progression through these two parts as illustrative of the research journey. As a researcher we move from careful planning, anticipation and messy 'data' collection into sorting, organising and analysing. But what does this mean for understanding the impact of the pandemic? How does a focus on 'in/ex situ' dynamics' help us understand research practices? In this case, the entanglement of technology and being 'unintentionally ex situ' has led to artefacts of the research journey that we may not otherwise have had. Conducted in person, the research would have captured our greetings, my guiding narration and, if captured during a walking interview, the environmental distortion sounds. It is less likely to have captured the behind-the-scenes material, such as the technology fails or the scribbling of notes. But more importantly, a focus on these non-research sounds prompted by thinking about 'in/ex situ' brings this material and dynamics into view (earshot). The heavyweight mediating role of technology within these pandemic conditions makes us more aware of particular aspects of our research practice. The pandemic conditions disrupt conventional ways of researching place and creates new awareness, in the same way that 'de-familiarisation' techniques are used in creative methods to generate knowledge (Mannay 2016). It sharpens our critical senses and opens up opportunities for deeper reflections on our own research practices. Whilst the research journey discussed in this section points to universal and broader aspects of researcher experiences, the next journeys will look in more detail at dynamics specific to this doctoral project to draw out such critical reflections.

The methods journey

Methodologically, the progression through Parts One and Two depicts the movement from participatory listening to more conventional interview tools. The technological stumbles and chaotic distortion sonify how the process is less under my control as a researcher during the

listening activities. I am led by the participants in their choice of activities, where they listen, routes they take, what they decide to capture and what technology they chose. The participant takes up the position of being situated in the place being researched and the technology enables this place to be extended out and connected to my distant location. The participant is therefore physically exposed to the environmental conditions of that place, moving outside through their neighbourhood. Due to the project focusing on urban seaside gentrification, this frequently involved participants walking by the sea, on the beach and encountering high winds. These conditions can be heard in the quite painful distortion (01:15-01:46) which makes for uncomfortable listening.

As a researcher, listening through my headphones to participants walking in their neighbourhoods felt intense, which this distortion represents. There were many aspects to this listening experience that were out of my control including the nature of the soundscapes walked through and the behaviour of the technology. The distortion clips are sampled from a listening walk in Worthing on a very windy day. However, on a similarly windy day along the same strip of beach, another participant sounded clear and undistorted. Listening back, there is an intermingling of different types of roars and rushing sounds surrounding the participant's voice. To my ears, I feel I can make out the sound-sources of waves, wind and also something computer-generated and machine-like. The technology is also making itself heard. In amongst all of this, listening back makes me remember how I pushed my headphones into my ears and closed my ears to try and make out what the participant was saying. This 'unintentional ex situ' listening was an intense sensory experience that remains vivid.

Part One helps us therefore explore what it is like to give up control when researching and utilise participatory methods. The pandemic adaptations made my methods more participatory, which had positive impacts on my research findings. I was made to be more reliant on residents being situated in their neighbourhoods because I could not be, making their knowledge and experiences central to understanding gentrification processes. Often when participants pointed out a sound, asking hopefully 'can you hear that?', the technology did not allow me to hear that sound-source. This made the elicitation element of the method even more crucial to generating knowledge about experiences of urban seaside gentrification. Moving into Part Two, we can hear the elicitation and interviewing techniques. This includes my commentary on asking more questions about 'living by the sea and some more about the sounds and changes in the area' (04:39-04:47) and the sharing of a video as a reminder (04:50-04:52). The technology used for online interviewing effectively enabled this elicitation. Less frantic than in Part One, the different parts of the interview are made clear in my narration. This reflects the re-assertion of control by the researcher within an interview process as I lead and decide on the questions and structure.

The break part of the interview would usually be viewed as unremarkable in an interview schedule. However, it is a significant section in this sound college, lasting two minutes (02:28-04:30). The samples that are layered in this section could be considered non-research sounds as the recorder was left on out of convenience rather than with any recording intention. Yet these two minutes of layered break samples can help us think about 'in/ex situ' dynamics of research. As already discussed, the 'field' is extended by the technology, which raises interesting time-space questions about what constitutes place methodologically and conceptually. During Part One, the combination of environmental conditions and technology behaviour created distortion, resulting in an intense sensory researcher experience. During Part Two, this takes on a different dynamic, which is represented by the break. After the first door sound, we hear the 'Coo-uu' of one participant's wife calling to them followed by other domestic sounds from

both the participants' homes and my own. We hear doors opening and closing, which makes prominent the sense of being in private indoor spaces. We also hear the sounds of children's TV, revealing family homes, as well as the intimate close slurping sound of drinking. This section therefore makes audible the ways our domestic spaces are connected and intermingled through the technology.

This break section also points to a researcher unconventionally carrying out interviews in their own home. The use of our private spaces would usually raise ethical concerns pre-pandemic. Yet enforced working from home has disrupted our customary understanding of research settings and our corresponding research practices. The next section will delve further into these pandemic-impacted research practices by looking at the third journey identifiable in the sound piece.

The research practice journey

In this final identified journey, I will reflect on the research practice that have emerged in response to the pandemic whilst facilitating this specific method. As discussed, Part One is intended to feel more intense, messy and chaotic. This reflects the experimental feeling with which these methods were first undertaken. Just as the pandemic and first lockdown hit the UK, I was due to begin recruitment for group in-person soundwalks. Without knowing how long the restrictions and pandemic would last, the digital pivot was intended as a stop-gap. Viewed as temporary, these adaptive methods were undertaken with the awareness that they might fail. However, as we settled into the daily rhythms of living with Covid-19, it became apparent that these tentative experiments would need to constitute all of my fieldwork.

In Part One, we hear the phrase 'can you hear me?' repeated twice (00:56 and 01:20). This phrase became a common trope in our everyday pandemic lives as many people moved to meeting through online platforms such as Zoom and Teams. The tone taken when sharing a screen and asking what the other person can see (02:10-02:19) are phrases that have become more commonplace as we increasingly use this technology. Consequently, the sound collage moves from the tentative into repeatable phrases to reflect the way my research practice moved from experimental to rehearsed procedure. When listening back to the audio recordings and deciding what to sample, it became apparent that there were frequently repeated sounds. The different software dial tones became increasingly familiar. The phrases I used to guide participants also became more consistent. Even considering the unexpected nature of data collection (as discussed in the first journey), repeating the method 22 times created a particular way of doing things. Consequently, changes mediated by the technology to my research practice were unavoidable.

At a basic level, I gained more competence with the technology, which is depicted in the decrease in explicit sounds of technology in the sound collage. We are more likely to hear the sounds of technology and notice technology when it is not working for us, as expressed in the frustrated sigh in Part One. In this respect, I became more entangled with the technology, more accustomed to wearing headphones, pressing the right buttons and navigating whilst talking. It started to become less noticeable, perhaps like a Dictaphone in a conventional face-to-face interview, or a pen when writing ethnographically. Something shifted, from the disrupted unfamiliar to the mundane every day. The technology worked to facilitate the process in effective ways. For example, being able to share a map to plot the participant's listening walk route and sharing media that they had captured as a recollection tool.

As my research practice developed, I became more comfortable and crucially more able to

develop good relationships with my participants despite the physical distance. Participants themselves became more comfortable with the technology as the months passed from July to November 2020. In my initial technology review, I prioritised participants using software they already had and envisaged using a number of different platforms. But Zoom became the dominant software that most people recruited were already using. Interestingly, this was not differentiated by age as might have been assumed pre-pandemic (Matthews et al. 2019; Seifert et al. 2018).

As we reach the end of the sound collage, we hear my commentary on 'technology is a funny thing' followed by laughter and warm goodbyes (04:56-05:16). This sonifies the connection I was able to make with participants, which was facilitated by the method. Participants were given a degree of power and control over the listening activities, positioning them as experts of their neighbourhoods. Often participants readily took on the role of tour guides or journalistic reporters, whilst I eagerly took on the role of a restricted researcher hungry for information about the places they knew so well. By the time we met online or on telephone for the interview, there was therefore a more relaxed tone to proceedings.

Consequently, underpinning these dynamics, is the importance of a participatory approach, which I was able to apply to listening methods. My research practice developed through giving a degree of control over to my participants, necessitated through trying to research places remotely during a pandemic. The 'in/ex situ' dynamics and entanglement with mediating technology raise interesting questions about what are deemed privileged positions of knowledge when researching place. As a researcher, I placed continued importance on the physically situated and privileged position that residents could take, whilst I was forced to stay static by my laptop. Reflecting on this entanglement reveals my researcher desires to use my senses without technology mediation. But the ability of this project to generate rich findings about gentrifying neighbourhoods without being physically present as a researcher challenges these common research assumptions, strengthening the possible roles of technology in future participatory research.

Conclusion

Critically reflecting on the overall research, methods and research practice journey identified through both creating and listening back to this sound collage, I have been able to explore the entanglement of technology and being 'unintentionally ex situ' as a researcher. The first journey suggests there are universal aspects to the researcher experience that persist in spite of the pandemic impact. However, the idea of the researcher being 'unintentionally ex situ' creates opportunities for reflecting anew on our research practice. Framing the audio recordings generated in this project as 'self-reflexive narratives' (Anderson and Rennie 2016) has allowed critical reflections about the second identified methods journey. These reflections bring out the participatory dynamics of this method and the shifting control a researcher has over the unfolding research process. But most distinct to understanding the pandemic impact are questions raised about what constitutes 'the field' in place-based research that is remotely enabled through technology. Being remote creates intense and potentially disorientating sensory researcher experiences whilst also creating unconventional connections between researcher and researched domestic spaces. These all have implications for our understanding of place both methodologically and theoretically.

The final research practice journey shows how this sonic exploration has allowed me to identify shifts in my research practice. As both myself and participants became accustomed to the technology, my practice shifted from being experimental to rehearsed procedure. There are many

aspects that have not been able to be explored within the scope of this paper, namely how existing technology-related and media studies can help us understand our changing research practices and participants perspectives, experiences and positionalities. However, identifying the significance of a participatory approach in all of these journeys opens up questions for future inquiry on place-based methodologies. Why do we privilege the status of being physically 'in situ' in knowledge production and why do we feel the need to occupy this position as researchers? How can we further understand the mediating role of technology and its entanglement with 'in/ex situ' dynamics? The pandemic disrupted these customary research practices and created alternatives that may help us renew our research practices moving forwards.

Appendix: Unintentional Ex Situ Listening sound collage transcript

Part One: Listening Walk

[00:00:00]

Researcher voice: So, if you're sitting comfortably, I invite you to close your eyes.

[Background room noise hum starts and quality of voice changes, feels like the speaker is at a distance]

Researcher's voice: and then starting to become aware of the sounds around you. What can you hear?

Researcher's fingers: Click-click

[Background humm increases with a scuffle and shuffle of an object next to the mic]

Skype: De-dwunk-de (start up tone)

Skype: Dhudub dhudub dhudub dhudub wwyeer (heartbeat pulsing of calling tone followed by not answered end tone)

Researcher's voice: Ohh

[scuffle and shuffle of an object next to the mic]

Researcher's phone: dededezzzzzz (interference) dum dum duuum dum dum duum dede (musical ringtone)

Researcher's voice: Ohgh (exasperated sigh)

[clunk, scuffle and continued interference)

Researcher's voice: Hello (tentative)

A participant's voice: Hello (muffled words)

Researcher's voice: Hiya.

Researcher's voice: Is that, can you hear me again ok? Um, so yeah. So where are you now? Do you mind, um, retracing your steps or going for a little bit of the walk whilst you talk to me?

Skype: Dum de dum – de- (jauntier but distorted calling tone)

A participant's voice: Hello? (muffled through phone)

Chorus of voices: HelloHello|Hi|Oh hi|How you doing?

Researcher's voice: So do you want to start retracing your steps? So where are you now, are you outside your house? (distorted echo increasing)

Can you hear me okay?

A participant's voice muffled by loud uncomfortable distortion: whudjzsshhmm|that's something I| quite umm|whudjzsshhmm|quickly|whudjzsshhmm

Researcher's voice: Yea?

A participant's voice muffled by increasing loud distortion roar: WHJSZHZHZHZ|by steps|WHJSZHZHZHZ|walking along|WJWHUMWHJ

[crackling rushing sounds behind]

A participant's voice muffled by loud distortion roar and crossed wires sounds: ZHSHZHSHZHS|feels quite quiet but|ZHSHZh

[distortion stops and sudden quiet]

Researcher's voice: Bye, bye (tentative)

A participant's voice: Yea (awkward short laugh)

[quiet clunk]

Skype: dje-wjuum (end call tone)

Part Two: Follow Up Interview

[00:01:52]

[quiet computer click]

Skype: p-p-p-puwm (starting tone) dumm-de-dumm de-dum-de (jaunty calling tone with beat behind)

[clacking picking up sound]

Researcher's voice: Hello?

Chorus of two higher pitched voices: Hi|hi

[child's indistinct 'wooo' in background]

Researcher's voice: How you doing? |gone through, listening to the recordings and I've got a

kind of crib sheet of questions|

Researcher's fainter voice: I wonder if I can...?

[quiet room humm]

Researcher's fainter voice: Yeah, I might just shaa-re screen rather than share a particular screen. Okay. So hopefully can you see...?

A participant's voice: Cool

Researcher's voice: So hopefully, can you seeee…?|Right I'll stop sharing the screen|

[faint dull computer thud]

Researcher's voice: Right I'll err, stop sharing the screen?| Uh, so it's ten to three now, if you want to take, like till just after five to..?| I'll leave it on (awkward laugh)

[background humm, scuffle of object, creaking of chair, faint distant clatter, chirping of birds]

Distant echoey voice: Coo-uuu

[background humm, scribbling and scrawls of pen mixed with scuffle of turning, faint shuffles and plods, click-clack of door handle and clack of door opening and closing,

background humm increases, faint and louder slurps, distant conversation turning into shriller higher pitched and mechanical voice, scribbling and scrawls of pen continue,

chirrup of birds starts up and keeps a regular rhythm, distant distorted wafting music with mechanised singing, deeper distant conversation,

dull computer bluup,

distant distorted wafting music with mechanised singing continues,

thud thud of footsteps, scuffle, clank, scrhuch-schruch, bash-clack

click-clack door closing, scuffle thwack nearer to mic, creeeak-creeeaack of chair

echoey twack twack, scuffle-shuffle, scrawl-scribble]

Closer echoey voice: hm-hm-hm-hm-hm-humm-humm-humm-hm

Researcher's voice: It's helpful just because the other whole screen fatigue, it's good to just have a break for a minute. And also it gives me a chance to kind of tick off what I've kind of| And, um, I wanted to ask you after a break a bit more about living by the seaside [scuffle-shuffle of papers] and some more around the sounds and changes in the area| So I've got actually, I've got up the video that you did of the-

A participant's voice: Yep

Researcher's voice: So I could just play that quickly to remind you|this uncertainty and limbo we have to live with now, which is

Chorus of two voices laughing

Researcher's voice: Oh, thank you. (laughter) Yeah. Technology is always fun.[00:05:00]

Researcher's slightly echoey voice: Brilliant yes, well stay safe in these strange times. And er, thank you again-

Chorus of interspersed voices: Yea |Yea se ya|Bye|Bye-bye|See ya|Bye|Byyye|Cheers|Bye

Skype: dje-wjuum (quiet end call tone)

A final participant's quieter muffled voice: Bye then, thank you, bye-bye

Skype: dje-wjuum (louder end call tone)

Click-clack

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