

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Alan Dimmick

COMMENTARIES

'In the open'

**Luke Fowler, Lauren Gault, Ashanti Harris,
Sulaiman Majali, Duncan Marquiss, and
Margaret Salmon**

July – September 2020



'Searching for the Open'

It's hard to remember when it started exactly – at what point did we already know something would change? It's only been some months, or longer? While time slips, or plays tricks, it is also being counted and registered in new ways. A range of counting (and accounting) is taking place (minutes, days, markets, jobs, illness). I can't say for sure where we are exactly, I don't pay attention to the news – at a certain point, I stopped looking, it was too much. I wanted to experience something other than the rapidity of counting – I wanted to feel time differently, as it occurs from inside this room. The room takes over to dominate the days, giving way to a state of being inside. I can't say whether it's a slow time, a fast time, or an average time; somehow, time is broken. I try to avoid a form of linearity, even while being surrounded by all this counting. Rather, the beginning opens outward toward something; a waiting, a dissipation, a panic and a reflection, as well as new forms of care, concern, and engagement.

I take the counting and I put it on the shelf. Instead, I search for ways to stay within time, letting it float, billow, stand still. I want the slowness, I want the sudden disappearance of the schedule, of the calendar; to stay with the postponement. I want the erasure of time as known before, to embrace the strange emptiness – the emptying out taking place, which is an emptiness also full of illness, loss, the labour of others, risks taken, politics. From within the room, global activities seem abstract, as physical contact, togetherness, and a sense of tactility are replaced. And yet, such abstraction is what makes everything so pressing and urgent, as if a type of mutation is occurring. There is that sense, in the midst of the strange emptiness, and the time that disappears, that is captured or strained in ever new ways. Something unrecognisable is taking place, which requires responsiveness, even experimentation.

Responding, dwelling in the stillness, the emptiness, staying with the disorientation, not only to find something out, but also to refigure the processes by which finding

out takes place: remaking practices, even in the smallest of acts. For instance, I must confront the moment of leaving: to open the door and step outside again, to take a walk even, in the neighbourhood (I can't even begin to think of travelling farther than this...). How to approach this stepping out? In fact, each step demands a certain concentration, reflection, consideration. Whether out or in, through or around, steps taken and steps needed emerge as questions. Where do we find support in these instances? What might we hang onto when leaving, or returning?

The Common Guild's *In the open* accompanies me during these days, aiding me in my own steps. It draws on such questioning, bringing its listeners close to their steps – to the sensitivity found in considered steps – as thresholds demarcating the inside and outside are weighed. Each step becomes an acoustic framework, attuning one to the strange and strained ecologies of lockdown. A series of seven audio works by six participating artists, *In the open* opens our ears to a range of careful perspectives, while guiding us as we walk. Created to be listened to while walking, while taking those unsteady steps outside, the works wrap us in geographies small, detailed, intimate and reverberant, dense and opaque. From captured soundscapes to musical compositions, sudden conversations to self-talking, from ground to sky to water, the collection may be heard as a form of acoustic labyrinth, inviting one to hover within different chambers, corners, stories, imaginaries.

Step by step, opening the door, to pass along the hallway... It is quiet, with the light reflecting across the wooden stairs, to catch the corners and the early morning...

A voice speaks to me, reading a letter, leading me into a scene of reflection, laughter, social gathering, an outdoor territory. Luke Fowler's *The Pitches* captures the nearby grounds close to where the artist grew up in Glasgow. A kind of open territory, a left-over terrain, that becomes populated by an unexpected crowd – a sociality pressed out from the experience of lockdown. With everything closed, people

spill out of the city, leaving the streets and shops of the urban centre for open expanse. Life, in this way, goes elsewhere; it meanders aimlessly, lingers in the empty architectures, giving way to renegade celebrations. Fowler brings attention to these persistent and enduring movements, composed alongside conversations with his mother as she speaks about lockdown, her garden, and the grounds beyond; movements that give articulation to a rather complicated sense of suspension and expressivity; movements across new levels of quiet towards shifting strata of the audible and the animate. I wonder at the birdcalls as they take over, flitting their melodies within a soundscape full and empty at the same time.

I carry it along, carrying these voices, ambient stirrings, mysterious hummings... down the stairs, as I touch the banisters, wondering, withdrawing, taking my hand away, feeling my way across the materiality of things...

It becomes a collection of stories, some voiced, others energetic, echoic, recalled... Within the conditions of lockdown, memories come forward. Narratives and new diaries that find traction by tracing genealogies of other struggles; histories of loss and crisis, as well as those of capturing new strength.

History is central to the audio piece by Ashanti Harris. The artist has produced a work that speaks to the body, inviting us to meditate upon our breathing, the vitality of oneself, while attending to under-represented histories within coloniality and the project of the British Empire, in particular the relations between Scotland and Guyana, marked by experiences of slavery. Harris' historical recollection acts to resound the archive, drawing into audibility the lives of Guyanese women. Interweaving the past with the present, such stories equally ask us to dwell upon the conditions of place – to follow the lines defining the nation, the city, as trade routes and geopolitical channels trafficking in a complex range of agendas, economies, desires.

In walking I look down at my steps and wonder as to the histories underfoot in this neighbourhood in Berlin, these streets

which contain their own difficult politics of colonialism, restitution, and identity. Harris' narrative reminds of the necessity to continually hear beyond the hearable, to extend the limits of listening so as to reorder understanding and the acknowledgment of others – to continually resound the archive to allow for other narratives, voices, demands.

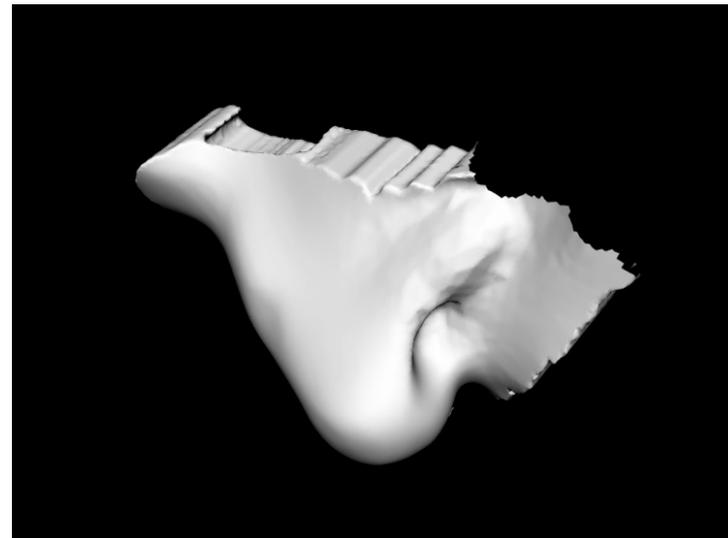
Walking may become an act of listening, a migrating hearing... past or through the acoustic norms that often define a particular distribution of the heard... walking, imagining, listening out for the itinerant echoes that might complicate the stories we tell of ourselves...

I am across the street, there is no one around.

History, memory, the archive... a looking or listening back, as Fowler's mother does, and as Harris asks of us, and which takes another perspective in the work of Lauren Gault. We shift from social histories, and the human-centric questions of equality and injustice, to that of geological time, a deep time that seems to also require another way of listening. Gault strays towards Fossil Grove, dwelling upon the eleven stumps of extinct lycopod trees fossilised and found in Victoria Park, Glasgow, in the 19th century. Drawing out a compelling range of reflections and views on geology, the temporality of planetary life, the nature of sea and land, and the ecosystems of a deeply shared earth, Gault immerses us as listeners, pushing us down into petrification and the language of roots: a mythical soundscape radically concrete. Questions of land and listening spin wildly in my thoughts, as Gault's breathless journey becomes a mesmerizing poetry whose cadence captures the incredibly dense world of earthly entanglements.

Time, time, time continues; like threads pulled, stretched, then let go, left to slacken... we are moving across scales of duration, temporality, each punctuated by politics and poetry, species and sonority, a time that figures life and death in different ways.

I look up and watch the leaves of the chestnut trees, emerging within the new summer.



Top
Margaret Salmon
Clouded, 2020

Bottom
Sulaïman Majali
strange winds, 2020

Courtesy of the artists.

A medley of light, phosphorescent greens, the humming of being in time... which gives way to Duncan Marquiss' audio work, *Contact Call*. A series of short improvisations played on electric guitar, *Contact Call* takes its lead by focusing on birdcalls and songs the artist notices during these days of lockdown. With the lack of traffic, Marquiss attunes to the call-and-response passing overhead. Following these meandering, studied improvisations, I'm led to attend to the ways in which other species may experience the current dramas and dilemmas; to what degree do other planetary life participate, respond, and work through their own experiences of virus and contagion. Such may be a recurring thread within *In the open*, understood as "ecologies of attention": compositions and recordings, narrations and conversations, all of which craft or elicit ecologies of attention, placing listening at the centre of a view onto worlds and the worlding we might participate in.

The worlding of human and more-than-human entities, a listening in and then past what we can see; a composing with others shaped by the acoustic imaginary drawn out during these walks, which seem to become possible only by way of lockdown, and the stress and strain of a geobiological threat.

Time, time, time... listening takes time.

I linger in the nearby square, which is suddenly full of people enjoying the summer sun – though the playground is still off-limits... listening between what I see and what I hear...

Listening to Margaret Salmon's work, which brings attention to the clouds, placing us within a narrative of pastoral reflection, a being-in-common with water – not as static form or category, but as a living process, an ecology of tears and rivers, streams and rain, clouds and their mysterious movements. The liquid cosmos Salmon composes gives expression to that "watery dreamer" Gaston Bachelard describes.¹ For Bachelard, water and clouds form an elemental matter of poetic dreaming: from moisture to vapor, fog to clouds, these figure as a nexus of shimmering imagery and oneiric expression. While Bachelard dwells upon the poetic image, Salmon draws out an auditory

sensation, a cloudy listening that also throws shadows across my path.

Shadows, like dark clouds that wrap the buildings, float across the windows, break and deepen the emptiness... someone passes by, speaking into their phone – a half-conversation that clearly works at keeping connected, vibrating relation with urgent words...

Sulaïman Majali's *strange winds* equally locates me within an arena of phone calls and whispered narratives, a telling of *A Thousand and One Nights*, which is another story of counting, one that works at fending off death. How many nights have passed during this current epic? Majali captures the night as a scene of telling and of survival, a type of futurism that endures and persists as an imaginary – diasporic and cosmic, that shimmers as night turns to sunrise. I imagine the new colours which Majali invites us to experience... blue turning lighter, with the slow emergence of yellow and pink... pink becoming orange and a brighter yellow, blue and more blue suddenly. A composition of colour that equally counts the days, but that reminds of new beginnings, and new tales to tell.

Taking steps emerges as another form of temporality, one that stops and starts, ebbs and flows; taking steps in this moment is a considered act, marking out through a subtlety of rhythm the time it takes to move, traverse, linger. *To watch the sunrise, to dream upon the clouds, to engage the threads that bind us to particular histories.*

Steps are another kind of breathing.

I breathe the air, the wind, the absence, testing my lungs while sitting on a stoop in front of a closed shop.

Here is where I end my journey, returning to Luke Fowler, this time listening to his second contribution. *A walk through a different city* maps the ambient soundscape of the emptied city centre. Navigating the altered environment, Fowler draws closer to the soft whirring and rustling of urban life, reminding of the multiple forms and forces, mechanics and movements, that constitute the city as a world. I am also walking in a

different city today. What might emerge from these first steps, which are not only mine, but others as well: what do others hear as they step out and across this different city, encountering the familiar as never before? Being in the open, as Fred Moten suggests, is to refuse the constructs and genealogies that often work to settle us in ways we never consent to.² With Fowler's city humming in my thoughts, and the memory of the other audio works, I have a feeling that we must find ways to stay in the open.

Brandon LaBelle is an artist, writer and theorist working with sound culture, voice, and questions of agency.

1. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas Institute Publications, 1994.

2. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.