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Angus Carlyle

Acoustic Commons Evaluation

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Like Trees in a Wrong Forest

“Of the tree under which the Buddha was born, and also meditated, and Krishnamurti tried to find shelter and peace? Of the oak, from which the druids picked the mistletoe, or of the tree under which my friend dispensed justice in Africa? And of so many others. What has befallen these suppliers of air for our life and spirituality? Are the trees today nothing but material at the disposal of humans for their various businesses? What will happen to a humanity that behaves in this way toward its most precious common good?”

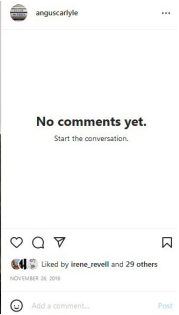
— Luce Irigaray, “Sharing Universal Breathing,” *Through Vegetal Being* (2016)¹

¹ Luce Irigaray, “Sharing Universal Breathing” in Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder *Through Vegetal Being: two philosophical perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 26.

Seeds and Lichens

The low and leaden clouds had deadened many woodland hues, barks of oaks and alders blackened by rain, rock outcrops sodden to sullen, fir needle greenness dialled to dull, puddles pooled ochres and ponds liquified pewters. Other shades seemed sharpened by their contrasts with the grey, berries blazed reds, mosses shone stronger jades and were jewelled with droplets that turned the world upside down, lichen spread crusts the colour of processed mustard or flourished as fronds of baby blue, bent bracken rung out russets.

We partially paralleled the palettes on the wet Grizedale Forest trail. The sombre sections of the colour chart shared between military surplus waterproofs, the outdoor tenor of trekking gear and the smart urban tones of black, navy and grey; the brighter tints in the Lakeland understory mirrored in rainbows of dripping plastic cagoules and sopping woollen hats that were peeled off and hung to dry on hooks and chairbacks in the room hosting this first in-person encounter of the Acoustic Commons project.



An element of the agenda involved sifting the significance of the terms in the funding bid, terms that seemed to have shifted in the shadows cast by the then-impending election, the first since the narrow referendum to leave the European Union. It was not just a conceptual cargo that was unloaded and unpacked, the proposal also carried a freight designed to deliver “a range of creative and technical approaches and innovative ways to activate audiences and places,” cumulatively intended to “develop... resources for the growing number of artists, scientists and citizens who are increasingly turning to sound as a medium to make and explore environmental connections”. The technical protocols in the document that cabled hardware to software and attached streamers’ microphones to listeners’ loudspeakers were parsed according to social

grammars: the motivations behind establishing a live audio stream, the incentives to access one, the kinds of engagement projected by the overlapping vocabularies of users, listeners and participants. Written in notes I shared with the participants, whose dialogue I was facilitating, was a hope that later circumstances would transpose to a more poignant register: an ambition to match any gathering’s digitality with a corresponding corporeality, to “create physical spaces in which to engage with streams”.

Roots and Grapefruits

Although I needed a legible prompt to be reminded of this physical / digital pledge, like the finer-grained details of the forest walk-and-talk, the architectural setting for the workshop lodged in memory. The meeting room was an aesthetic amalgam of 1970s scout huts and institutional libraries in the 1980s when card indexes were giving way to microfiche, this scruffier behind-the-scenes space concealed from visitors diverted by smart sans serif signage to dioramas and display boards and directed into a gallery space that was then occupied by Yoko Ono’s *Wish Tree for Peace*.

Ono’s installation asks for written wishes to be attached to the twigs of living trees whose root bowls are contained in wooden boxes, the work incarnating the arboreal as imaginative intermediary, there in the demand that *Secret Piece* (1953) be performed in “the woods from 5 a.m. to 8 a.m. in summer... with the accompaniment of the birds singing;” in the injunction of *Whisper Piece* (1961) to “Whisper a secret to a young tree. Make a chair out of it and send it to a woman”; and in the invitation in *Watch Piece 1* (2016) to “Watch a hundred-year-old tree breathe / Thank the tree in your mind for showing us / how to grow and stay.”

The *Wish Tree’s* paper offerings, of which more than a million have been collected since 1996, travel to the IMAGINE PEACE TOWER on Viðey Island in Reykjavik, are preserved in that structure’s Wishing Well and broadcast their blessings of “awareness to the whole world that peace & love is what connects all lives on Earth.” Since wishes can be transmitted by Twitter and Instagram, Ono’s speculative signal routing insinuates a blending of energy states, encompassing but not exhausted by the physical and digital, and perhaps problematising these categorical separations in the ways she did in *To the Wesleyan People*, where she explains that just

as her music is “only to induce music of the mind in people” so her paintings are “mainly in ‘painting to construct in your head.’”²

If the 2016 *Acorn* instruction score collection loses some of the occasional bleakness, brutality, ostentation and awkwardness that enlivens the text pieces in the 1964 and 1970 versions of *Grapefruit* (the massive and the miniature, the instantaneity of some propositions, the deep temporalities of others, the burnings, killings, cigarettes, cannons, the casual forgettings, the irrevocable resolutions), it felt propitious that Ono’s work vibrated the air around the inaugural Acoustic Commons meeting. That Ono’s approach becomes a footnote in a critical commentary on the political meanings of the commons that this essay turns to next adds another dimension, one reinforced by Ono’s understanding, in the same declaration after her 1966 Wesleyan performance, of what might be wagered and won in telemetry, whether “painting with a person in the North Pole over a phone, like playing chess... [a] method [which]

² Yoko Ono, “To the Wesleyan People,” originally in *The Stone* (New York: Judson Gallery, 1966), reprinted in *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), unpaginated.

derives from as far back as the time of the Second World War when we had no food to eat, and my brother and I exchanged menus in the air." In hindhearing, this talk of transmission technologies during times of trauma again appears to prefigure the fundamental changes that were just starting to unfold but which, in November 2019, in the Lake District, I had yet to notice.

Trunks and Tremors

From afar, the commons is a buoyant phrase, blown up to the same smooth contours that shape the "most precious common good" that Luce Irigaray thought humanity risked imperiling; brought closer to hand, the notion of the commons is serrated with sharp complexities. In one of her multiple approaches to the idea, Silvia Federici, summoning the same woodlands that cause Irigaray and Ono their anxieties and joys, grieves that "the language of the commons has been appropriated by the World Bank and the United Nations and put at the service of privatization. Under the guise of protecting biodiversity and conserving the global commons, the Bank has turned rainforests into ecological reserves, has expelled the populations that

for centuries had drawn their sustenance from them, while ensuring access to those who can pay, for instance, through eco-tourism."³ Although critical of the romanticising (and potentially exclusionary) uses of a 'reproductive commons' that Federici goes on to advance, Marina Vishmidt acknowledges the ways in which "the 'commons' has become a compelling theoretical, socio-economic and aesthetic paradigm" that derives impetus from "a shared emphasis on plurality, experimentation, pragmatism and a certain 'soft utopianism' which animates many variants of the political and the aesthetic approaches to the discourse of the commons."⁴

Attached to that "soft utopianism" Vishmidt finds a loose hanging thread that once tugged starts to unravel the viability of any unreflective

3 Silvia Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons", in eds. Craig Hughes, Stevie Peace and Kevin Van Meter, *Uses of a Worldwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), p. 284.

4 Marina Vishmidt, "All Shall Be Unicorns: About Commons, Aesthetics and Time," from *Open! Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain*, 2014, <https://www.onlineopen.org/all-shall-be-unicorns> p. 2.

appropriation of the commons. Vishmidt warns that contemporary "commoning practices" ("trendy among the mainstream" as Federici has it) risk letting intoxicating aspirations obscure the need for disruptive material change, particularly when failing to address "property and social relations around communal resources." And this is where Ono again returns to the frame, with Vishmidt suggesting aspirational commoning "evokes Yoko Ono and John Lennon's Vietnam-era billboard facing an L.A. freeway that proclaimed 'War Is Over if You Want It.'"

The differences between a soft utopian commons and a commons arrogated by institutions advocating privatization have agitated offline and online alike, with authors like Sophie Toupin identifying a time in advance of the last millennium when the notion of a "digital commons [was] developed as part of the non-market orientation" before it succumbed, becoming "re-appropriated by companies which privatize it in the final product they sell to consumers. In these scenarios the digital commons are at great risk of being privatized and owned through the making of new products."⁵ With

5 Sophie Toupin, "The Commons, Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Resistance" in eds. Cornelia Sollfrank, Felix

increasing understanding of untrammelled digitality's toxic fallout (and its long half-life), these processes of privatization do not isolate their ecological effects in the same way that they seek to build fences around the facilities they offer (and seek to enclose the financial benefits they acquire). If resources are greedily "taken away from our commonwealth, plausibly the common lands and waters of communities in Africa or Central and South America,"⁶ their damages are gifted liberally across a world without horizon: the data centre electricity estimated to contribute between 0.3 percent and 2 percent of global carbon emissions, with one data centre alone calculated to use 7 million gallons of water daily;⁷ the "immortal waste" that ends up in "e-waste graveyards like those

Stalder, and Shusha Niederberger *The Aesthetics of the Commons* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2021), p. 200, p. 206

6 Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting The World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), p. 192

7 Steven Gonzalez Monserrate, "Statistics from The Staggering Ecological Impacts of Computation and the Cloud," The MIT Press Reader, <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-staggering-ecological-impacts-of-computation-and-the-cloud/> [accessed January 3rd, 2023]

of Agbogbloshie, Ghana. These metals, many of which are toxic and contain radioactive elements, take millennia to decay;"⁸ the single computer that "requires 240 kilograms of fossil fuels, 22 kilograms of chemicals, and 1,500 kilograms of water to manufacture."⁹

The definitional tremors shaking the semantic underpinnings of the commons, the ecological shockwaves set in motion by particular infrastructural engineering: these both would threaten the stability of the commons as conceptual shelter for ventures like Acoustic Commons, were it not for an important qualification. The "commons refers neither to resources alone nor to people alone but to an intermixture of them both. The commons is not only 'common pool resources' nor is the commons purely 'the people.' In other words, it is not a thing but a relationship."¹⁰ As a relational rather than a foundational category,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nathan Ensmenger's analysis cited by Monserrate, op cit.

¹⁰ Peter Linebaugh, *Stop Thief! The Commons, Enclosures and Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014), p. 18

the borders of the commons are made, unmade and re-made in actions.

The commons might unfurl a flag for soft utopianism or construct a mask for privateering, but it can also be amplified as sonorous reverberations. The Occupy 'mic check' Federici mentions captures aspects of this auditory version, perhaps, but a much wider compass, one that is as sensitive to listening as much as speaking, evolves in Ella Finer's explorations of term within the context of this project (and beyond). Finer heard samples of acoustic commoning emerging in a time of pandemic lockdown where "once-physical art events were being re-imagined as radio stations, shows and online broadcasts. Zoom was re-purposed from conference platform to broadcast medium while quarantine pirate radio stations, bed-room broadcasts and podcast series began to fill the airwaves with content, assembling communities in the ether." She detected a collaborative "experience of sonic sociality, of being close at distance," a gathering of "acoustic commoners, also with responsibilities for attending to the living resources and giving back to the collective project by sharing our own acoustic environments at daybreak, planting new seeds

of conversation, staying with the stream for however long we can."¹¹

 **Angus Carlyle** @AngusCarlyle · May 1, 2020
Come stroll tomorrow's night woods - or at least listen to me doing it live, as I read excerpts from @makinabooks "Night Blooms" as part of @soundtent. We've done a couple of tech rehearsals - so as well as prose poems, you'll hear huffing & puffing, wind in leaves and footfalls.



1 13 31

An acoustic commons, understood from this perspective, is not one that is enacted according to the common pool resource paradigm, which would be closer to what is modelled in metaphors of noise as pollution (the pool

¹¹ Ella Finer, "Soundcamp 2020 / The Reveil Platform / Acoustic Commons" (2020), https://acousticcommons.net/files/reveil_7_evaluation.pdf

contaminated) or soundmark as heritage artefact (the pool preserved). As Peter Sinclair interjected during a discussion held in the midst of The Realtour that formed part of the Acoustic Commons *finissage*, instead of holding tightly the idea of soundscape, "what happens if we share the sound?"

Branches and Arrows

The "planted seeds" in Finer's essay intrigue me as germinal kindred to Irigaray's and Ono's trees, allegories all for other collectivities, the roots and branches of an undercommons, the "trees in a wrong forest" which Finer reports Lia typing into the IRC chat of a meeting of the Acoustic Commons Study Group during 2020's Reveil. Yet for all the joys of misty monochromes set alight by small flashes of colour, Grizedale Forest is a convincing candidate for Irigaray's "trees today [as] nothing but material at the disposal of humans for their various businesses." The primeval woods there were felled first for coppicing before the coppices were, in their turn, transformed according to still-more industrial instrumentalities: clearances making space for barrel- and bucket-makers, tanners, pig farmers, smelters, while oak and other

broadleaf afforestation and conifer stands made resources for charcoal burners and saw mills, the 150,000 cubic meters of timber felled for the same war in which Ono was evacuated out of a fire-bombed Tokyo.

As the wildwood ecosystem that pre-dated human control was superseded by ancient woodland that saw the first sustained incursions of extraction and exploitation (with the ninth century colonisers' introduction of pigs to the valleys coining the estate's current name), so coppicing gave way to centuries of plantation schemes and eventually to the current combinations, including the re-configuration of the natural as a space for recreation. Each shift in land use matched corollary innovations in the property relations that Vishmidt wants to keep under a spotlight, with two short paragraphs in a mid-twentieth century history of Grizedale Forest shifting a chronology of ownership between Norse invaders, the monks of Furness Abbey, and various private owners – textile merchants, successful ironmasters, shipping magnates – before the large-scale purchases by the UK government department known as the Forestry

Commission, tasked with expanding silviculture and the country's biggest land manager.¹²

If felled and cleared, fenced and factory-functioning forests represent the tragic triumphs of particular forms of exploitation, buried somewhere beneath these approaches to commodifying the earth is a less absolute and exclusive form of land consumption and commodification, the forest commons, an idea that that Al Fritsch claims is "neither new nor especially radical ... this concept is rooted in ancient tradition and finds precedent in virtually every culture on Earth."¹³ In the context of the UK, the 1217 Charter of the Forest is cast by David Bollier as "a kind of human rights convention that guaranteed commoners specific uses of the forest – the right of pannage, or pasture for their pigs; the right of estover, to collect firewood; the right of agistment, to graze cattle; the right of turbary, to cut turf for fuel; and much else. In

12 The 1537 Church Commissioners mentioned in that report are not the contemporary Church Commissioners who are the property arm of the Church of England and the country's largest private sector forestry owner.

13 Al Fritsch, "The Forest Commons," (1991), accessed at AppalFor, Appalachian Sustainable Forestry, <http://www.appalfor.org/commons.html>

essence, the Charter of the Forest was the first legal limitation on privatization."¹⁴ Although extensive programmes of enclosures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would uproot vast tracts of what had been Charter-protected commons, a notion of forests as at least symbolically shared spaces still persisted with sufficient political vitality to defeat a government attempt to privatise the Forestry Commission's arboreal estates in 2017, with a *Guardian* article on the thwarted sell-off featuring a photograph of a campaigner walking the same path taken through Grizedale by the Acoustic Commons researchers.¹⁵

Pannages, estovers, agistments and turbaries may involve some degree of (concessionary) plurality in terms of property relations, but continue to encounter woods as "material at the disposal of humans for their various businesses." There

14 David Bollier "Who May Use The Kings Forest," (2015), accessed at <https://www.bollier.org/blog/who-may-use-kings-forest-meaning-magna-carta-commons-and-law-our-time>

15 Martin Wainwright "Cameron faces the countryside alliance in Grizedale Forest", 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/jan/28/cameron-forests-protests-grizedale>

are less directly productivist forms of aboreal engagement and the *Guardian* journalist refers to woodland leisure activities as being part of what was perceived to be at stake in defending public ownership from privatization. Although they are very differently-scaled than Buddha's and Krishnamurti's meditations under leaf canopies, the druids' mistletoe, the justice of African friends shaded by other trees, all that is inspired in Ono's *Secret Piece, Whisper Piece, Watch Piece 1, Wish Tree*, in Finer's seeds and Lia's "trees in wrong forest," nonetheless, mountain biking on Forestry Commission land might (have to) also be accommodated as an equal embracing of trees as "suppliers of air for our life and spirituality."

"Forest bathing" has become recently emblematic of a reparative form of sensory emplacement that does not exhaust scarce resources and Forestry England – "an executive agency, sponsored by the Forestry Commission" – provides a guide to "the simple method of being calm and quiet amongst the trees, observing nature around you whilst breathing deeply."¹⁶ The same guide suggests a mediated version

16 "Your Guide to Forest Bathing" <https://www.forestryengland.uk/blog/forest-bathing>

of the practice, presenting for these purposes a 360° video inviting participants to “Use the arrows to gently shift your gaze into the tree canopy, watch the branches sway, listen as the leaves rustle. Pause, breathe, imagine. Immerse yourself in woodland bliss”.

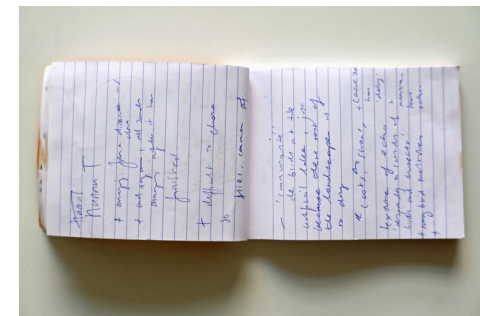
As forests are staged as theatres of mindfulness – both those which require the protection of dull or bright waterproofs and those where the virtual visitor is invited to “sit back, get comfy and enjoy our forest views from [their] home” – so are forests dramatized, as Federici did with the rainforest, as the very stakes in extractivism’s excesses: forests as bulwarks, as a vital source of carbon sequestration; forests as tripwire alarms, the treeline that snaps when subject to extreme environmental pressure; forests as release valves, mechanism to mitigate some of depletions and degradations, with nine of the first ten returns on a google search for “carbon offsets” directing me to webpages with prominent photographs of tree-covered panoramas.

Susan Simmard punning world wide web as woodwide web rehearses similar interspecific symbioses to those nurtured between the forest commons and Acoustic Commons, connections

that thicken further through the work of Hill Hiroki Kobayashi, whose research contributed to Tokyo University’s project Cyberforest – one of the Acoustic Commons partners – and whose venture *Soundbum* delivered the first experience of remote and real-time sounding that really opened my ears, through a live stream broadcast from the jungles of Iriomote island in the Okinawan archipelago since 1997. Soundbum, its portal now shuttered, provided a perception of presence that was so palpable – a paragon of Finer’s “being close at a distance” – that classroom listenings in 2006 were often interrupted by vigorous disputes of its authenticity. In stark contrast to the gentle, seemingly subtle ecological footprints left by the Soundbum system, were Kobayashi’s *Tele Echo Tubes* which engaged a very different techno-natural gearing when gallery audiences could listen to feeds from forests surrounding Mt., Fuji but also shout through a stylised sounding horn: “users can sing out ‘YO-HOOOO!’ very lively from the local tube to the speakers in the remote forest. A loopback call at the remote tube occurs while the playback sound from the speaker is captured by the mics and transferred to the local tube with spontaneous network delays (approx. 20-90 secs). When the users hear the loopback call,

‘their voices within the soundscape from the forest’, they cognize that the aural expression actually travelled through the forest.”¹⁷

Kobayashi’s intentions were to give “users an opportunity to feel the presence of ‘a fickle ECHO in the forest’ in the midst of a city,



beyond cultural and imaginable boundaries.” At the Exhibition of Sounds symposium in October 2022 – another part of the Acoustic Commons *finissage* – Suko Yasushi cross-faded from introducing CyberForest’s Spotify account to discussing his own collaborative

17 Hill Hiroki Kobayashi, “Tele Echo Tube: beyond cultural and imaginable boundaries,” (2018) <http://hhkobayashi.com/tele-echo-tube/>

biomedical research which investigates the potentially healthful impacts of listening to live CyberForest streams from mountain, coast and riparian wooded areas across the Japanese archipelago. The Spotify recordings are extraordinarily sharply-detailed, exuding intense impressions of densely-layered depths in the insect ambience from the Funda-ike pond in a Chiba ecology park, Cyberforest’s most popular track with 91,661 listens.¹⁸ Sharpness and depth are doubly diminished in the Kyoto Cyberforest feed I am currently playing, but the listening experience remains utterly compelling, drawing me inside subtle shimmerings of surface eddies, seeking to catch the meanings of other wetnesses, straining to decipher a source for a soft smudge that thickens from nothing and dissipates just as slowly. Yasushi’s research involved playing “natural sounds” from the live feeds – “(1) loud birdsong, (2) gentle birdsong, (3) the sound of a running river, (4) the sound of wind, and (5) the sound of rain” – into a “Sound Cocoon” temporarily inhabited by a surgeon, fresh from conducting a clinical operation and assessed for stress through skin conduction level monitors and an electrocardiogram and later to complete a

18 Accessed on January 29th, 2023.

preference questionnaire and an interview. On the basis of the pilot, the associated peer-reviewed paper proposes as a first hypothesis that “[l]istening to natural sounds immediately after work improves surgeons’ mood states regardless of their levels of experience.”¹⁹

Further research will hopefully verify the physiological and psychological restorative effects of the Sound Cocoon natural stimuli, but as the nocturnal feed from the Yura riverbank continues to leak from my speakers, I’m less assuredly occupying a biophonic and geophonic volume, feeling more the mystery of a looming, louring presence, a downward pressure and suddenly now – starting and startling as I typed the twin s’s of that word pressure – something slips – has slipped – did slip – from the murk, taking shape as a siren, gathering size and shifting in what appears inescapably as vehicular movement, signifying headlights flaring foliage round tight bends and insinuating that

19 Yasushi Suko et al. “Alleviating Surgeons’ Stress through Listening to Natural Sounds in a Half-Encapsulated Rest Space after an Operation: A Pilot, Longitudinal Field Study,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19 (9), 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9564721/#B19-ijerph-19-12736>.

the alarm is steadily submerging beneath my hearing because the van (ambulance? sound truck (*gaisensha*)? snowplough?) has turned a corner and become baffled behind a forested mountain mass.

Twigs and Cables

On the morning of The Realtour’s “plusiers variations de audiowalk” when we were to “penser avec nos oreilles et avec nos pieds,” the clouds had retreated to a higher altitude, absconding with the rain but leaving behind drips to fall from the scaffolds, staircases and shelters of Aix-en-Provence TGV and a drab light for the woodland-grassland that surrounded the station, where a mist of thyme and pine resin scents and a deliciously green vegetal sweat from oaks and poplars flared nostrils just as eyes widened for ebony and scarlet ants, for earth-erupting mushrooms that demanded teeth marks, for thousands of bottles, for two spiralling butterflies (the last of the year?), for hundreds of tiles and hundred of tyres, four of which could combine with all the scattered chassis and body parts to re-animate a complete car (albeit with a passenger door perforated by bullets), for a shattered

concrete pylon that would have done Beuys proud, for enough food wrappers to carpet a train carriage, for all the plant pots and vases needed (once glued back together) to decorate the station and many of its car parks with dead flowers and living plants. And then the litter that didn’t just dilate pupils but stopped you in your tracks, the singular and the single, the lone ballet pump, the sole cot, the solitary pink toy truck.



A quarrelsome landscape; no Agboglobloshie but getting its challenges in early: defiantly turning its face from Montagne Sainte-Victorie, that craggy mountain, its imperious thirst for the sun, the “beau motif,” far from any blithe nature however it has been subsequently positioned, first glimpsed – after all – by Cézanne

from a train of all things, and embraced for its elan, even as its “weightiness falls back to earth;” insolently insisting that this sense-inflating and category-deflating miracle of mess is all that will be our lot to tend, a damaged pastoral that no taxonomic tidying can divide into dichotomies.

As much as the neatly drawn plans of a soft utopia or the carefully coded agendas of tech privateers, a commons can also be this mess, “the ‘fickle ECHO in the forest,’ in the midst of a city, beyond cultural and imaginable boundaries,” the “mix” that appears so often in Finer’s account of the lockdown Reveil. Though they might be sown in serried ranks and logged for precise lengths, perfect for the wooden shades curving around the Aix-en-Provence TGV (its silhouette a techno riff on the Sainte-Victoire relief), left to themselves, trees also conspire to this haze. Against any convention of a closed botanic integrity, the lifeworlds of a plane tree in this scrubby Provençal savannah will burrow well below its roots and buzz high above its crown as a multispecies assembly. By the same token, although the pixels glowing as phosphors under my phone’s smeared glass rigidly separated green from non-green on the map of the GR2013 hiking trail, the edges of the

woods on the bank of the Réaltor reservoir were a much more fuzzy proposition, blurring when gases and minerals were interchanged with the surrounding environment, when the Mistral carries seeds elsewhere, when local water resources shift through siphoning and transpiration. The blur does not only radiate outward since the borders of the wood can also shrink, through drought, disease, pests, through humans: if fresh oxygen is gifted to the air (Ono's "watch a hundred-year-old tree breathe"), the woods are forced to take back toxins from phthalates leaching from all those tyres; the early answers to bird calls came from jets descending and ascending; in return for the dappled shade extended by tree canopies, the D9 donates a nightly spill of sodium glare; the glitter from a fly-tipped mirror matches the tumblings of a thirsty leaf.



A rendering of how the blurrings in a forest commons get entangled with the ditherings of an acoustic commoning – those fickle echoes and mixes – appears in the Sam Baraitser Smith illustration of a Cyberforest monitoring station which filled the first page of the original European Cooperation Project proposal, unshaded black and white line drawings of cables, microphones and tripods finding fellow form with trunks and branches. Tangled trees returned in *nous avons marché* – *a l'écoute du paysage commun*, the zine that Baraitser Smith contributed to which constituted "une sorte de 'lieu du commun'" constructed by the 110, 117 or 105 students and artists who hiked the GR2013 in the footsteps of the project proposal's desire to "explore environmental connections." "[C]'est surtout avec nos oreilles que nous avons parcouru le chemin," ears that found birch branches to sketch, "tricolour twigs" for the lines of a poem, timber structures of hunters' hides to photograph in a dance between cultivation and wilderness, and conifer cones, strips of plane tree bark, acorns, spiny casings of sweet chestnut, pine needles and alder leaves to bring back for scans and for contact prints.



Perhaps not the 110 (or 117 or 105) who had earlier auditioned the woodland-grassland route for the *nous avons marché* zine, but the Realtour drew what was already quite a crowd for a different seven hour circulation to blend other blurs. The promised "plusieurs variations de audiowalk" began with Irena Pivka and Brane Zorman's *SandBox*, a composition that had been transplanted from another trackside territory, in the north of Ljubljana railway station, and from another temporality, the "weeks of silence and the gradual return of noise" of the early lockdown, its preliminary excursion a geolocative contribution to the "Is it working?" festival. Although doubly-dislocated, with the SNCF "tam, tam, tam, tam" receding, *SandBox* spooled out and settled into the surroundings as if this specific scrubland

had been its initial impetus all along: with an auditory aptness that was discombobulating enough to have me lifting the closed cups off my ears, other jingles, hydraulic hisses, sirens, and whining PA mumble effaced the chalk line bounding the actual and the virtual. In another bewilderment, *SandBox's* narrator seemed to be providing a guided tour that pulsed in sync with the very rubbish-strewn environment that sloped down from the crash barrier "the public space ... the private space ... the conflicted space ... the degraded urban area ... transitional space [where] nature has taken its place". My notes from October 2022 traced *SandBox's* later voices tuning into a more SF frequency and these scribbles are now transformed into their own disorientations since although I had not consulted them since, they now provide eerie foreshadowings from many months ago of themes I believed I drafted just yesterday and only detailed on this screen two hours ago: from a script Pivka and Zorman have published online: "The proximity of trees, the proximity of plants / The noise they absorb, the fragrance they emit / the light they catch / they calm us down / ... this space of potential / will be overgrown by vegetation / The plants, the dominant

life form / It's plants that rule the planet. They are the true rulers of the planet.”²⁰



20 Irena Pivka and Brane Zorman “SandBox” (2020) <https://walklistencreate.org/walkingpiece/sandbox/>

Regrouping in a glade close beside both a cruising ground and a data centre, we heard that Tim Shaw would “compose and improvise with immediate sonic environment... everything we hear is live signals happening in the space we share together.” Lagging behind the other Realtour participants almost as far as the 100 metre range claimed for the RF ‘silent disco’ headphones that relayed Shaw’s manipulation of all the different microphones in his kit bag, my experience was no longer *SandBox’s* unnerving synchronicity at a spooky spatial and temporal distance but its more intensely vertiginous inverse: an unbinding of cause and effect, where the invisible now sparked the audible in ways that caused adrenaline to race at the apparent approach of a fast car that only arrived 10 seconds later; that made a puzzle of a metal grinding metal when all around – for once – was just soil, stone, bushes and trees, a sky finding some blue again, those ants and some gulls; that sent my ears what I’d expect a hydrophone to hear if it was dropped into that surging night-time Yura near Kyoto when my eyes just saw dirt that had all but dried from the earlier rain; that separated static to let Madonna’s voice in as a *χορός* (“chorus”) commentary where “It all seems like yesterday not far away /... Ring through my ears and sting my eyes

/... All of nature wild and free / This is where I long to be.” Shaw opening his radio receiver to admit *La Isla Bonita* revealed a feature of an acoustic commons (and the blurry arboreal commons) that could be eliminated by the planning of a soft utopian commons and the coding of a privatizing commons: a sensitivity to what Maria Papadomanolaki, enunciating her own experiences of acoustic commoning at the Exhibition of Sound symposium, called “chance interactions.”

Less audaciously acousmatic but functioning well as a decompression chamber to acclimatise our ears to a less mediatised sensorium was the final headphone piece of the Realtour day, Sena Karahan’s *Palimpsest*. The layering folded into Karahan’s title was also found in its compositional strategies, with sheets of urban sound etched with sonic meanings that were then erased or annotated by inscriptions that followed, as what was heard once as audio was then transcribed into speech by Karahan’s collaborators. And this layering was there in our listening, too, where what came through the headphones sedimented into strata with what came from outside, recorded spokes anticipating the spinning wheels of a mountain biker (testing the trees as “suppliers of air for

our life and spirituality”), the digital signals of cars, trucks, horn beeps and compressed air brakes heralding the physical churn of the D9 from below, beside, above and behind. As one of the transcribers put it, “usually eyes confirm what you hear [but the composition] makes your brain confused by what really happened;” Karahan’s palimpsest evoked the medieval practice of reusing precious parchment, the same historical medium that led Tim Ingold to a description that resonates in surprising sympathy with the blurry and unscheduled condition of an acoustic and an arboreal commons.

You can see why Deleuze and Guattari prefer grass to trees. It is because their trees are not living specimens rooted in the ground, but dendritic diagrams that articulate a hierarchy of levels of resolution, from deep to surface structure... I think we could well return to the ancient analogy between the tree and the book, to the oak and the beech, their tangled roots threading the earth, their emergent trunks rising to an equivalent tangle of branches and twigs in the canopy, their rustling and chattering leaves mingling with wind and weather. Perhaps the domain of mind could itself be compared to a dense patch of woodland. In writing and reading,

then, we would not move across a hard, preformed surface, as boots on tarmac or as on-road vehicles. We would rather find or push our way through the ground and, in so doing, contribute to its ever-emerging texture. This is the kind of movement I have called wayfaring – a movement that seeks not to connect predetermined points or territories but rather, at every moment, to keep on going. It is not a form of being but a way of becoming. And it is along this way, perhaps, that we can find the real meaning of earth writing..²¹

Ingold's analysis finds a geography ("earth writing") between wayfarers and the woodland blur but, though leaves are awarded an autonomy to rustle and chatter, where are the other active "living specimens" in this becoming scenario?

21 Tim Ingold, "Surface Textures: The Ground and the Page," *Philological Quarterly* 97 (2), 2018 p. 154.

Leaves and Coots

As the Bureau des Guides led the Realtour towards the Réaltor reservoir and the surrounding woods, the sky quickened subtly from time to time, quiet quiverings that broke the surface of consciousness then sank back below senses' sensitivities; not intrusive these, not when the air trembled more insistently as the path rose from the plain, nor when molecules coalesced into chimeras held halfway between a larynx and a syrinx, nor when ambience finally thickened into performance that was (in part) Hanna Tuulikki's. *Vocal Improvisation with Birdsong*, particularly that preposition, encapsulates an aspect of how Tuulikki's voice went wayfaring between human and more-than-human, finding an acoustic common as relation and not resource with the coots, swans and terns that might well have been curious wayfarers themselves. What the title doesn't evoke is another agency, the landscape itself, which I reconstruct from notes to carry the "reverb from Hanna off structures artificial and non-artificial. Concrete adds delay, mountain gifts echo. Can't help but put birds and insects into a responsive relationship. The trees as mirrors and curtains."



Perhaps because it had inched its way slowly into perceptibility, perhaps because we had been listening intently for so many hours since the drips and jingles of the morning's Aix-en-Provence TGV, it felt as if Tuulikki's improvisation had EQ'd my ears to new frequencies, retuning them to the sonic spectrum of "living specimens" and, by contrast, making human chatter harsher. A short walk and we came to a limestone ledge, a platform that Ida Hiršenfelder used to perform *Remembering A Tree*: the base of the bluff behind (an amphitheatre), the trees in front (a stage curtain). A subtle surge of feedback decloaked the microphone, laptop and speakers for the audience arrayed across the escarpment, many with eyes closed in concentration, a welcome tug at another loose thread, this time that one hanging from the myth of media

transparency that invests in "preferences for natural experience as if it would be quasi non-mediated."²² *Remembering A Tree* resembled a phonographic negative of "a fickle ECHO in the forest:" instead of the Fuji forest coming to the city, in this mix urban field recordings filtered through the waterside woodland, sparrows and blackbirds, jackdaws and pigeons leaving their town roosts for a country perch and bringing with them what sounded like auditory reflections from surfaces too hard to be imprinted as Ingold's "ever-emerging texture," concrete, glass, tarmac, steel. And then the conspicuous microphone appeared to have acquired had a hidden yet hearable double, a hydrophone whose concealed cable seemed to snake through the trees to siphon splashes and gurgles from the lake, a hydrophony whose tangible processing by Hiršenfelder unpicked the tapestry of media transparency a little more, a tug that was the

22 Ludwig Jäger and Jin Hyun Kim "Transparency and Opacity. Interface Technology of Mediation in New Media Art," in eds. Uwe Seifert, Jin Hyun Kim, Anthony Moore *Paradoxes of Interactivity. Perspectives for Media Theory, Human-Computer Interaction, and Artistic Investigations*. (2008), p. 47, <https://mediarep.org/handle/doc/2319>

“kind of disturbance that redirects one’s attention to the opacity of the interface”.²³



Canopies and Categories

After the discussion during which Sinclair had wondered “what happens if we share the sound?,” Elena Biserna introduced her new *Walking From Scores* publication, which contained five Ono works, including *Walking Piece* (1964) converging with and diverging from our experiences on the Realtour:

Walk in the footsteps of the person in front.

²³ Ibid.

1. on ground
2. in mud
3. in snow
4. on ice
5. in water

Try not to make sounds.

In the deciduous wood clearing, Biserna’s focus on an “activation collective” magnified how sharing, including the sharing that is embodied and emplaced as group walking, should still be subject to scrutiny, to reflections on who is walking, why they are doing so, how the walk is conducted and where it has been deemed safe to stroll, questions that are not always asked of soundwalking, as Allie Martin²⁴ and Paola Messina,²⁵ both cited by Biserna in a subsequent discussion, have shown in their

²⁴ Allie Martin “Hearing Change in the Chocolate City: Soundwalking as Black Feminist Method,” 2019, *Sounding Out!* blog, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2019/08/05/hearing-change-in-the-chocolate-city-soundwalking-as-black-feminist-method/>

²⁵ Paola Messina “Soundwalking on the Edges: Sound, Safety and Privilege in São Paulo, Brazil,” 2019 *Sounding Out!* blog, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/category/soundwalking-while-poc/>

respective essays. Other commoning practices, too, however “trendy among the mainstream,” can be augmented rather than diminished by critique, an analytical mode evidently adopted in one of the two listening structures that bracket the concluding passage of this essay, Julian Weaver’s *Nearly Present*.

Three enclosures of fire-blackened timber – borrowing their form from the cabinets used to conserve botanical samples on Victorian expeditions – simultaneously house loudspeakers that relay live audio streams through custom software and unhouse those same sound devices, recasting the speakers (and what they relay) as specimens for inspection, imagining a laboratory where the recent stringent scepticism towards field recording can be re-routed to attach to “the roles that the exotic, the commonplace, and the invasive, play in remote transmission and listening.” It is not just the resounding “YO-HOOOOO” that *Nearly Present* scrutinises for the very liveliness through which Kobayashi’s playback brought the distant close, but also the deeper (often unplumbed) commitment to capture and to captive release, operations to privatize or make soft utopias from a pool of sounds that may not have ever been defensibly designated as common in the

first place. *Nearly Present*’s unpicking of what might, in the wake of Macarena Gómez-Barris’ extraordinary writing,²⁶ be called aurality’s extractivist assumptions was exacerbated by its installation in the Jardins du Pavillon Vendôme in Aix-en-Provence, the grounds of a former hunting lodge, its walls furnished with trophies from tracking and trapping.



²⁶ “Therefore, the extractive view sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity. The viewpoint, similar to the colonial gaze, facilitates the reorganisation of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractible data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulations,” Macarena Gómez-Barris *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Duke University Press: 2017) p.5

Though making space for anger and taking time for mourning, Gómez-Barris' is not an appeal that steers the reader into a conceptual cul-de-sac where they will be immobilised for all eternity. Her work replenishes, sometimes drawing on acoustic and arboreal motifs, sometimes conjuring collectivities akin to a commons, a critical one, queer and anti-colonial:

I wouldn't want to be that singular voice that echoes indoors and in hollowed-out chambers. Or the singular optic that maps you to subjugate. Instead I offer my respect, respite, the potential of enlivened dreams. The density of emergent canopies, the freedom of your auto-poesis. In the waves of lunar pulls, the vibration of our otherwise emerges... I am part of your multispecies chorus, one of a plural and horizontal council. I want to sing and dance for you as a multiple being, to flee the carbon-induced carceral state.²⁷

As keen as *Nearly Present* was to manifest disruption, I saw its apparatuses and the cables

27 Macarena Gómez-Barris, "Transmission," from *Artists-in-Presidents: Transmissions to Power* (2021) <https://www.artistsinpresidents.com/macarena-gmez-barris>

connecting them approached in the Acoustic Commons exhibition for pleasure and play as well as curiosity and inquiry. The second listening structure, *PITCH* was necessarily a collaboration by Angharad Davies, the Director of PUBLIC WORKS, Michael Speers, Art Assassins, Bizzie Bodies and the students of L'École supérieure d'art d'Aix-en-Provence on whose campus it became a site for aural-adjacent assemblies. An architectural antithesis to the hunters' hides featured in the *nous avons marché* zine: on its wooden frame, sails that transducers turned into speakers to channel a mix of Locus Sonus streams and a conversation co-located between East London and the South of France; across its roof, cloth cyanotypes created by groups where *PITCH* had been set up, a fabric version of the leafy canopies that Forestry England, Ingold, Irigaray and Gómez-Barris all spoke of as sheltering becomings.



On the Saturday morning, the speaker-sails pulsed the glories of Sukanta Majumdar's stream from his Kolkata rooftop, the same stream that Sinclair chose to begin the Sunday symposium. Having briefly shared an office with Majumdar a decade ago where we hung our own stream out of a London tower block, it felt like *PITCH* and Acoustic Commons were not just dissolving distance, but were collapsing categories, too, where users, listeners and participants switched roles, where the boundaries of academic, artistic and scientific blurred, where friend and colleague became as interchangeable in their reciprocities as larynx and syrinx, leisure and labour, speaker and

microphone, live and recorded, relation and resource.



It was when gathered in the shade of *PITCH*, the streams running softly in the mix, that some of the symposium's explanations of what an acoustic commons might mean came to make the most sense: Sam Baraitser Smith's understanding that what is needed are those physical and digital "places where some kind of collective listening can take place," places where, as Maria Papadomanalaki observed, "listening is co-listening," places where answers might be shared to Christine Bramwell's questions about "how we convene and listen together... how to listen in a comfortable state... how to change ideas of ecological radio to make it non-exclusive."

