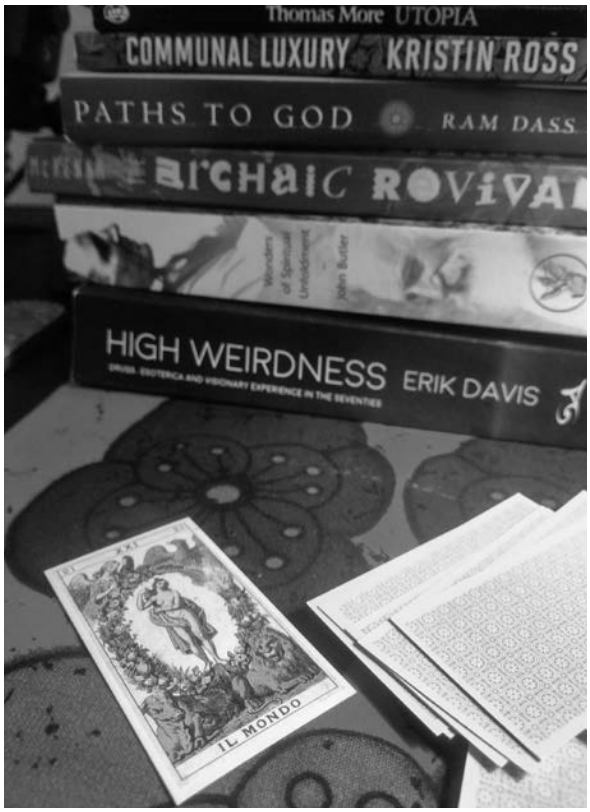
Audible Worlds

Frances Whorrall-Campbell suggests that sound, such as deployed in works by Roy Claire Potter and Kieron Piercy, Cường Phạm, and Caspar Heinemann, can offer the marginalised a visionary, as opposed to a merely visual, space in which to create worlds beyond the limitations and exclusions imposed by society.

In *Three Sweep Between*, a spoken-word and music commission produced last year for the temporary art radio station Radiophrenia, artists Roy Claire Potter and Kieron Piercy invite the listener into a tumble-down terrace house. The house functions not only as subject and backdrop to the work – the setting in and about which the narrative unfolds – but also as a site of thinking, making and listening. The pair describe how they used the dwelling's layout to 'build and inform their interrelated recording and writing process', the result of which is a composite space, existing in multiple dimensions: real and imagined, words and sound, actual and conceptual, physical and projected.

According to the artists, *Three Sweep Between* is an attempt to 'reimagine a shithole's lost potential': an act of cultivating a stubborn attachment to a place in which you are stuck through its temporal possibilities. While one might not be able to enact this potential materially (because of overbearing landlords and a lack of resources), one can enact it audibly. The work's thickly layered soundscape transforms the claustrophobic air of the house into a boundless archaeological journey through time. As Potter's words coagulate in the listener's ears and mind – the description of the dilapidated bathroom, with its piles of thumbed magazines and cracked enamel, is particularly visceral – these damp and peeling walls of sound lift themselves up, giving us glimpses of another space, spectres of rooms past that hover, like Potter's voice, above the eerie synthesised recordings.

In terms of art, audio works have always enjoyed an 'alternative' status of being opposed to sight, the dominant sense through which artworks are received. The foregrounding of sound is already a choice to present a parallel and somewhat marginal experience (at least in terms of genre), and suggests another way to engage with a phenomenon that is not straightforwardly defined as 'art'. One of the great challenges of visual works, so concretely embedded in our current reality, is how to imagine a world beyond our own with matter. Sound, however, presents an opportunity for less grounded speculation. Words can narrate unearthly scenes and characters; music can conjure inner emotions with no reference to an external object. Works that are solely audial exist as something akin to a dream, synthesising material drawn from daily life into fanciful pictures and sensations seen and felt only within the body. More than just private interior visions, however, this dreamlike sensation can be collective and realisable – in the sense of 'dreaming for'. In the three works discussed here, working-class, colonised and queer subjects use sound to dream up futures or re-envisage memories in ways that are impossible in the concrete terms of their wakeful visuality.



Caspar Heinemann, *The World and The World*, 2020, production still

This, however, raises a question: how to realise these imaginings? While the mental image conjured by *Three Sweep Between*, of a house hovering ghost-like within its future self, might appear to suggest that sound inhabits a parallel immaterial sphere, Potter and Piercy's use of field recordings removes the wall that divides real from unreal, presenting the noise of an action that did happen as the sound of something yet to occur. It is this unsettled state, bridging the imagined and the inhabited, that enables audio works to open new worlds, but it also renders this opening fragile, contingent, flighty.

Such imaginative expansiveness is paradoxically connected to the constrained circumstances accompanying these works' production and reception. *Three Sweep Between* exists in such a contained location partly because it was made during the UK's first national lockdown. In many ways, the limitations of the pandemic ensured the popularity of such works. The closure of galleries and other venues necessitated the move of performances of text and music to other platforms. Where once listeners came to hear the show, now the work had to go to them. The artwork entered our own spaces, meeting us where we were, in a physical and social environment not constructed specifically for such experiences.

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Cường Phạm, *Riparianised Memories*, 2020

For moving-image and other screen-based works, this new form of transmission alters them little. Outside the monitor, the set-up might be different, but fundamentally the work still lives within that clearly bounded rectangle familiar from the gallery screening room or the cinema auditorium. Works that are experienced primarily as sound, however, loop over and swell through the entire room, everywhere within earshot becoming a potential container for the work. The frame is invisible and malleable, held by the varying capacity of our bodies and speakers rather than any fixed and specific architecture. Sound waves flood into and around the listener, superimposing the intangible 'space' of the artwork onto the very real site of listening. This layering is thematised within *Three Sweep Between* as the imagined rooms of narration are mapped onto the actual rooms of recording, which are both then conjured in the listener's own room: a re-purposing of one shithole that opens up the potential of many others (or even much nicer listening spaces). The places in which we live and do our mundane tasks become thickened or expanded with this application of other sounds and associations.

The work's sonic veil reshapes our perception of the world and things around us, warping commonplace markers to reveal usually unnoticed facets. Listening to *Three Sweep Between*, certain images rise from the soundscape through the ear to the mind's eye, calcifying into a visual form within one's own imagination rather than on any material plane. Cường Phạm's *Riparianised Memories*, 2020, commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery as a companion to Thao Nguyen Phan's exhibition 'Becoming Alluvium' (Reviews *AM*442), makes the most of this fluid capacity to rework familiar narratives, untethering them from the locations to which they are usually tied and breaking new grounds of remembering. *Riparianised Memories* uses a richly textured soundscape of music, ambient noise and field recordings – as well as readings in French, English and Vietnamese – in order to dredge up the histories of colonial exploration along the Mekong River. Pham is concerned with the problem of remembering in the wake of colonisation: how can (deliberately, forcibly) forgotten stories be told again or for the first time, and what does it mean that this retelling also requires engaging with the opposing memory culture of official history and monuments?

This dilemma is held in *Riparianised Memories* by the body of water that forms the work's core. The river comes to stand for the elusiveness of a collective memory for the people who lived along its banks; their place in history 'gushing by', taken by the same current that brought the Europeans up through Southeast Asia. Instead, 'collective amnesia consumes [them] like a large, crashing wave', dragging them down 'drifting, falling to the bottom of the bed'. Pham's work with sound waves, then, is against this dominant current, attempting to weave fragments of voice and music into a sonic mesh that connects and collects, allowing individual memories to rise to the surface like bubbles. These gentler waves wash over and into each other, moving forwards and backwards, covering and uncovering lost associations and memories.

Fragmentation and superimposition are functions of both memory and colonialism: one time and place mapped onto another causing a fragmentation of the 'original', which comes into being as an untainted or true 'first' through this shattering process. *Riparianised Memories* expresses this conjunction through the medium of sound: recording and narrating tools with the potential to re-inscribe colonial violence, as well as possible (albeit fugitive) attempts to repair against it. The cut and collaged audio speaks to the clotted history of old colonial sites – memorials and memories, architecture and bodies – overgrown and overlooked sites of trauma that can only be reckoned with in the imagination, the only reparations possible being those in the mind.

Riparianised Memories, then, is not so much about imagining lost potential as troubling the very act of recovery. Audio itself is revealed to be a flawed tool, if not splintering memories even further, then at least able to do little more than register the fragmentation and loss enacted by colonialism. One of the narrators, Camille Mỹ Giang, asks, 'if we remove, reconfigure or no longer remember, does that mean we risk repression?', calling into question the ability of Pham's sonic collage to truly liberate. The possibilities sound provides to transform our surroundings, to envisage through our own minds new and unseen potential, remain (quite literally) up in the air – never manifesting in reality. In films or photographs we get to see imagined futures enacted by real bodies that animate and materialise our dreams; paintings and sculptures can appear like artefacts from a hoped-for world, or speculative tools to help us get there. Yet audio is immaterial, unable to fix a leaking roof or tear down a monument. The fluidity of sound makes it slippery; it cannot be held to account, but exists without 'real' consequences, like a dream or hallucination.

These unresolved and unsettled qualities are eloquently expressed in Caspar Heinemann's *The World and The World*, 2020, produced as part of the exhibition 'To Dream Effectively' at Focal Point Gallery in Southend-on-Sea. The piece mimics the format of a

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late-night radio talk show, with all the surreal pleasure of the small hours between wakefulness and sleep, when thought is at its freest and daily life feels distant. This midnight vibe is intimate; listening, even in the early evening with my eyes closed, I felt that I was part of a club of co-conspirators, awake while everyone else sleeps. This warm and familiar atmosphere is assisted by the disarming qualities of Heinemann's delivery: his breathy, hesitant beginning with its disclaimer (itself disowned for being somewhat contrary to the poet's politics and previous promises) about the work's provisionality. Heinemann describes *The World and The World* as still being in its 'larval stage' – notes rather than a finished piece – and in its unpolished stream of consciousness it does sound like a diary or a journal read aloud by the author. Heinemann compares himself to a 'charismatic YouTuber' or podcaster 'laying out [his] swaggering theory of the history of everything'. This tension between intellectual seriousness and the comedy of such grandiosity characterises the ironical tendencies of *The World*; Heinemann will rev up to a point and then coyly retreat from committing, sometimes dropping whole ends of sentences. The work inhabits a shifting territory, constantly denying the listener a stable enough purchase to hold any critical vantage on what they are hearing. But then, critique is not what Heinemann is going for: for him, art and poetry are some of the few things you don't have to prove, slipping away from the hard edges of fact and measurable standards of judgement to inhabit instead the realm of dreams and intangible possibilities.

In one of the more scripted moments in *The World*, Heinemann reads a particularly fantastical passage that enacts language's metamorphic properties: 'In my mental maquette my room is a Martian desert, the vast expanse from magnolia wall to very close parallel magnolia wall, Greer Lankton postcards to Mormon temple postcards: a tin foil galaxy shimmers possibility under the night sky, disco ball, thermal blanket, RGB strobe.' The final list of bizarrely related objects rises through the claustrophobic space, transporting Heinemann's bedroom to stratospheric heights. Words build on top of each other, possessions shimmer like holograms pivoting between the thing and its imagined alter-ego.

The superimposition that occurs in the layered soundscapes of *Three Sweep Between* and *Riparianised Memories* also happens around Heinemann as he reads. Without the recordings of the house or the river, there is nothing solid or material to ground this shapeshifting: it could all be happening in the author's head. *The World and The World* has a cyclical interiority, seeming to spring forth entirely from Heinemann's meandering thought and feelings. He confesses his shame in making the work about not being able to make the work, a paralysis itself caused by shame: a self-perpetuating spiral that unscrews itself loose from the outside world. The resulting whirl of niche references and sci-fi imagery shoots above the viewer's head, defying the laws of reason and gravity, climbing from one association to the next in an increasing retreat into the immaterial and imagined.

Roy Claire Potter and Kieron Piercy, *Three Sweep Between*, 2020, production still

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The World and The World inhabits a supra-critical domain, above reproach, looking down on the constraints and responsibilities of matter. There might seem something alarming about ceding responsibility in this way, as though the refusal to engage in debate and critique is the refusal of all politics, rather than being a particular kind of politics in and of itself. Heinemann's original disclaimer points to the fact that debating is for some already a losing game: a kind of sabotage (self-imposed or – more often – external in origin) that wastes precious mental and physical resources that would be better turned to imagining something entirely beyond the limited scope prescribed by 'rational' argumentation. If you cannot exist in seamless alignment with the consensus reality, if you are deemed as having something to prove (or disprove), the only escape is into unarguable eccentricity. Indeed, as Heinemann says: 'There is no Utopia if you have to prove it, or, it's not Utopia if you can prove it.'

What advances, then, out of the 'enlightened mists' of *The World and The World* is not a proof but rather 'the hottest take'. Flashy and impulsive, the hot take doesn't care for measured evidence, its swashbuckling penmanship hijacks the conversation and pulls it off-piste, ripping the way through to some novel opinion. Only Heinemann never actually makes it there: this take remains 'unbaked', no more than hot air and fancy words – roundabout statements that fail to resolve. If they did, though, this wouldn't be art or poetry: the two things you don't have to prove, whoever you are. These forms have the luxury of contradiction, able to hold 'everything and nothing all at once, the wall and the hole in the wall, the world and its reverse'.

With this, Heinemann flips his disarming hesitancy into a full-blown thesis on the revolutionary potential of his art: in *The World and The World*, the surreal doesn't just overlay the real but changes places with it. The poet speaks of how as a child he could disassociate at will, his whole identity and being becoming like a fiction or a dream, something so apparently fixed and certain dissolving in moments. *The World and The World* enacts that switch, only – in keeping with its medium – drawing it the other way, the weightless, immaterial qualities of sound transformed into something solid and grounded, capable of impacting and altering matter.

The materiality of apparently immaterial sound is expressed by the inexplicable similarity Heinemann notices between two pieces of music: 'The Diggers' Song and 'What Wonderous Love Is This'. Despite being superficially opposed in content (one is a proto-communist manifesto-to-music, the other a hymn yearning for otherworldly communion), both songs engender the same feeling in Heinemann's body: a feeling he describes as love against the world as it is, and the search for something else beyond it. Yet, because both songs are sung to the same tune (that of 'Captain Kidd'), this similarity is literal, physical: the vibrations that shake Heinemann's body when he hears or sings these songs are actually the same. A political ideology is formed through the shaking of one's inner ear and the tapping of one's toe; songs shaping the body, which can then shape the world.

With this mental switch, it as though we have stepped through into another realm of sound – fallen through the walls that contain sound art and broadcasts of this type into the paradoxical realisation that through listening we can not only imagine a possible world, but actually that this imagining is in some way an act of creation. This revelation was in some way with us all along – hovering on top of a more mundane understanding of what close listening can do – we just had to really listen. When Heinemann describes 'The Diggers' Song' and 'What Wonderous Love' as being 'in the future in the present', he is drawing attention to the twinning of these two realities: the base material (world as it is) and superimposed audio (world as it could be). What initially appears as a tension between escapism and material conditions emerges as a false binary.

What each of these three broadcasts make us aware of is that, to change the world as it is, we must engage this very escapism in our most intimate and immediate spaces, activating our imagination outside of the prescribed venues of the gallery and auditorium and in the context of our 'real' everyday lives. The temporary home, the traumatic memory, the embodied sense of self: all of these are entered and sonically exploded. Indeed, for those of us who are working class, migrants and/or queer, escaping into our imagined realities might be the only recourse we have to enact change when we are stripped of the physical resources others might access.

The question that remains, however, is how to maintain these transformations when they can slip away as easily as a dream, when they sit so lightly on the surface of our lives and we do not see them enacted on the screen or embodied in matter. It's a question that has no answer just yet, but it is also, maybe, a question for later – when we can be together in the physical world once more.

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