



Audio transcript

Inspired by Belsay: Experiments in Sound Art

Matt: My name's Matt Thompson. I'm the Head Collections Curator with English Heritage and I've been working with the artist Susan Philipsz on a project called The Yellow Wallpaper here at Belsay Hall.

[Refrain of The Unquiet Grave, sung by Susan, plays]

Susan is a Turner Prize-winning artist who began life as a sculptor using physical form, but for several years now, she's been using sound creating effectively sound sculptures to transform spaces and transform the way people feel about spaces.

There's been quite a long tradition of displaying, installing contemporary art at Belsay and it's something that goes back perhaps two decades in fact, and there's been some wonderful and some really challenging installations and very playful pieces as well that have been displayed here.

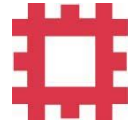
Alongside the work that Susan has produced for Belsay Hall, we're also working with students from Northumberland College who themselves are going out there working with local artists to explore the soundscapes of their lives; it's the soundscapes related to their experiences at heritage sites or the soundscapes of central Newcastle and they're going to be using field recordings to produce their own sound sculpture, effectively, that speaks to their own experiences.

Tess: I am Tess Denman-Cleaver and I'm an artist based in the north east. We've talked quite a bit about how there's no furniture and a lot of things haven't been repaired or you can see how things have disintegrated; there's a lot of space for imagining possibilities of what might have been in the spaces or what we might do in the spaces. There's a lot more scope for your own imagination, maybe.

Robin: My name's Robin Webley. I'm an artist also based in the north east. First impressions of Belsay Hall? Very beautiful. Well maintained, historical...

Tim: My name's Tim Shaw. I'm an artist interested in sound and communication technology based in Newcastle. Belsay Hall itself is a really interesting acoustic space. There's no soft furnishings, so sound travels really well between rooms. There's some really interesting like acoustic spaces, especially in the basement where there's a long reverb and it's a really kind of rich space to install sound within and Susan's done that with her work. She's placed different speakers in different rooms and you can kind of just by walking through the building you can kind of get a cross fade between the work so the kind of composition of the piece is kind of informed by your journey through the heritage site, which is which is quite interesting. Quite a nice way to experience a sound work.

Robin: Tim and Tess have basically been taking us on a quick crash course into sound art, really, so they've been showing us hands-on how to create the equipment that we're using, you



know, the ways of approaching work as well as paying more attention to sound, you know, as well.

Rebecca: My name's Rebecca Flynn and I'm a north east artist. We began with a couple of workshops and we made our own microphones. And then from there we went out to different places and then just kind of recording different sounds. We went to Warkworth Castle, we've been to Newbiggin Beach, Jarrow Church... and here! And Belsay Hall! [laughs]

Matt: We look after 400-plus sites and they can be large stately homes, or they can be lumps and bumps in fields. But all of these sites have been recognized as being special in some way. They're really important and we care for them on behalf of the public. And this means that we have to be sensitive to their needs. We have to not undertake any work at any of these sites that will cause permanent changes, or, where we have to, we have to make sure we mitigate those changes and if at all possible make sure that they are reversible.

So these are sensitive sites and Belsay Hall, whilst it is empty, is a sensitive site and we have an obligation to look after the walls, the floors, the ceilings, the plaster work... This is all part of what makes Belsay Belsay. So we really want to find sensitive artworks that respond well to sensitive places and sound can dramatically transform a space and yet it leaves very little behind. We don't have to drill into the walls. We don't have to knock holes in anything. We can fill the place with stuff - sound - but at the end of the day we can turn that sound off and very little physical change has taken place.

Rebecca: I've never done a sound project before so it's really kind of made me think a lot about how people use these spaces now, to what they potentially were in their like heydays, and how we kind of... I don't know, I feel like it's also almost an invasion of space and I like to record that kind of idea of what people do in the space.

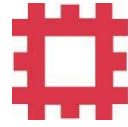
Tim: Now, we've collected quite a lot of material and the next kind of task is thinking about how these this material's going to come together and how we're going to present it.

Tess: The way that we've been working with sound and collecting a lot of field recordings and thinking about different approaches to field recordings will shape what the work is.

[Bubbling, crumpling sounds]

Tim: We're currently listening to some hydrophone recordings of Jarrow, which is a place a bit further down the river from Newcastle towards the coast. And it's a very interesting kind of post-industrial area. Nature's kind of come back to this place. And we went there together. We went to Jarrow Hall and Jarrow Priory to kind of look around the heritage spaces there. Then we went to the river and we just by chance through these microphones that I have which are designed to record underwater sounds (hydrophones), we heard this kind of amazing soundscape under the surface of aquatic animals talking to each other and because it was a hot day they were kind of really excited. They were having conversations!

Robin: It's like having an ear on the end of a string. You're getting right up close to the smallest little crustaceans and molluscs which communicate in their own way, and it just sounds like, you know, a cacophony of these little tiny little voices, you know, these little screeches and bubbles



and whistles and stuff. It sounds just like, I was like, I can't remember exactly what language I used, but you know, it was great, you know! So that was the most, probably the most exotic one.

Tim: So it's a very odd sound world that you're listening to; kind of sounds like electricity bubbling or strange [to Robin] I think you described it as cosmic ants so something like that [laughs]. And it's interesting to use microphones as a way of putting your ears in places they don't usually go and listening to environments that you don't usually hear.

One of them is like an urchin. You can hear this kind of scraping sound. The urchin has a kind of ligament which it uses to scrape along the rock and that's one way it feeds and it's also one way it kind of moves itself around very slowly.

Tess: So in some of the early workshops, Rebecca was saying that we built some microphones that we could use to listen to electromagnetic currents. So listen to electricity or any kind of electrical infrastructures that might not – well, certainly aren't audible but might also not be visible. So we started by going around Ashington and listening to things like broadband kind of boxes [audible static sounds]. Rebecca's done a lot more of that kind of between sessions recording the electricity in cars and buses and stuff, and it's a really, I guess, I really like it as a way of listening to another reality of a place. So coming somewhere like a heritage site where you're looking at these stone walls and seemingly bare spaces, actually to walk around with something that makes those invisible infrastructures audible has been really interesting and so, and also they're a really really different sonic quality to the other things we've collected. [They] give another characteristic to the work just in terms of how it sounds.

[Traffic, road sounds]

Matt: So here we are. It's three and a half months later. We're in the centre of Newcastle on a cold November night, and the group have been working on this project solidly for quite some time now and they've collected a whole number of recordings and we're about to go into the gallery now and we're going to hear the piece of work for the first time.

So just coming in: it's a classic white cube gallery. And the first thing I'm aware of is this sense of sound all around me; the sound of the seaside, the sound of the coast... A whole load of the sounds that actually I can't quite identify, and I can't quite identify which direction they're coming at me from so it's quite an interesting, slightly disorientating experience actually.

[Strumming sound, echoing]

Tess: It's an endless and ever-evolving composition that plays back Tim can probably, and Robin who installed it with Tim, can probably speak more about how that playback system works.

Tim: We collected this sound archive together. So we have about 65 recordings of different places around Northumberland heritage sites, and we were thinking about how we might play these back in a gallery space and instead of fixing them in a composition which would have a start, a middle and an end, we decided that we would build a piece of software which would allow us to play back that archive randomly. So each time it plays back, it's completely unique - a little bit like the soundscape that exists within every day. It's always changing. It's always



unique. So we wanted to kind of bring some of that to it and not make it linear but actually make it kind of random and generative and self-evolving.

So in the gallery space where we are now, we have a collection of different speakers. So we have six speakers that are placed around the space in different ways. In moments of the composition, certain speakers will play some sounds and certain speakers will play others, and that's also kind of part of the composition; how the sound interacts with the space when people are experiencing it.

Robin: For someone like myself, sound art was like a new thing? So it was really insightful and a great way of getting interacting with more accomplished artists, so it's totally been great for us as students to get involved. You'd be really amazed at just how diverse the sounds are, and just how some of them are so alien from these locations. So I hope people enjoy it.

Matt: I think Belsay Hall has provided a great source of inspiration for a lot of artists and designers over the years, primarily because it does come across as a kind of remarkable blank canvas. It is a remarkable building in a remarkable setting and the spaces, the rooms themselves, are remarkable, but they're also empty and that's really rare to find. They simply provide an opportunity for you to fill a space with whatever you can imagine and that's what's happened previously and that's why we have such a rich creative tradition associated with this particular property.

[Fizzing, popping sounds; fades out].