

Simon Ingram, Patrick Lundberg, Raewyn Martyn

Field Recordings

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The Physics Room

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Rachel O'Neill

She goes to the window after hearing a shout, or a squall or the shriek of a gull. The classroom is so elevated that she can look down and watch distant waves usher in the age. The children are far away or fitting into society, some pulling up carpets, others washing dogs. She can hear principals, permanent staff, reading recovery and substitute teachers on the stairs but they have their own rooms somewhere in the upper domain. The sky grows dark. She flicks the light switch. It's painted on. In fact, she can peel it off entirely. A horn blares, shaking the foundations and rattling the glass. A vessel. At this point she touches the headlamp, switches it on. The ship blares its horn again and she begins to turn. Around and around, sending the beam out in a wide arc.

Field Recordings, the title of this exhibition, stirs up all kinds of associations for me about states of being 'outside' and 'inside': outside the studio, inside a discourse of the natural or site-specific, outside the musical, inside the usually inaudible, outside of the pleasures of predictability and control, inside the pleasures of accident. Raewyn Martyn's work, *Surface Reproduction*, 2015 (latex, paint), was constructed in the dark. Due to various scheduling requirements, the gallery space was blacked-out for the screening of a film during the time in which Martyn made her work. Using artificial light, each evening Martyn riffed off signs of use, wear and other defining features of human presence in the space. Latex paint was layered up and then during installation was partially peeled back off the floor. The boards that had blocked light from the room were taken down and stacked to the side, which resulted in an environment that was half-demolished, half-theatrically-composed. The painting that was made with no natural light was left to breathe with ease.

Martyn's work carries a defining provocation, which is to look again. Such a provocation evokes assumptions and conditions of 'outside' and 'inside'. Writer James Baldwin commented on an encounter he had with a mentor of his, the American modernist Beauford Delaney, 'I remember standing on a street corner with the black painter Beauford Delaney down in the Village, waiting for the light to change, and he pointed down and said, 'Look.' I looked and all I saw was water. And he said, 'Look again,' which I did, and I saw oil on the water and the city reflected in the puddle. It

was a great revelation to me. I can't explain it. He taught me how to see, and how to trust what I saw. Painters have often taught writers how to see. And once you've had that experience, you see differently.'¹ Here, the city reflected in oily water opens the eye to a pollution of surfaces and potential depths. When we take note of the overlooked, when we trust in what we may not at first grasp, or what we grasped but felt compelled to ignore, to not admit to the field of the visible, we acknowledge that what we see and the context in which we view, read and interpret the visual at any one time is a heady mix of legitimate and illegitimate experience.

One of Delaney's many portraits of James Baldwin, a pastel drawing made in 1963, is described on the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery website as a 'study of light'. Baldwin projects out of a yellow and mustard background, though it's his bodily contours (and his fine sweater) etched in green that make him seem fiery, rather than the yellow. His eyes are round and wide, a slight smile plays on his face. He is a concrete figure made of the idea, he is embodied green fire. The work situates the abstract and the concrete as always, equally, portraits of imaginative risk that require the eye to read across an intersection of experience and knowledge. In his 1950 self-portrait, Delaney colours his left eye the same colour as his face. His right pupil, however, is surrounded by a startling white, making it seem hyper-real and alien. This eye seems to be 'thumbing' the context of the face, the portrait and the viewer, whoever they are, putting 'Delaney' together in their mind somewhere, elsewhere. 'Thumbing' a context of contemplation can be a gesture of disdain for the 'authoritative' ways we are directed to experience the world. It can also be an earnest, complex and open mark that burnishes a temporary path through the conditions that shape the visible and invisible.

It's true. I did once draft a personal advertisement 'To Oak'. I did not conjecture in any way the facts. I admitted that the suspense was killing me. I'm not ashamed. I didn't send the advertisement. It didn't come to that. I threw it on the fire and when I realised I hadn't lit the fire I lit the fire and watched it burn. What kind of bastard takes you to the circus and promises he'll never leave you? When is it ever hard to return with refreshments! At the time of writing this all down I was afraid. No, I was tempted. At any moment, I felt, I might accept one of the offers of marriage that were coming in almost daily. I had paid for an advertisement. That's what the clerk at the newspaper told me on the phone. I may as well stick something in. Did I have any other messages I wanted to get out? Nothing, I said. Nothing? Nothing. Half an hour later I rang back. Take this down, I said. 'To Oak, Ivy is no longer single. This is not a metaphor. I am married to a very nice editor.' Which paper? The clerk interrupted. 'A man with scruples and a shelf full of novels. When he divides up a mandarin he always gives me eight parts.' That it? the clerk said. Yes, I said. Did you get the eight

¹ James Baldwin, 'James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78', interviewed by Jordan Elgrably, *The Paris Review*, Spring 1984 No. 91

parts? Of course, the clerk said. How many parts are there in a mandarin, then? How should I know, I said.

There is a tense moment in *Mr Turner*, Mike Leigh's film about J. M. W. Turner, that poses questions about what happens when we momentarily disassociate from style, identity, systems of belief, underscoring the kind of freedoms that can glimmer in such moments. Turner is surrounded on all sides by fellow artists, both admirers and haters, in the salon and he dips his thumb in red paint. He goes up to his own 'finished' painting and smears his thumb on the canvas. The mark is seductively ugly. The room becomes a square gasp and an interested sort of confusion titters around the walls. The crass gesture then provokes an additional, if anticipated, layer of artistic intention, a complimentary gesture that reintegrates the red mark back into Turner's 'style'. Rather than a giant leap forward for abstract expressionism, the mark is re-constituted into an object very fitting for a painting that will be called *A Boat and Red Buoy in a Rough Sea*. It's a nice rock-n-roll moment for Turner in which he gets all the other white men in the room to pay slightly more attention to the supposed demarcations of taste and style.

There is a huge amount of pleasure to be had in letting go, experientially, contextually and imaginatively, of dogmas of style, identity and belief, even if that letting go is only temporary and the old rules flood back with their overtures of predictability. When I think about the work of the three artists in this exhibition, I imagine a field recording that acts like an audible and visible 'thumbing' of expectations, if temporary, of what a 'field recording' should be, and a 'thumbing' that contains a wry, playful trust in the impossibility of a complete break from expectations. Patrick Lundberg's work, *No Title 8 parts*, 2015, demands from the viewer an attentive and playful eye for detail. Small yellow marble-sized balls were installed at various heights and locations in the first of the three rooms in the gallery. Etched into the yellow paint are fine abstract markings that suggest a practical object of work or play, say a rope, or a ball or the lid of a manhole, all of which have been rounded by the distinct and powerful gravity of these tiny worlds. As the exhibition text on the website suggests, these round paintings draw one's attention to the negative space of the room. Once we realise the room is not empty we experience the room and what it contains or describes differently. Space has been commandeered by nodes of sculpted gravity, and the temporarily peripheral comes charging to the fore.

The peripheral is a curious state, one that has formal, conceptual and worldly relevance. As Chris Kraus pointed out in a recent piece for artspace.com², we live in a time where Pulitzer prize-winning journalists must find work where they can, which includes LA-based business espionage bureaus. With the dessimation of print journalism or, at least, the undervaluing of research-based writing, investigative

² Chris Kraus, 'Chris Kraus on the Ambiguous Virtues of Art School', *Artspace*, March 2015, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/news_events/chris-kraus-akademie-x.

journalists must adapt their skills, including to the arena of corporate spying. From here Kraus went on to discuss the way artists' mesh a studio practice with self-directed, if not always self-taught, apprenticeships to various humanist occupations, especially those now grossly underfunded and undervalued within academic institutions, the very contexts in which they once flourished. Artists are keeping alive a range of skills, knowledge and experiences that have not lost their relevance, rather they no longer fit with dominant social and political agendas of those in power. By resuscitating skills on the edge of social and philosophical extinction artists are fulfilling a desire to know the world. We ask ourselves at this point, what does it mean to know the world by way of an attention to what is disappearing from it, what is being forced out?

After a lengthy silence, Old Badger Hair clears his throat and asks me what exactly I got up to 'in the gallery'? For many days I sat in the van, I say. I was used to stir coffee. Wow, the brushes say. I was used to stir carbolic acid once, says the short brush beside me. Then I was working night and day. A bird came to the open window. I'm heading North. North? I asked, though there was already a spark in my gut. Where's that? It's more of a feeling I have, said the bird. I glanced over my shoulder at the path in front of me. I think I'm heading North too, I said. See you there, said the bird and nipped back to the sky. Once you've been North, says Old Badger Hair, you can never forget it. Though I have never seen any fowl there.

Simon Ingram's *Box Field Situation*, 2015 (oil plastic, aluminium, cable, lego, brush, wood) is concerned with acts of translation. Sound recordings translate into data that translates into machine-made markings that translate into visual landscapes. These works record a field of information and meanings carried across different modes and technologies of expression. Boxes that once contained large goods are hung around the walls and an electronic painting machine, or large brush composed of various mechanisms including lego, has etched a series of 'heart-rates' of Christchurch city on the flattened cardboard. The data that feeds these paintings comes from recordings of a site directly outside the window, a zone of construction and destruction. Transformation is full of temporal inconsistencies. Change that happens slowly and in the blink of an eye is also a tension that imbues Kraus' observations of artists who throw life-rings to activities no longer valued in society. Kraus asked this question: 'Why would young people enter a studio art program to become teachers and translators, novelists, archivists, and small business owners? Clearly, it's because these activities have become so degraded and negligible within the culture that the only chance for them to *appear* is within contemporary art's coded yet infinitely malleable discourse.'

Activities can exist as records and mythologies of importance can grow up around them. What happens when the skills and knowledge of making are lost? What happens when transformation can no longer happen within the terms of the activity because a

key part of the craft and language has been lost? A lighthouse classroom with its dedicated teacher, a personal advertisement in which unconscious desire for narrative closure exerts itself, a cohort of paintbrushes that attempt to understand variations of 'North'. Like the work in this exhibition, these images are tuned in to the value of paying attention to tensions of translation and transformation, from marks of habitation and sounds of narrative construction to the space in which forms of identity and activity hover on the edge of appearance. In *Field Recordings* there is an attitude of 'thumbing' expectations of presence and distance. The works tease out the many implications of attending to subjects and things that, as Kraus puts it, we perceive as 'degraded and negligible within the culture.'

Rachel O'Neill is a writer, artist and filmmaker based in Wellington, New Zealand. She is a graduate of Elam School of Fine Arts (2005) and the International Institute of Modern Letters (2008) and her debut poetry collection *One Human in Height* was published by Hue & Cry Press in 2013. She is a member of All the Cunning Stunts with fellow artists Liz Allan, Clare Noonan, and Marnie Slater, and they exhibit as a collective in New Zealand and Europe.