Inside Out: a video essay by Juliet Fraser with filmmaker Jessie Rodger



It's quite common at the moment to hear people referring to Alvin Lucier's sound art piece *I am sitting in a room* when they reflect upon the way they spend their days. With restricted horizons, we're probably all spending more time 'sitting in a room' and we may have developed quite a new relationship with that room. For the first performance in 1970, Mary Lucier created an accompanying sequence of Polaroid images (of the chair in which Alvin had sat to record his text) that had been similarly transformed and degraded. Their piece, then, was sonic and visual; a sound doubly framed. Beyond the title's superficial resonance for *these* times, though, I am wondering how my perception of sound and space may have changed whilst confined.

I am thinking of my mind as a room. This space is not easy to describe with words: we often refer to the 'interior world', the 'thought life', or an 'inner monologue', but these fall short and feel clichéd. I'm particularly intrigued by the role that language plays in this space: some thoughts feel verbal, even if not verbalised; others seem more like sensations; still others are visual. So, 'monologue' isn't the right word. 'Soliloquy' is closer, but that is still performed, mitigated, somehow... It's tempting to constrain this space by describing it as the arena of the 'psychological', in order to distinguish it from the physical, but sometimes it's all too clear that my inner world is extremely embodied: so many neural pathways have been worn by habit and some thoughts are triggered or accompanied by physical sensations. Actually, I love that it's not simple — I am more and more interested in the grey, smudged areas of our understanding. Mystery is underrated; it keeps me engaged and humble.

musical excerpt I

I don't think I have ever listened to so little (and I distinguish here between listening and hearing). I am in a quiet place in the countryside, I am not travelling, I am, mostly, not encountering people, and I am very rarely listening to music. What I hear most are the environmental sounds around me — ticking radiators, birdsong, traffic on the breeze — and the voices of my parents or the tinny voice of someone I'm speaking to on the phone or on screen. Then there is the 'sound' of my inner monologue. I can't remember it feeling so prominent. Much of the time I don't notice it, it just trundles along saying its things, observing this or that, remembering something, trying to remember something else... But then there are moments when it comes sharply into focus, when its 'otherness' is uncanny.

In her essay 'The Delusions of Certainty', Siri Hustvedt asks:

What is thinking? Are thoughts the utterances of each person's internal narrator? Are thoughts identical to inner speech? There is no private language, as Wittgenstein argued. When I use words, they are words that I share with other people even when I'm talking to myself. Words are alive between you and me.

Language happens among us. Do unconscious thoughts use words? Do thoughts take place only in a person's mind and/or brain? Or does one think with one's whole body? Do babies think? Could a false pregnancy be a form of bodily thought? Can the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems symbolize wishes and fears? How are a crow's thoughts like mine? How is it possible for me to think what I have never thought before?¹

I've been spending a lot of time inside one particular monologue: Samuel Beckett's *Not I*. This, of course, is not *my* monologue and, technically speaking, it's no-one's internal monologue. Each phrase, each cadence, each internal repetition or circling back or fork in the torrent of words is minutely controlled by Beckett; the art is in the artifice of Beckett's rigorous script masquerading magnificently as his character's stream of consciousness. A facial composite presented as a mirror. The more time I spend with this text though, the more I become it and the more it infects my own inner monologue. There's also an intense embodiment of the words — I *can* think my way through it, silently, but it's much more difficult and I have to go slower without the muscle memory of the words in the mouth, the movement of the *lips... cheeks... jaws... tongue... never still a second... mouth on fire... stream of words... in her ear... practically in her ear... not catching the half... not the quarter... no idea what she's saying... imagine!... no idea what she's saying!... and can't stop... no stopping it... she who but a moment before... but a moment!... could not make a sound... no sound of any kind... now can't stop... etc.*

To learn *Not I* was a challenge I set myself during the first lockdown. For all its madness, and maddeningness, it has kept me sane. I'm relishing the opportunity to bring a heightened level of detail to the musical patterns — especially the loops and the not-quite-loops, which call to mind works by Morton Feldman or Bernhard Lang. It has also been a timely project in that it has given me something to do with my voice that is a step removed from my usual repertoire. I can bring a singer's skill to this piece but without needing to sing. It can be learned in an armchair and muttered on long walks alone. I am fascinated by the tightrope one has to walk between an intense control over the material and the illusion of vertiginous confusion. That was the tightrope Beckett walked when he was writing, but now it's me up there. It demands so much focus that my mind empties. I am no longer sitting in a room: I am the room and the great roar of words pours through it.

One of the reasons I became a musician was because I love chamber music. My formative moments were spent playing string quartets as a child. And yet, here I am working alone, day after day. Occasionally I crank up the volume and sing along to someone else's performance of some great romantic *lied*, but, well, it's hardly the same. I am alone, with only my thoughts, and when I'm practising, my thoughts are overwhelmingly critical. I've long suspected that this might not be ideal, but I've also been sceptical about my ability to undo decades of habit. At the beginning of this year, when my negativity was getting

 $^{^{\}rm 1}$ Siri Hustvedt, 'The Delusions of Certainty' in A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women (London: Sceptre, 2017), p. 281.

out of hand, I decided that this might be the moment to do some 'deep work' and reprogramme my thought patterns; after two weeks, my morale was in tatters. Ultimately, I made my peace with this defeat, sensing that this wasn't the right battle to be fighting. After all, critiquing one's own work is a crucial skill, it's just that there is a thin line between identifying a sound as disgusting and identifying why a sound is disgusting. The issue, I concluded, is not so much how unflinchingly critical the voice inside my head is but that, currently, when I'm singing, it's the only voice I'm hearing. Where normally she'd be one voice amongst many and this itty, bitty practice would be balanced out with actual full-sweep performances, these days all I do is sing for myself, without much purpose and, honestly, without much pleasure. I'm just trying to keep myself fit to avoid a different sort of crisis further down the line.

There is a growing body of work that situates the score not on paper but in the mind. Multidisciplinary artist Luke Nickel uses the term 'living scores' to describe the careful collaborative process that connects a small group of composers and performers including Éliane Radigue, Deborah Walker, Silvia Tarozzi, Cassandra Miller, me, Pascale Criton and Luke himself. Luke and I are working on a new piece at the moment. In this piece, we are transforming roller coasters into sound through a process of simulated gravitational witchcraft. I have built a roller coaster in my mind. I have sung its tracks and its speed and its height and its G-force. Luke has been constructing simulated roller coasters in a digital space. He has collaborated with AI to write a witchy spell. We are having a lot of fun.

musical excerpt II

I don't believe I have perfect pitch. Or, at least, I don't have the sort that seems immutable. I definitely didn't have perfect pitch as a child, but I seem to have memorised an A, and then a D, from my years as an oboist; beyond that, it's a combination of relative pitch and muscle memory. I depend on my pitch for the sort of music-making that I do. However, at the moment it's pretty wobbly. As a result, I have come to appreciate how much my inner ear — the muscle memory of the imagination, perhaps — is oiled by all the musicians with whom I usually work. Each one of them contributes to the ongoing maintenance of my sense of pitch. Without them, I am drifting; I am untethered. I've decided not to worry about it, because there are many, many years of memory in here, but it does frustrate me when I am practising and I do wonder how long it will take to get 'pitch fit' again.

Further, I feel timbrally starved. I am sitting in a room that only ever resonates with my voice or sounds emanating from my laptop speakers. How I yearn for five different instruments to pass a single note around me. How satiating that would be! Digital performances are food of a sort, of course, but the sound is, by definition, compressed and disembodied. Through all this I am realising that, as a performer, I need to share the room with my audience — I want the transference and the counter-transference, the communal project of contributing to the shared energy in that space, and I want to feel you listening.

I haven't done a single livestream. I salute those of you that have, but that mode is not for me. I can't create the performance energy on my own; I need an audience, my killer heels and some jitters for that. For related reasons, I have watched very few livestream performances. They seem such a poor substitute to me, and too often I am irritated by the way a performance is filmed. Anyway, most of the time, when at a concert in person, I listen with my eyes closed, but I am wondering now if that is in order to feel more with my body... With a livestream I can't drum up that same sense of being present in a fleeting moment, of relishing the opportunity to listen feelingly.

musical excerpt III

In 1971 my father bought a derelict farmhouse tucked away in a valley in Suffolk. In the fifty years that it has now been under his stewardship it has been home to a commercial quantity of pink pigs, a lovely pair of black piggywigs called Robinson and Pettitoes, a small herd of red poll cattle, a cantankerous old donkey, some chickens, some guinea fowl, a very nasty turkey and many other beasties that I overlook. My father has also planted a lot of trees, many of which now form mature woods through which one can wander: a mixed wood to the north of the house, plantations of poplar and black walnut to the south-east. Together he and I have just planted a hedge of nearly 200 trees, and I now patrol the rows, checking eagerly for signs of spring, or of hungry rabbits. Some of my friends know this place well: they have been coming here for over twenty years, and now they bring their children. That sort of continuity — for me, for them — is rare these days.

I spent most of the first lockdown alone in my London flat — my paper 'An identity in lockdown' was written there — but after nine weeks, I decided to leave the city. It's looking likely that, by the time my work starts up again in May or June, I will have spent over a year living with my parents in the farmhouse in which I grew up. Identity is rooted in place. At a deep level it is formed by places and spaces, and a temporary shift in place or space can be an invitation to play a different version of ourselves within that new city or that new landscape. Many of my friends have moved house recently, perhaps in need of a diverting project, or new walls at which to gaze, or a taste of possibility and potential that enlivens their relationship with the future. I, instead, have gone backwards into my own story. I have been building new relationships with rooms and woods and fields that I have known forever and that are heavy-laden with memories of the past and of past versions of myself. I came back here primarily because there is room for me to sing freely, but I was trepidatious about the emotional cost. Confronting that has been one of the great delights of this period as, to my amazement, I discover that I have come *home*, and this time, finally, as an adult.

In his essay 'The Work of Local Culture' from 1988, Wendell Berry writes:

The new norm, according to which the child leaves home as a student and never lives at home again, interrupts the old course of coming of age at the point of rebellion, so that the child is apt to remain stalled in adolescence, never achieving any kind of reconciliation or friendship with the parents. Of course, such a return and reconciliation cannot be achieved without the recognition of mutual practical need. In the present economy, however, where individual dependences are so much exterior

to both household and community, family members often have no practical need or use for one another. Hence the frequent futility of attempts at a purely psychological or emotional reconciliation.²

A year ago, I would have drifted past these words, I think, but now I observe an uncomfortable truth in them. Perhaps because of the 'mutual practical need' he describes and an altogether unprecedented scenario, the dynamics between my parents and me have been completely rebuilt: we have met one another afresh. Though I didn't generally feel 'stalled in adolescence', I'll admit that I used to struggle with feeling like an adolescent after too many days with my family! Something about this unexpected process of building a mature friendship — that none of us was waiting for — feels liberating. This must be why Berry's words about reconciliation mean something to me, because I feel I've closed a circle.

And here I am today, filming in the London studio that was my creative base for so many years. I haven't been here for many months but it is so familiar that it always feels like home... home!... Home... I'm not quite sure where that is now... I am writing these words in Suffolk to be filmed in London. Suffolk was always 'home' in the sense of 'childhood home' and London, the city, was 'home' in that it was the locus of my adult self; however, I realise now that my London flat has never felt like a permanent home. It is a base, a space that I love, certainly, that I have made homely, but I am not anchored there. And it strikes me now that this is as much about what it represents in terms of my identity as what it lacks in terms of characteristics of space or location. What is cause and what is effect here? Am I defining my choice of territory or is my chosen territory defining me? What you see is a true record of 3 March 2021 — I am sitting in this room reading these words — but as a portrait of this time it is unreliable, for this is not the room in which I spend my days. I feel a nostalgia in this lovely wooden space: it belongs increasingly to my past.

musical excerpt IV

From place, I want to turn to time. My experience is that the days are long and yet easy to fill. I have never before, in my adult life, had a daily routine. I think I was pretty terrified of such an idea, associating it with the (perceived) drudgery of a 9-to-5, but of course it can be much more creative than that. Time is now broken into familiar blocks throughout the day and a particular task can be prompted as much by the changing daylight as by a glance at the clock. This is entirely new for me, to be in one place for such a long time, and I like it. I have loved witnessing a full cycle of the seasons here in the countryside and noticing that my place in this landscape is always changing and deepening. Perceptions and habits can change faster than I thought.

 $^{^2}$ Wendell Berry, 'The Work of Local Culture' in *The World-Ending Fire* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 114-115.

Let it be said, all this relates to the singular experiences of a certain woman in a certain kind of situation. None of the space that I am enjoying — in terms of horizons of the mind or of the land — would be possible if I were trying to home-school three young children or having domestic issues with my partner or being harassed by the bank about mortgage repayments. I am grateful.

Another of the voices that has been filling my mind recently is that of Rachel Carson. If you don't know her work, I highly recommend it. Her voice is poetic, passionate, compassionate and still, sixty-odd years on, urgent. She seems to have held the sort of place in the world to which I aspire: beautifully human but grounded, with humility, in the wider ecology; her perspective shifts fluidly from the microscopic to the cosmic, contagious in its wonder.

The early history of life as it is written in the rocks is exceedingly dim and fragmentary, and so it is not possible to say when living things first colonised the shore, nor even to indicate the exact time when life arose. The rocks that were laid down as sediments during the first half of the earth's history, in the Archeozoic era, have since been altered chemically and physically by the pressure of many thousands of feet of superimposed layers and by the intense heat of the deep regions to which they have been confined during much of their existence. Only in a few places, as in eastern Canada, are they exposed and accessible for study, but if these pages of the rock history ever contained any clear record of life, it has long since been obliterated.

The following pages — the rocks of the next several hundred million years, known as the Proterozoic era — are almost as disappointing. There are immense deposits of iron, which may possibly have been laid down with the help of certain algae and bacteria. Other deposits — strange globular masses of calcium carbonate — seem to have been formed by lime-secreting algae. Supposed fossils or faint impressions in these ancient rocks have been tentatively identified as sponges, jellyfish, or hard-shelled creatures with jointed legs called arthropods, but the more sceptical or conservative scientists regard these traces as having an inorganic origin.

Suddenly, following the early pages with their sketchy records, a whole section of history seems to have been destroyed. Sedimentary rocks representing untold millions of years of pre-Cambrian history have disappeared, having been lost by erosion or possibly, through violent changes in the surface of the earth, brought into a location that now is at the bottom of the deep sea. Because of this loss a seemingly unbridgeable gap in the story of life exists.³

It is difficult to wrap one's mind around the scale of time we're dealing with here. For me, it brings a welcome shift of perspective. However, it does lead me to think (narcissist that I am) about the 'sketchy records' I may leave behind. With no children to prove after I am gone that I have existed, which interpretation of my tread will contribute to the collective

³ Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (London: Unicorn Press, 2015), p. 15-16.

narrative, the communal annals? I've always had a testy relationship with recording — by the time a record is released it's already so out of date as a representation of me as an artist; also, the process is so clinical in comparison with performance and it triggers the worst version of my inner critic — but I have a growing conviction that documentation actually really matters, and not just for us performers but, of course, for the composers whose works we interpret and for our musical networks and communities more broadly. I don't believe it is vain to consider one's legacy if acknowledging that we really do nothing alone. Music is so rarely created in isolation, and even if we may be able to map how we think it came about (which will differ, of course, from how others think it came about), we certainly can't map the impact it may yet come to have. We are each unavoidably part of an artistic ecosystem.

As Carson writes:

...it is now clear that in the sea nothing lives to itself. The very water is altered, in its chemical nature and in its capacity for influencing life processes, by the fact that certain forms have lived within it and have passed on to it new substances capable of inducing far-reaching effects. So the present is linked with past and future, and each living thing with all that surrounds it. 4

musical excerpt V

If you are self-employed, as so many artists are, you may well have felt like an outsider at times. Our independence can be a problem when applying for a mortgage or insurance, or trying to find the right drop-down option under 'occupation' on an online form. The self-employed were abandoned initially by the UK government when the pandemic hit, until we rallied and reminded them that, yes, we do exist and we do contribute and we are in need. I've never known another form of employment, but I still remember the terror of the early years — it is a long, long road to some sort of stability and confidence, and we are constantly reminded in subtle and not-so subtle ways, by loved ones and by industry, of the precarity we have chosen.

I return to Wendell Berry, this time quoting from his essay 'The Agrarian Standard', written in 2002. He writes:

The idea of people working at home, as family members, as neighbors, as natives and citizens of their places, is as repugnant to the industrial mind as the idea of self-employment. The industrial mind is an organizational mind, and I think this mind is deeply disturbed and threatened by the existence of people who have no boss. This may be why people with such minds, as they approach the top of the political hierarchy, so readily sell themselves to 'special interests.' They cannot bear to be unbossed. They cannot stand the lonely work of making up their own minds.⁵

⁴ Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (London: Unicorn Press, 2015), p. 42.

⁵ Wendell Berry, 'The Agrarian Standard' in *The World-Ending Fire* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 135.

In my early twenties I made quite a few attempts to study at conservatoire, to follow the orthodox path, but I wasn't the right sort of candidate. Now, of course, I can look back and be glad of that, for I kept my horizons wide and began 'the lonely work'. In my view, the narrowness and inflexibility of the institutional route for singers is one of the great tragedies of the classical music system. It's easy to be a critic from outside the system but I also know how many singers feel that they, as artists-in-the-making, were required to contort to fit a syllabus or ideology still dominated by musical traditions from the nineteenth century rather than being served by a programme and professors that championed the great diversity of our industry. What sort of artists do we expect to produce with that model? I am a firm believer that technique is the route to expressive freedom, but what we want to express, and how, and to whom surely necessitates some critical engagement with a plethora of possible techniques and possible routes to accomplishment. One size does not fit all.

If becoming an outsider meant that I began 'the lonely work' of making up my own mind in my early twenties, that work has accelerated in recent years. In my mid-thirties I began to realise the extent to which I had coupled myself to people with strong opinions on music and had therefore failed adequately to develop my own. Berry is right when he describes the work of making up one's own mind as 'lonely'. That turning inwards is isolating and frightening, not least because one knows the action that follows will be lived out amongst and judged by our community. I suspect there is a lot of reflection going on at the moment but this gives me hope that we may yet emerge empowered as natives and citizens of our places.

musical excerpt VI

If I say the word 'community', what image comes to mind? Does it include organisations or institutions? I suspect it probably doesn't for most of us, because we are artists and because we've been bred on a diet of pretty fierce individualism. As 'outsiders', we know that our role is to hold the power structures to account but, whilst I stand by that, I suggest that we also need to invite them to participate in community. One of the most powerful currencies within a community is that of agency: the more it flows, the more there is, and bigger organisational structures have the capacity to generate a lot of agency. One festival director commented recently that he felt his main duty was 'to let the money flow to the artists'. That is a beautifully simple example of generating agency. At heart, organisations and institutions are a personal affair. We need them in our ecosystem, and they need nurturing just like every other body.

In September 2018 Nick Cave invited his fans to submit 'questions or comments, observations or inspirations' which, along with his thoughtful and engaged replies, now form The Red Hand Files. 'You can ask me anything,' he wrote, apparently. 'There will be no moderator. This will be between you and me. Let's see what happens.' It seems to me that this is a project about intimacy. Since I am interested in how and why we create intimacy on stage and how this intimacy contributes to a sense of community, I am intrigued. In response to one question, Cave writes:

Compassion is the primary experience — the heart event — out of which emerges the genius and generosity of the imagination. Creativity is an act of love that can knock up against our most foundational beliefs, and in doing so brings forth fresh ways of seeing the world. This is both the function and the glory of art and ideas.⁶

Compassion. Intimacy. Vulnerability. These qualities can be in short supply in our working lives. As artists we talk all the time about the vulnerability of sharing what we create, but we have also learned how to perform, and much of the time I believe we are performing a version of intimacy, of vulnerability, of compassion, even, whilst slightly tensed in a defensive pose. It is risky to practice these qualities, and we all have different thresholds; risk-taking is a practice that has to be cultivated, I think, since we have to build the muscles of self-knowledge and resilience. Also, not all professional environments or working relationships are safe, and judging when and how to risk intimacy, vulnerability or compassion takes time and a degree of maturity. A skilful engagement of these qualities, though, makes for better working relationships, stronger support networks and more meaningful art.

I have been reading about the life and works of the artist and poet Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, also known, superbly, as 'The Baroness'. What a ferocious creative energy emanates, even from the leaden pages of this anthology. These are the opening lines of her poem *Pity Me (Confession)*⁷:

I loved world — because I could do love in it I love world — because I can do art in it I love world behind world

Maybe I am in a Matryoshka doll of worlds at the moment. I'm in the littlest of the nest. I know — or hope — that the bigger versions are still out there, but my contact with the people I love has shrunk to fit, in a way, following the early saturation and exhaustion of trying to keep in touch with everybody. My community has always been disparate and dispersed, but I miss the physical company of my friends enormously, sharing food or a drink or silliness. It appears that many people have had to shed a lot of collective guilt as we allowed our worlds to contract, as we battened down the hatches perhaps in order suddenly to pay attention to our own unfamiliar needs. Time and again I have found myself reassuring a friend that it was OK that they hadn't been in touch, that I understood that we were all just doing our best, but I appreciate that this comes from a position of confidence and of being well supported. What frightens me is the unknown numbers of people that may be slipping through the gaps of our networks, those who might *not* come to mind and who struggle to reach out themselves when they need help. I have known the crippling isolation of clinical depression and its self-perpetuating cycle of blackness. Though I have little interest in our digital discoveries changing the future of live performance, I do recognise that they are a vital tool against loneliness since online

⁶ Nick Cave, 'What is mercy for you?', The Red Hand Files, 109 (2020),

 [accessed 22 February 2021].

⁷ Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven 'Pity Me [Confession]' (excerpt) in *Body Sweats* ed. Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo (Cambridge: MIT Press), p. 251-2.

concerts, lectures, discussions, festivals etc. all stimulate our individual minds and our beautifully messy ecology, providing the flow to counter the ebb. It's up to us whether we participate or not but the provision, the possibilities, must be there, to catch up someone in a moment of creativity, boredom or desperation.

What I miss most is singing with other people. It's rare that I get to work with my closest friends but I'm fortunate that I am often working with colleagues who have become, or are becoming, friends. A couple of new pieces are being stitched together online, and I am glad of that, but oh my goodness how I miss the glory and the mischief of collective music-making.

sonic collage

END

CREDITS

Concept, essay and performance: Juliet Fraser

Film: Jessie Rodger Sound: Brett Cox

Musical excerpts

Exercises from a work in progress with Luke Nickel:

i) silent visualisation;

ii) vocalisation with spoken text

The New River by Charles Ives (for voice and piano)

Spazio Immergente I by Beat Furrer (for soprano and trombone)

The Housatonic at Stockbridge by Charles Ives (for voice and piano)

The Mouth by Rebecca Saunders (for soprano and electronics)

References

Siri Hustvedt 'The Delusions of Certainty' in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*

Samuel Beckett Not I

Wendell Berry 'The Work of Local Culture' and 'The Agrarian Standard' in *The World-Ending Fire*

Rachel Carson The Edge of the Sea

Nick Cave The Red Hand Files

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven 'Pity Me (Confession)' in Body Sweats

With thanks to

Luke Nickel, who reads 'This is a roller coaster'
Annea Lockwood, who reads from Rachel Carson's *The Edge of the Sea*

and all the lovely people who contributed their voices to the sonic collage

Emma Baldock (clinical psychologist; London)

Matthew Bell (architect; Stowmarket)

Isabelle Bozzini (cellist; Montréal)

Avery Fraser (violist/personal Beckett Bootcamp trainer; Ipswich)

Jeremy Fraser (artist/novelist/farmer; Ipswich)

Corinne Frimas (actress; Paris)

Mark Knoop (pianist; London)

Cordelia Lynn (writer; London)

Sara Mohr-Pietsch (broadcaster/curator; London)

Christelle Monney (singer; Geneva)

Luke Nickel (artist/composer; Bristol)

Berno Odo Polzer (curator; Brussels)

Heather Roche (clarinettist; London)

Jessie Rodger (filmmaker; London)

Rebecca Saunders (composer; Berlin)

Evelyn Shlomowitz (schoolgirl, 16; London) Philip Venables (composer; Berlin) Bas Wiegers (conductor; Amsterdam) Emily Wood (schoolgirl, 12; Guildford)

Closing music

One Day (another looping experiment made and performed by Juliet on the TC Helicon VoiceLive 3)

© Juliet Fraser 2021