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Martyn Hudson Watts Feb 28

Call Centre Project Report



Call Centre: Art thinking and practice in a time of viral crisis

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A research project that is inviting people to share their experiences of this time of COVID-19 and how it has impacted on lives and creative processes.

It will engage regional, national and international artists from contrasting rural and urban areas. From their 'outposts' the six satellite artists and a writer will focus their research on a variety of areas including home, travel, being stranded, trust, fragility, confinement, politics, the domestic and motherhood.

Picture above: Emily Hesse

1.Introduction: A Time of Monsters

There is a quote from Antonio Gramsci that I have always loved and it comes from the translation of his Prison Notebooks (although I first read it in the novel 'Daniel Martin' by John Fowles in the early 90s).

'The old is dying and the new cannot yet be born, in this interregnum (between two kings) a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'. In his own translation of this passage Slavoj Zizek replaces 'morbid symptoms' with 'this is the time of monsters'.

Gramsci is actually writing in code so his fascist prison censors cannot understand what he saying - but what he probably means is that capitalism is dying and communist hasn't showed up yet and is rather late to the date - and in this gap fascism turns up promising false solutions to real problems. Monsters in fact.

Now, in a new way our old world is dying and the new world hasn't quite turned up - and there are monsters galore out there - a terrorist massacring three gay men in a park in Reading, white supremacists attacking BLM protestors, the use of holocaust imagery by the president of the US.

I've been reflecting, I know we all have, on the old world that is disappearing and indeed I have been half-mourning it and half-cheering its demise. I won't miss the airplanes and the ecological disaster they are part of. I will miss some things. Call Centre has really raised some amazing questions for me and I have found it incredibly exciting - already our conversations are talking about other species, varieties of fungae, clouds, planets, atmospheres, the sound of the world, the languages of birds and so many other things.

As the artists involved develop their set of correspondents we will see some compelling and powerful responses and reflexes to the old world passing and the new one beckoning. We have talked a lot about home and its meanings, about the domestic, about isolation in forests, notions of political trust and the meaning of the microsphere that we find ourselves in. The Cathar heresy in Languedoc used to refer to their homes as the 'domus' - not just the material fabric of buildings, but the culture of the house, the interactions of people around it, and its spiritual basis. Andrew Wilson has referred to this as a kind of cocoon - and what do cocoons produce - well they produce monsters of one sort or another.

Indeed perhaps we can think of these as 'hopeful monsters' and that our homes are producing new evolutionary and untried routes and species. I can't help but be thankful for the death of that old world - and the markings that art inscribe on its material surfaces will be profoundly different as a consequence. We are world-making in new and untested ways.

2.Reiver Lands: In Northumberland, debateable land, landings and callings

Back in 2013 a group of us based in Newcastle and Northumberland developed a project to try and understand the knowledges that we shared with each other. That conversation included Allenheads Contemporary Arts, VARC and others and we spent a few months thinking about art and culture in rural communities. It was fun and convivial and like any university-supported project full of problems and contradictions and I thought a lot about it ever since. Call Centre has allowed others and myself to come back again to those places that some never left. What were those themes that still, to some extent, haunt me?

Firstly, it was clear that universities often act as predatory knowledge extractors willing to take data and archives and folklores from communities without sharing much in return. I was told, up at Tasset, by one respondent that she wasn't really interested in anything I could share with her and nor was she particularly keen on sharing her hard-won knowledge with me - I was neither asking the right questions nor being reciprocal.

Secondly, and it seems trite to say this but those who are immersed and embedded in specific localities have knowledge of that landscape and the art that can be produced in it that is very different from people like me parachuting in with the arrogance of the outsider. We must listen so carefully to the voices of those fields and trees. Alan Smith often posts pictures and films about the 'nothingness' of that landscape knowing full well that the thingness of those places are complex and emerge out of deep histories.

Thirdly, this is debateable land, reiver territory - from Allenheads to the border and beyond. Indeed it is a land of many borders - the littoral of the sea, the fells and mountains, rivers, dialect, peoples. None of this is seamless - we can see the seams in the land and below it, the fractures, schisms and boundaries. We can see those fractures in our own interiors as our minds struggles with who we are, who we are not and who we construct solidarity with. And beyond this are other places, artists, satellites and correspondents all bringing to us here the embedded knowledges of their own microspheres.

All of this is debateable, its up for grabs, experimental and often chaotic - it reminds me of that fractured landscape up at Allenheads. Contested, antagonistic and full of learning and care.

3.Nothings

Alan has talked of the 'unnerving quiet and isolation'. The world became quiet and our conversations began, a kind of whisper into the abyss, a connection across the abyss that separates us. We talked across borders, counties, countries. These were the sounds of emptiness and the sounds of fullness. Alan posted the sounds of nothing and they were full, replete with winds and birds. The sound of the traffic died down from a roar into a nothing, our days became full of nothingness and at times we had to listen to ourselves and our thoughts, monstrous thoughts often full of grief for the people we missed and the world we had lost. And then the cars and the trains returned, people turned up in our yards and gardens who we thought had been lost in the deluge, drowned out. The boundaries we made around the silence became permeable again and other voices appeared to disrupt, to bring noise, to scatter the daws from the benches in front of the old schoolhouse. Helmut shouted to the forester beyond the garden, Annie picked up the child, Andrew looked out into the garden and the city beyond. The students returned to annoy Ben, the books arrived by a ding dong in the post, the tourists returned to the beach and left their broken bottles as the porpoises played in the bay, their revelling disrupted by trawlers again. Of course there were no nothings really, the hand scrawled the page and the gamekeeper waved from the pasture below.

4.He and I, She and I: May 27th 2020

Kerry talks about reduced liberties, fears and anxieties. An excess of computers and screens, an annihilation of social practice and consumption:

My own person take, as an artist, on this moment in time: this time of lockdown and reduced liberty; this time of fear and anxiety; this time of restricted movement; this time of limited purchasing options; this time of excessive computer and internet usage; this time of make do; this time of getting to know where I live; this time of being in one place for weeks on end with one other human; this time of being isolated in a forest; this time of time; This time of Coronavirus Covid19.

The last time I saw Kerry was at a conference at Manchester School of Architecture. We talked about species and plants a few of us and exchanged emails afterwards. This was the

world before the deluge and all has changed. It was a day of storms that day in Manchester, the city was building and re-building. The monument to Alan Turing was closed off as the new office blocks were built around the square. Squalls, trains, coffee and across the Pennines back to home. Crowds, crowds of people, the boundaries of their bodies intersecting with others, shaking hands, embracing, sharing cigarettes and elevators. Unmasked then back in 2017. What was Kerry bringing to this: thinking practice as an artist in a unique condition of lockdown in a remote forest in Scotland. And this was thought in a moment when trust, as Kerry says, was totally unthinkable and problematic: trust towards governments, governments who had governed over destruction and destitution of us, of artists and indeed of entire populations: the governance of capitalism.

There is someone else in the room with Kerry: a He here too. Helmut and who is he? They share a home, in the cottage, in the forest, on the edge of the western night. They share poodles and bees, a marriage. They are sometimes antagonistic and sometimes harmonious. They make in different ways but also, often, together. For Kerry:

My experience of this time (as above) is both the same and yet very different to his. My experience of this time (as above) is both the same and yet very different to hers.

Each day we go through the same ritual of: ablutions, breakfast (and discussing what we'll have for tea), recording birds over breakfast, dog walk, morning coffee, lunch, afternoon tea break, afternoon dog walk, an aperitif (new to this coronavirus situation), cook dinner, eat dinner, eat chocolate, watch telly, evening dog walk (just one of us) up to bed, ablutions. Sleep. Dream (a lot).

Each day our experience of the above ritual and the space between these punctuations is our own. Sometimes we are on our own, doing our own thing. Sometimes we are together working on one 'project' like gardening

For the Call Centre, our daily ritual will remain. However, during the breaks, the time sat drinking or the time spent walking, we can, and most likely will, ruminate and share call centre thoughts and reflections.

They bring other artists, and even economists, to our party. They will ultimately stop making during lockdown, almost as if the silence of the forest where they live makes everyone go to sleep, and they do sleep. I cannot think of them there over the border above us, beyond us without thinking of a gigantic hawthorn hedge that encloses them from the world outside, or even the vortex of a storm that keeps all out. Only the deer can make it through the great hedge. And for a century the cottage in the western night remains behind that hedge. Protected from the ravages of capital, removed from the metropolis, a place full of birds and the wind through the larches.

Out of the garden Helmut emerges, a figure out of Norse myth, his beard resplendent in the may sunshine. Perhaps it is he who is the sleeping beauty here behind the hedge or the prince come to the rescue. What does Helmut bring to the calls we make across the void. Of course it is the same routine, with minor distortions as that of Kerry:

My own person take, as an artist, on this moment in time: this time of lockdown and reduced liberty; this time of fear and anxiety; this time of restricted movement; this time of limited purchasing options; this time of excessive computer and internet usage; this time of make do; this time of getting to know where I live; this time of being in one place for weeks on end with one other human; this time of being isolated in a forest; this time of time; This time of Coronavirus Covid19

In collaboration our creativity expands

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5.Green Time

With three others the writer and theorist Tracey Warr will reflect on the lived and felt experience of Covid. Tracey calls this period 'historic' and it is that microhistory that Tracey reflects on and specifically the nature of her locale, of the dual locales of Devon and France, that she makes her home in. Indeed the notion of home becomes all-encompassing. For Tracey:

Two topics have exercised me over the last few months: getting home and being in the present.

I have struggled with the question of where is/are home(s) and why do I need to get/be there. All the uncertainties connected with the virus situation have caused me to experience a loss of momentum and an inability to plan the future. These struggles seem to be having an emotional impact on my present where I am conscious of experiencing and expressing volatile emotions that differ from my usual equanimity. I feel that I am suffering from a loss of perspective, attitude adjustment and reassurance that results from tactile, live contact with others.

I have made some decisions that will definitely stick, such as never flying again. I already don't drive. I will only travel by train, bus, bike, boat, foot and non-fuel based flight in the future. Many of us are dreaming of travelling. I want to contemplate why travelling and moving is as necessary to us as breathing and staying still, whilst acknowledging that we are not all experiencing the crisis and these issues in the same way.

This loss of perspective, precisely because of travel and the lack of it and a future and the lack of become disorientating for Tracey. Embodied, live contact with others, including her grandchild (Tracey calls herself a nanoo), become less possible. Her relationship with her neighbour is fractured by a river. She is dislocated from her place of work, her students. She cannot see her neighbour's house across the river but is assured it is still there.

But is it still there? Can Alan and Helene see beyond Killhope Law, can I see beyond the backyard wall. Tracey's imagination roves across space and time: she visualizes the medieval anarchy, the women of a lost age, but she can no longer see anything beyond the River Viaur. The membrane of her locale is restricted and almost impermeable. Is this historic time, non-historic or micro-historic. We do know that it is, as Tracey notes, a time of colour – and specifically green:

I call this daily moment there the green time when the sun is at a particular angle to create these fabulous perpendicular reflections. It is extraordinary to immerse in and swim through that space. I am potentially separated from that home by Brexit too but that relates to one of my other decisions and is for discussion in another post.

Tracey initially writes from her flat on the Dartington estate, an incredibly green space. She feels the separation from the world, indeed the estate itself bounds where she is and even though it gradually opens up to visitors it is a green world, almost reminiscent of the green chapel in the legends of Gawain. Her friends, like all of our friends and indeed our friendships, new and old, with each other in Call Centre, are distant, mediated, beyond. The green sanctifies but also separates. Perhaps it is this separation that allows her to move back into the medieval world to think and write and recompose words out of the distant past and the dead generations. For Tracey:

I started out in Call Centre exploring the notions of getting home and being in the present. I wanted to ponder on why travelling and moving is as necessary to us as breathing and

staying still. During lockdown, I experienced both a desperate need to be released and agoraphobia. I experienced frustrated momentum and trajectory. And I decided not to fly anymore.

The pandemic made me decide where is home and what I need to do with the rest of my time. I made a choice forced on me by a dishonest and ill-conceived referendum and I Brexit. As soon as border restrictions were lifted, I travelled home to France. Now new travel restrictions are separating me again from my family in the UK. The virus is still out there – lurking beneath my balcony with the holidaymakers. I continue to work online, sitting on a different sofa. But at least here, I feel that I can reclaim the 'real' landscape of my mind. I can swim, be with my community of friends here, and above all, I can write.

My white jasmine is making a comeback from near death after five months without me. My balcony rose is budding and blooming. My orchid is basking in the late summer heat. I am swimming in the deep green silk of the river and recovering (or readying for the next onslaught of the virus). The bells of the four ancient churches surrounding me peal asynchronously at breakfast and lunch and sound the half hours and hours. There never seems enough time in the days, in life. I'm working on really feeling each moment in this place.

The moments, the sound of bells, the flowers, the green days of life and distance and separation. Have those bells been ringing all through the centuries since the last plague or two?

6. Island Farm

For the first time since Christmas we managed to take a break for a couple of weeks. The first week staying in a bothy under Irton Pike and Illgill Head in the Lakes and the second week exploring our usual landscape of the North York Moors. At the close of that week we managed, Emily Hesse and I, to sit with Alan and Helen on the seafront at Staithes and watched the children swimming in the harbour as the sunlight illuminated the strata of the cliffs.

I have been reflecting on some words of Ben Ponton and Katherine Akey in recent posts with Call Centre. Ben has been writing of the archipelago and the microsphere observable in the microworld of our lockdown homes. He even used the metaphor of the barometer almost as if our homes had their own micro-climates. The accidental and the serendipitous are part of the art of our microspheres and Ben embraces that. Katherine Akey has been thinking about the 'pain of others' and this also really resonated with me. This last year or so has been a year of loss and grief; around about twenty friends and family have died since February 2019. To somehow dissolve grief we have been doing what we usually do - seeking solace in the moors and mountains in the places we shared with our friends: that last walk in a December storm across Mount Grace with Ian, that last run through Haredale with Paul who knew that it would be his last time there. As Katherine has said - we fail to grasp horror in the abstract, our minds recoil from the grand numbers of the missing of the Somme - that vortex where tens of thousands disappeared. Srebrenica. Treblinka. It is often the single photograph of a soldier found in a charity shop, discarded because nobody can remember who he was, that shakes us and unbalances our world as we step out into the street. My great-uncle George was one of the few of the Norfolk Regiment who made it back from Gallipoli. His brother died in a ship off Italy. My great grandma looked after him for the rest of his life. He could not marry. The horror was too present for him. My great grandad Joseph returned from the filthy plains of the dead: Arras, Somme. He could see the flares and the wire as he threw his dinner into the fire and drank himself into a murmuring peace for the rest of his life.

Katherine mentions the Napoleonic disaster of 1812. It is a moment of history that means so much to me: Antonio Gramsci, long before he was killed under the fascist jackboot, wrote of

the 'invisible army of books and pamphlets' that had radiated out of France and levelled the way for Napoleon's armies. Tolstoy's vision of burning Moscow. Rachel Bepaloff's joint vision of Troy and Moscow which haunted her existential imagination until she finally took her own life in exile in America. But the story I love most about 1812 is not the horror of the retreat through the snow, the burning farms, the dead horses, the soldiers left behind in the snow and ice. It is this: that for generations there were families and individuals in western Russia, specifically around Smolensk, that were known as 'Frenchies'. These were families descended from Napoleonic soldiers who had been taken in by Russian peasants and protected. Many of them married local women. It strikes me that this is an example of planetary humanism and love which conquers horror - overcoming what Norman Geras once called the 'contract of mutual indifference'.

I want to write finally of an island in my archipelago - the 'island farm' of Sleddale not far from the Beacon in the picture above. It was called this because its pastures are entirely surrounded by moor. I first came across it (accident and serendipity again) many years ago and Emily and I often visit the stone circle to the south of the farm. It was tenanted by Fred Proud who had served in the First World War and came back to find solace in this farm, both far from civilisation and the machines and noise of war. It was a farmhouse full of flints (pygmy-flints, fairy-darts) found by the children on the moor, left by Mesolithic and Neolithic hunters whose descendants would ultimately build the stone circles. We often pick up stones or flints from here and bring them back to the microworld of our own house: the house is full of this detritus of the moor. They are nothing if not memory-stones, of course of grief and remembrance but also of humanness and solidarity and our shared landscapes and machineries of joy.

7.If We Stop

I re-read the passages from Zahra Dallilah and Julie Tomlin with my heart stopping with grief and excitement. Andrew has invited them to talk and think about this moment. There are sixteen passages of grief, ruin, displacement. Here are some of their thoughts:

How can we keep ourselves in these spaces of third nature, the spaces of the ruins, of the knowledge that all is not well? How do we summon up alternatives, not just sit out the show that insists it must go on?

Life can be so enchanting; the lover's kiss, a meal in the sunshine that nourishes every part of us, folds us into something greater than just the function of eating.

We still have that nature around us, but in so many ways we have reduced to an 'it' all that personhood, knowledge and agency that is settled within the earth.

And yet, this it, is becoming something different, a different kind of 'it' no longer patiently enduring our abuses, it is developing its own monstrosity, or its complexity is becoming something new to us, something intrinsically shaped by us, something changed by what we have dumped, spilled and emitted into the atmosphere and the waters. And now we begin to learn that those forces are not subject to our ordering, that the sense of imperial dominance that has shaped us for years is now becoming more and more ludicrous, as at the same time the aggression and violence that was always there becomes more deadly, more concentrated, more outraged.

How do we tune in, and what are we tuning into? If we tune in, begin to mend the torn web of our relation to the earth, can we begin to heal - both ourselves and the earth? How can these relationships be restored? How do we begin to hear, to listen, to reconnect our beings to the world around it, to lose the lie, embodied in us under capitalism that we are separate, distinct, disembodied?

The plants outside my door keep drawing my attention, and I see in their stillness, their settledness, a patterning in their entanglement that is mutually beneficial, that allows for all, trusting in the contribution of each to form the whole. It is life that is happening out there, while so much of the activity that we engage in is not.

This reconnection requires many of us in the West to carefully dismantle so much of the mindset that has taken shape over the centuries, based on the superiority of elite white men, of patriarchy, of notions of racial superiority. The dismantling, carefully done, can enable us to hold on to some of those things that the Enlightenment opened up, but now they sit in a new landscape. In many ways a ruinous one, one that is beginning to show up in the cracks of the world that we have created.

The end of the world as we know it seems an inevitability now, not the earth, which we seem prepared to sacrifice for our own gains, but the systems that we have built up, given shape to that reflect a view of the world built on domination, on control, on extraction.

In fairy tales, people learn through the tasks of daily life - from the little girl in the house of Baba Yaga, who learnt how to wash clothes, keep the fire and cook, to sweep the floors and sort what seemed impossible to sort.

Work as initiation, as transformation is a strong motif of ancient stories; the weaving of nettles, the spinning of gold. These were pathways to transformation, but as is the case with the story of Rumpelstiltskin, they also suggest the presence of a deep unease with work.

The cultural somatic framework, "a constellation of ideas pivoted around the fundamental principle that groups of people i.e. cultures are in fact bodies. In this framework, oppressions such as white supremacy are understood as manifestations of traumas held in our collective nervous systems, which in turn become embodied in our cultural systems" (Tada Hozumi, A cultural somatic reader on whiteness, trauma, and allyship, The Selfish Activist).

And now, as we are inching our way slowly out of this event, not knowing if it's really over, when the virus might return, spike, can we look with the eyes of unfamiliarity and ask ourselves is this really the life that we want to be living?

Can we really crank our bodies into action again, defy all the weight of a body slowed down, ignore all that we have experienced and simply return to 'normal'?

Surely in the silence of a world that stopped for just a while we could hear the cry of the deep, the cry of a different world waiting to dance with us?

If you close your eyes and sit in the stillness, can you hear it begin to rumble?

Work, the notion of it, the experience of it, the dread of it, the demand of it, contorts my body, pushing me into a shape that isn't mine. We work, and as women we have fought to work, fought to be equal, but realise now that the game itself is flawed, that what is needed is what we knew at the outset, but forgot in a swirl of red lipstick feminism, that what is needed is fundamental, radical change. And so here we are, the world having been stopped, trying to get on its feet again, trying to be well. But I don't think it knows just how sick it is yet.

I see a women's feet, wet and glistening, she has been under water, away, for a very long time. But she is walking carefully, her feet feeling the ground, being held by it. She is coming, and the work of becoming begins.

Living by sea for a few days, days of precious refuge from people, such a privilege of a problem, the overwhelm that comes from too many, reading, I realise that there is far more than this, that these are just the tumbling out, the foam on the shore of a greater, deeper mass. I see the gaping wide mouth of the sea, hear its tides, the constant battering of the wind, and realise that here, now, there is something new, of salt, and cleansing, of newness and beginning.

And so we begin to see whiteness under scrutiny, although it's never entirely under scrutiny, never really seen as a whole, an identity to be challenged, it is held to be the way, the truth, the life, so how can it be scrutinised, when it is the marker for all other bodies.

And now the whitest of white men are coming up with measures to get people back to a way of life - government discounts three days a week in cafes and restaurants - seem desperate and ill thought through.

Can we nudge ourselves into a different space, one which accepts that the whole edifice has to come down, that whiteness, white maleness, white womanhood, is a construct that we need to dismantle?

We have to find new ways of being that are not subjecting others to our dominance, our desire to control, to impose a way of thinking and being that is deemed correct.

And how is an edifice of thinking of this nature dismantled?

And this spring and summer of lockdown I have learnt that it is not just food that is waiting to pass on its knowledge and usher us towards wellbeing; plants I have walked by and only seen under the general heading of 'weeds' a phrase that conjures up the tiny plants pushing through the gaps and cracks in the pavements outside and the concrete in the garden of my childhood, have gradually become known.

Still too many remain generic, unseen and unnamed, but I now nod to the wild chamomile, knowing that it's there to ground us and calm us, help us to process, look after our guts. And there's peppermint too to help us keep open and engaged and rose to hold our hearts and lavender to calm the mind and help us sleep.

I can walk past many others still as I walk past strangers in the street, but those that are now known to me I will always recognise, my heart will always leap when I see Red Clover and I feel dreamy when I think of Elderflower still and a quiet reverence for the St John's Wort I found hidden away in a quiet garden.

Where I'm sitting there is a greenhouse beyond that is surrounded with sprawling weeds that I am sure one day soon someone will deem need to be cut back. Like the chickweed that was filling the beds that had to be cleared for onions this year, there are matters of negotiation when it comes to space, critical edges that need examining, questions to be asked about how much is good to weed, whether some can be moved elsewhere, harvested now, and put to use.

But in that sprawl outside I have found German Chamomile, Purple headed Vervain and Yarrow, there are no doubt others that I can't yet name. Dealing with this growth is complicated - I've had to warn the guy who looks after the grounds where the St John's Wort is. I had to make a mad dash to harvest a load of Red Clover before the lawnmower did its rounds.

The weeds, or the herbs, with all their complex, subtle and nuanced properties are part of the under commons that Catherine Keller writes about. And so how do we work for the common good? She refers to agonism, the struggle with and for. And I feel that begin to open up as something of the third nature, of a way of being, a way of knowing, of recovering something that was lost in terms of our relationship to the earth, to its plants, flowers, waters and creatures, to recovering a relationship to it that is about holding the complexity of all the competing needs and holding them in balance.

Plants, weeds, the lower parts of our bodies, our guts. These are all part of the under commons, the lives, the ways of being that have been subdued, crushed, marginalised in the creation of a world system that seeks to optimise extraction - both from our bodies and from the earth.

And yet it is all still there, the wisdom of the gut waiting to be awakened by the nourishment it needs.

Lockdown lifted the only barrier between me and seeing how a seedling became a fruit, how a plant was not a victim living in fear of neglect, abandonment or destruction but a comrade and co-conspirator if you met it well enough. Through those plants it revealed to me that I fear death, they don't. I fear failure, they don't. I fear neglect, abandonment and destruction. They from earth, return there in their time with grace and surrender, whilst I flap around in panic and in anguish over not getting it quite right, not living up to my expectation of self, my identity as a Woman Who Can in jeopardy.

The wisdom and knowledge is all there and all it takes is seeds, soil, water and time. The first three I always had access to, the fourth a gift in lockdown.

We are not blank pages when pandemics come.

What was already scrawled on me, the days and nights of wondering how to kickstart life after the one I had was catastrophically blown up. The times of despair endured and the

aching sadness weathered leaving me with a deep sense of knowing about what I needed, what was appropriate for the time I was in.

Can we tumble through the veil and shake ourselves free of the contortions imposed on us and naturalised, made to seem inalterable, that there is no alternative?

Can I write myself into a different space, the space of the letters, the space where words pulse and live and become, where life is full of potential, of beginnings?

How can we keep ourselves in these spaces of third nature, the spaces of the ruins, of the knowledge that all is not well?

How do we summon up alternatives, not just sit out the show that insists it must go on?

The choreography of lockdown, its immanence, the trips made and meetings held knowing that they were likely to be the last, the cancellations.

I make no distinction between these sixteen passages, indeed reading them has been one of the most decisive moments of the Covid period. I cannot gloss them or discourse about them: moments of ruin and beauty and devastation. These voices make me breathless with horror and anticipation.

8.What punctuates our day

Cigarettes, toilet breaks, tea, food, drink, birds, trains, the doorbell, the forester.

9.The Archipelago of our Microspheres

Ben is in conversation with Michael Begg, a fellow musician and artist and we are all thinking of microspheres – an idea, emerging from our homes and studios, that has been incredibly important for shaping the Call Centre discussions and came initially from Ben. For Michael here in the first passage:

First, a confession.

I am one of the few for whom the lockdown has been almost entirely agreeable. With that comes a degree of guilt, but this new guilt arises mostly at the expense of an older guilt, now temporarily redundant.

As a freelance worker in the fringe territories of sound, every day has been an act of faith, of resistance, and an enforcing of the idea that the feasibility of the enterprise will win out against the overriding evidence that this course is economically unsound, critically ambivalent and socially of only microscopic value.

There is a particular frequency of anxiety at which I resonate, and sometimes it's fine. It works for me. And my work is broadly built on anxiety. But in many social situations, the anxiety would grow until there was a real risk that the body would shake itself loose, and I'd fall to pieces. Kind of like putting a brick into a washing machine on spin cycle.

Everyone's life seemed to have an obvious purpose, a trajectory, a sense of growth and advancement. I sensed, always, an illusory 'them' who would gaze down upon my poverty, my comparative lack of means, my anonymity. Whilst I, in turn, would console myself in a sullen judgement on their poverty of spirit.

When the lockdown fell, the familiar rhythms and patterns of life fell apart. So many people found themselves in the midst of a fractured catastrophe of isolation and insecurity, situated in the pressure cooker of the home, delineated by the chasms of time that seemed to be opening to swallow them. Welcome, I quietly observed, to the life I have already been in training for through most of my adult life.

This was the first revelation. It was suddenly apparent that this unhelpful self-consciousness and anxiety about my overall progress in general society plagued my every working moment. And I only recognised it because overnight, as the world came down to my level, the anxiety vanished.

How curious that only now should I find that I am able to work without guilt.

And in the second passage Michael talks again:

There is a point when teaching your kid how to make bread that the process seems suspended on the edge of ruin. The elasticated goo sticks to the fingers and rips and sags between outstretched arms. Slapped down onto the counter the mixture slowly contracts, and the game of teasing and tearing the increasingly muscular dough proceeds. Time has taken on this sense of elasticity. The familiar anchors that people set in their day have disappeared. Consequently, we find that they weren't anchors at all. They were constraints, imposing an unnatural order upon our experience. Work defined the day. As the lockdown progressed I noted with curiosity how our sense of memory became quickly distorted, and began to crumble. Was it this morning, or last week? Was this when I was a child? Where was that place, and why is it touching me so deeply in this moment? I noted how stories crept into the news about how we should be encouraged to keep a journal in order to remember this time, suggesting that without making the effort the whole episode would mysteriously slip away as easily as a landscape drawn with a stick in the sand. Creativity suddenly seemed to begin to assert its own value from a novel perspective; the process will align you to the passing of time, the product will enable you to fix the experience. The creative impulse, then, could be said to have been released from the constraints of time being measured by other activity. The to and fro of the day. The deadline. The road map. The working week. The calendar. And so the days, like dough, fold in upon each other, and stretch and tear. We watch pans of water come to boil over a period of light years, and tens of thousands die in a report that lasts but a breath. I swear I can see my children growing. I swear I have been in this morning before, but this time I feel more intensely the sun on the front of my legs. Detail. Detail. Unconnected details that turn and return from ungovernable orbits to be considered once again in the fragment of morning that remains familiar.

This awareness of this particular formation of time returns me, over and always again and in gratitude, to John Berger. Painting, he observed, was the capture of an impression of a moment that was about to disappear. At college, the perspective had been slightly different. A painting was to be viewed as the end of a process of decisions, captured at the point an artist said, 'Enough'.

A drawing, on the other hand, was different. A drawing, Berger outlined, was the evidence of a period of time spent looking. When I first read this during a summer holiday in Amsterdam in 2012, I was possessed with the idea of providing my children with concrete evidence of what their father did in time. Diarists mostly wish to burn their journals, and I am no different, but I wanted to have some mechanism through which my children could understand something of their father, should they wish. So, despite having no particular gift for drawing, or talent for draughtsmanship I began the occasional practice of drawing. An activity I hadn't touched since I had been an art student in the mid 1980s.

10.Collaboration 1: Art and Scientific activity

In recent years the two cultures of art and science have been challenged by kinds of artistic practice that have dissolved that boundary. One of Annie's main forays into the world beyond the home was in a site-specific arts/science collaboration in the Pennine uplands. This 'paralab' was an attempt to facilitate collaboration and move beyond what Annie calls an art which simply 'illustrates' scientific endeavour. As Annie notes:

Artists are often expected to enter the world of science, learn as best they can from it, and then make work 'inspired' by what they have learnt. We want to see if it's possible for collaboration to take new forms, to try and establish a mutually beneficial platform for all practitioners, where the scientists are just as out-of-their-depth as the artists.

The practice, what Annie calls *the trying* creates new sites of experimentation and praxis and process rather than focusing on the solidity of the result. An enmeshing of different kinds of experimental practices allow for the elaboration of new ways of *working* rather than simply the production of artefacts or *things*.

11.Collaboration 2: The Hyperlocal

Tracey interviewed Tina Bech, a Danish artist resident in London but who was stranded during the lockdown in Denmark. Tina raises fascinating questions about the nature of the local and the locales in which we are sometimes unwittingly and serendipitously rooted in: *'The lockdown has focused us on the hyperlocal. We have been discovering our local places, and our neighbours with fresh eyes, undertaking art residencies in our back gardens or sheds. But the lockdown has also been a motivation/emotional roller coaster without equilibrium, which is important for making artwork. We need some sort of safety to be creative. A lot of people haven't had a creative lockdown.'*

'I'm interested to know,' she concludes, 'how did we play during the lockdown? Our everyday creativity changed. What is the vocabulary of play in a crisis? I've haven't articulated it yet, but I'm exploring what is dark play, what is the dark creative'.

I am fascinated by this new way of seeing, of play with locales and particularly with the notion of dark play and the dark creative. In some ways this ironic and traumatic dark play can stand in for our entire conversations with Call Centre. What was it but dark play and indeed playing in the dark and in the dark times of monsters.

12.Collaboration 3: In Motherhood

Annie has been in conversation with Katherine Akey, and I have noted above a response to some of Katherine's words and thoughts. Both have been concerned with motherhood, in West Yorkshire and the US. The survivability and the resilience of mothers, the relation between the body of the women and the extracted child as an independent entity during this period. Indeed Cole has been part of our conversations, present and contributing and we have loved those moments when he has joined us and mourned when Annie has had to turn off her mic. For both Annie and Katherine there have been concerns about an enduring arts practice and being a mother and all of the difficulties that attend to that as well as possibilities. Indeed what comes through is that permeability and connection between the body of the woman and of the child as we speak to others, through screens, with a baby sleeping on our chest and in our arms. Our speakings punctuated by the calls and cries of babies. Katherine speaks of the artist's residency that she encounters: the 'reframing of parenthood as a valuable site for creative practice, rather than an obstruction to be overcome'.

13.Microspheres again

Ben asks himself who he is and who he will or might be. I have know Ben's work for years but we have never met and indeed this project allowed me to go back and revisit some of his sound and musical work of the past 40 years. Ben's self-definition in terms of the Call Centre project is actually quite something:

I am an artist and a curator, that questionable binary of the gamekeeper/poacher variety. My role here is that of curator, presenting and contextualising contributions from three correspondents I have invited to join me to form the Archipelago of the Microspheres (more of that in a minute). My role here is also as an artist, conjuring something more from not very much, pointing my finger at things I want you to see and hear, turning dust into devils, sound into music and paint into pictures. I've been doing that all of my adult life and earlier, switching from one to the other as the importance of one or the other rises and falls in the barometer of my interest and, inevitably, as the likelihood of a livelihood from one or the other, sometimes both, presents itself.

*At the moment, I'm mostly an artist, mostly fashioning made and collected sound into forms that can only precariously be described as music. I sometimes do that by myself but more often in collaboration with others, in groups – a band called :zoviet*france: and another formation called the Black Glass Ensemble. Both are long term projects, :zoviet*france: the*

older and the Black Glass Ensemble the younger. More recently, I've been turning paint into pictures, coincident to but not because of the lockdown, which came about, as many of the best things do, almost by accident; aleatory is one of my favourite things. I recommend making as much room in your life for it as you can get away with.

I wonder how those ways of defining and self-defining have been challenging to Ben during the Covid period and whether some sense of dislocation has happened for him as part of this process – and specifically thinking about the microsphere in which he is located. For Ben this sense of the microscopic against the macroscopic has been the central theme running through this project and indeed it is a microcosm understood in planetary terms and formulations. For Ben:

Humankind, in retreating considerably from our dominant place on the planet and how we traverse and encounter it, has been a refocusing on the minutiae around us. In the absence of the big wide world, the small microworld of our homes and immediate surroundings receive more of our attention than is customary.

And where does the 'archipelago' emerge for Ben:

When I'm being a curator / producer, a device I like to use in conceiving how artists and their work can be presented collectively without diluting their individuality is, metaphorically, as an archipelago – a group of islands that can be perceived in the singular but each of which is distinct, with unique qualities and varying in their proximity to each other. (On a side note, we often don't realise it but here in the British Isles, we live in a real geographical archipelago). I was very happy when the three people I invited to join me in this as correspondents reporting their perspectives, Michael Begg, Carla Santana and Mark Warren, all said yes. We all have a connection to each other somehow already and find ourselves at varying proximities to each other, literally, in distance and actively, in what we do – that archipelago thing. All of us, deliberately or otherwise, by circumstance or intent, have found like many in the world, our horizons diminished and our fascination drawn to intrinsic details of the otherwise mundane; the myth and magic of the mundane world, even.

This sense of the myth and magic of the mundane world is not only shaped by our homes and new insights into where we live in a microscopic way but also in that our world has become more perilous and indeed enchanting because we have lived through this Covid period. Let us examine the archipelago of magic and the mundane through the 'bespectacled horse' and Ben's insights into the Large Hadron Collider (LHC):

One of the primary purposes of the LHC has been to detect evidence of the Higgs boson, an elementary particle the existence of which was theorised by Newcastle-born physicist, Peter Higgs. It's not possible to see a Higgs boson, only to identify where it's been – its trace, and on 4 July 2012, evidence of the particle was detected in the LHC from interactions with protons. That successful detection added further proof of the Standard Model of particle physics, a general theory that can be used to describe fundamental forces in the universe, including the possible existence of extra dimensions.

I think one of the extra dimensions might be here in Newcastle, where it partially overlaps the one in which I habitually find myself and the neighbourhood where I live. That other dimension is, as far as I can tell, only inhabited by one man who appears intermittently and without any regularity in the streets here. I first noticed him many years ago and would occasionally see him near the local Metro station, even on a train sometimes, always carrying a couple of very large holdalls, made larger by his small stature. Always alone, seemingly indifferent and disregarding of his surroundings and we, the other people, he nevertheless seemed to be possessed by purpose: walking with resolve to a destination that may well be the same as the one from which he departed. Never a word, never a glance, never catching your eye; we are not there; we are not in his dimension.

Ages ago, I realised he'd faded away and that I couldn't say for certain when that was. The irregularity of his appearance meant that there was no marker by which to fix his absence. It hadn't been half-past-five when I usually saw him or every Tuesday or just the summer

months, it was as random as when I last saw a blackbird. The extra dimension no longer overlapped.

Two or so years ago, the overlap was reinstated, like a comet returning after years out at the far flung reaches of a weak gravitational pull, he has returned, this time more frequently and more often in streets closer to mine. He looks unchanged, the same black clothes, the same resolve, the same silence, never a glance, never catching your eye. The holdalls have gone, though and there is another difference: he no longer seems to be resolutely on his way somewhere. Now, he walks with a slower purpose, examining the pavements and where there are noticeable growths of weeds between the slabs, he sets about meticulously uprooting them, gathering them together and placing them in low piles in the gutter. Now, even when I don't see him, I know where he's recently been by those piles of weeds.

In my brief note, *The New Normal*, I touched on the notion that we are always creating the archaeology for the future. Implicit in that is the paradox of seeking to achieve a greater understanding of our present by forensic analysis of fragmentary evidence from the deep past, while at the same time leaving traces of our present to be unravelled by future seekers of greater understanding. The complexity and sophistication of that fragmentary evidence can be used to gauge the cultural importance of those finds, though the explanation – the why? – is often elusive (I'm looking at you, Stonehenge). Thousands of years from now, when archaeologists discover and excavate the site of Conseil européen pour la recherche nucléaire (CERN) and reach LHC tunnel sector 3-4, they will already know much and learn much more. However, I suspect one of the great mysteries that will elude explanation will be the significance to the search for an elementary particle posited by a Geordie, of a crude drawing of a bespectacled horse on the tunnel wall.

The routines, circulations of planets and moons and indeed the routines and cosmologies of one person who Ben watches measures our times on the planet. It overlaps with our time, with our magic and our mundane.

14. Planetary Social Distancing

In thinking about process, experiment and the production of things Annie makes an experiment in distancing upon the para-lab on Saddleworth Moor. For Annie:

You are occupying your own space, safe from the germs of your friends. In recent weeks the space surrounding you has expanded. You're probably more aware of it than you were before. Do you feel a sense of ownership over this space? Perhaps you're one of those people who feels annoyance when others intrude into 'your' space. Or maybe you're continuously aware of your actions in relation to others. You walk in the road so they don't have to, thinking 'Did I get too close?'; 'Should I have waited for them to pass?' Or perhaps you're one of those who makes a point of not caring. You enjoy the feeling of getting close, of breaking the rules.

On the 4th July our freedom increases but our space reduces.

Have you ever considered the scope of this space that has been allotted to us by the powers that be? Where does it begin and end? What shape is it? Let's each consider our personal section of the planet.

First, look down at your feet, at your place on the surface of the large sphere that is our planet. Imagine your section of the surface continuing down in a very long, narrow cone-shape, all the way down to its apex at the centre of the Earth. What substances, creatures and materials might be occupying your space with you?

Now look upwards. If you are able to do so comfortably, lie on your back and look up at the sky. Let's imagine your long, narrow cone of space extending up into Earth's atmosphere. Those raindrops you can feel on your face. They're your raindrops - or are they? Look up to the clouds where the raindrops are created. Try to locate the patch of sky that is yours. Form a circle with your thumb and forefinger and hold it in front of your face. Is this your patch of

sky perhaps? Observe it for a moment. Watch it change with the moving clouds. Become familiar with your patch.

We could go further still, expanding outwards to other stars and galaxies. If the sun could switch off for a second, we would see the constellation of Orion overhead, with Taurus the bull in sight of his arrow. Could you be sharing your personal space with one of these stars? Don't get too cosy in their company, as your space will scan the sky like a spotlight, welcoming in new bodies as the Earth turns.

Now slowly, in your own time, return to your immediate space. Focus on your body and where it interacts with the earth beneath you. Open your eyes and take in your surroundings: the landscape, the people. Stand up, if you're not already. Has your sense of space changed? Are you more or less willing to share your space.

I tried this after reading Annie's words and felt my fragility upon the planet. Annie had also introduced the writer Warlock to us and I also read those words in the days afterwards, feeling displaced, disoriented, almost vertiginous as if my body would drop off the planet. I think this was partly because it seemed like Covid had suspended all the laws of nature and our social formation. It was only when we spoke together as Call Centre that I could see this as a common distress, trauma and also a new realm of possibilities for orientation and re-orientation as if our civilization had somehow rotated on its cosmological axis. For Warlock, and for Annie, the crisis has led to new ways of re-imagining our locales and 'creating, stories, mythologies and rituals'.

Northern Dark: Warlock's Journal

To be a witch or warlock is to be a fool. To be a fool is to know nothing and be all the wiser for it. We live in peculiar times. It sometimes feels like we're screaming into the abyss. I'm a father and I don't know what to do, but when I walk in the woods and the rivers I feel a sense of knowing.

I plan to walk in them more often.

As a child I was a Satanist. Not too long ago, I discovered a box of my old toys in Grandmother's loft. In it was a red, plastic lunchbox with a carry-case handle, the sort you could bash someone over the head with. The Ghostbusters sticker had been removed and it was sealed shut with what appeared to be an entire roll of Sellotape. When I opened it I found a note. It was written in black felt tip on the back of a Woolworth's receipt and was in my own spidery hand, though I had no recollection of writing it. It said 'I do not like the devil.' But I did like the devil. I liked him a lot. I found little warmth in the porcelain arms of Jesus, but plenty in the devil's embrace. He was furry and warm, like one of Grandmother's dogs. And he had beautiful horns that shined like my school shoes when I polished them.

In my teens I was given a computer and I used it to seek out the devil. I sent heartfelt messages to the Laveyan Church of Satan and received cryptic, dismissive replies. At fourteen my friends and I took the bus to Manchester to visit Afflecks Palace. Nearby, between a pub and a sex shop, was a place selling books on the Occult. Inside was a man with long, black hair. He wore a t-shirt with the words 'Jesus is a Cunt' on the back. He said he was a Satanist. I told him I wanted to be a Satanist too, but he told me I was reading the wrong books and that I needed to be careful. I decided the guy was a loser and gave up the devil for a while.

Later in my teens I made an enemy and sought out the devil once more. I cursed my enemy. I stayed up all night stabbing his image with a burnt pin and cried until I felt sick. I wanted him to fall off his moped and die and, one month later, he did fall off his moped. He missed a maths exam but didn't die. I figured that was fair enough.

For years, I forgot all about him (the devil, I mean). Instead, I discovered drugs, Hip Hop and work. I pissed away a decade.

And then one day, as I was walking my dog in the woods, the devil came back. He came back at just the right time, as my mind was beginning to eat itself.

He was standing in the river and had horns, as you might expect, only they were white as birch branches. They were majestic in shape, like a goat's, though on subsequent meetings they would differ each time. Sometimes they were the broad antlers of the red deer, other times the curled horns of the ram. Sometimes, they jutted like the bull's. But they were always white, as were his terrible eyes. His fur was green as moss and he wore a cloak of stiff, black hide. Spikes of thorn were wrapped tightly around his wrists and betwixt his horns sat a blazing candle of green. He stroked my forehead with his taloned paw and it felt like the touch of a father. Then he sat me down on a log and introduced himself.

He told me he is not the devil but the Dark, the Northern Dark, the light in the Dark. That he has lived in these lands since the time that the mysterious Dark Spirit retreated underground, leaving Old Mother Root and Father Stone to hold everything in place beneath the great fire. He told me about his love for Thorn, the creeping daughter of Old Mother Root, who offers pain and protection. He told me about Crow, who swoops and spears whoever he likes. He told me about the duplicitous Serpent who carries Crow's victims down to the hell, where he whispers his own crooked truth to the spirit.

I met the Dark many times across a year of seasons, and he told me all manner of tales: of the various animal spirits and the terrifying spectres that haunt the North. He taught me how to whistle for Crow and send him darting after my enemies. He told me how to summon the Dark Spirit – but warned it would be the last thing I summoned. He taught me the way of the sword for protection and how to keep it sharp and clean from rust. He taught me the way of the branch and how to grow my mind like the mighty oak. He taught me the way of the bone and how to heal the body when it breaks.

And then he buggered off down a hole and I never saw him again.

Let us never forget the Northern Dark and what it has meant to us in this time.

15.Trust

From the very beginning of the Call Centre project Andrew began to work with issues of 'trust' then ten developed into other conversational directions. Our 'cocoon' of home were places of safety and Andrew and his satellite worked with narratives of trust around politics, morality and discourse in the context of pandemic and disease. The whole question of 'social trust' became of increasing importance during Covid in terms of self-care, social trust for others, governmental and health narratives and the nature of the individual as resisting or conforming.

16.Covid Correspondences

Andrew and his satellite developed a set of correspondences which reflected their interior concerns and exterior realities. It began with reflections on masks, air travel and the nature of the skies as we observed them – specifically the air trails of the pre-Covid world of travel and whether we would see the return of them. It moved into a discussion of the 'fervour' of fauna and new life emerging under lockdown as our ecologies moved towards summer. This became enmeshed with the public use of parks and greenery and the nature of unemployment and furlough as people used those green spaces.

Being back at work, having a regular pattern is disruptive to the studio groove that I found under lockdown. The job feels like hurdle which is disrupting my flow. Under lockdown I could glide through time, fewer hinges, less tethering. [MH1]

The relationship between cosmology to Covid in our fictions, fabulations, fabrications was also incredibly rich:

I'd forgotten about the videos, from back in October which showed a huge comet flying over northern China. This, he claims, is how Covid-19 arrived from space.

It reminds me of the Astronomer from The Little Prince (by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry).

Initially, when the Astronomer, of Turkish descent, is wearing Eastern Robes the scientific community refuse to take him or his work seriously. It's only after the revolution, when Turkey

adopts western clothing, suits, ties and hats, that they begin to take him seriously. Only after he has westernised is he and his work taken seriously.

17.From Berlin via San Sebastian to Groningen

Kerry and Helmut have been corresponding with Paul Striker. This began with talks and talks about talks, with the nature of transformation in capital, political economy and recession.

There were notes on the transformations in cities and new responses with Covid to climate emergencies and ecological change. Indeed the nature of nations and diversity became a core part of those conversations as Paul was translated from Berlin to San Sebastian. The nature of mask-wearing became a barometer of nations and the cultural diversity of Europe and there were worries that those diverse responses to viral crisis meant that as Covid hits regions differently this will increase the distance between forms of European sharing and generosity and beyond – to move beyond eurocentrism into a faster-moving world with new problems and new attempts at solutions. This supranational conception of the world had to try to understand the challenges of fossil fuels and biodiversity in the context of adaptation and crisis creating new kinds of futures beyond the present crisis. There was a sense that the economic, viral and ecological crisis would hit those beyond Europe the most. For Paul and Kerry and Helmut this led to a pause in writing and indeed a pause in the viral world itself. Kerry and the satellite had noted the spotlight that had been cast upon the environment, economics and inequalities. They provided the following insights:

Issues of intergenerational equity, irreversibility of environmental change, uncertainty of long-term outcomes, and sustainable development all guide ecological economic analysis and valuation.

Ecological Economics shares several of its perspectives with Feminist Economics including the focus on equality, sustainability, nature, justice and care values.

We know we cannot keep consuming at the rate we are because there simply aren't enough resources in the world to sustain our current capitalist appetite.

An ambition of ecological economics is sustainable human well-being alongside the protection and restoration of nature and social and environmental justice. It is more than an ambition; it is a goal.

18.Not a time for grand gestures: A Conversation

In June 2020 artist Andrew Wilson invited Julie Tomlin, Katrina Niebergal and Zahra Dalilah to contribute to the ACA Call Centre project as Correspondents. They came together in September 2020.

Katrina: I've been thinking about the question of form, of what form makes sense here. It just so happened that we (Andrew and I) were already engaged in this work, which we wouldn't have consciously called work. Over the last twelve months or so we've moved through different forms, starting with email, then a little in person, and then with telephone calls that we are now recording.

I was then thinking about that switch, or that movement back into text, and your transcription of it (for the blog). It's a loose and fragmentary transcription and, I say this non-derogatory, but it's not super interested in being a complete reflection.

I was asking - 'what if I started this project again?' – 'what would I know or what would I have done differently?'. I was amused by the idea that we could have just corresponded via text the whole time. None of this is lightning striking or anything but this has been my thinking.

There is so much we do in intonation as well. A lot of the research I was doing last year was looking at the differences between speech and writing, what are the possibilities that each has to carry, and how writing is often thought to be language. But, in fact it is not a language, it is a technology, a technology that reflects and holds information.

So, with our correspondences, I think we've been repeatedly opening up and closing back down again, like an accordion!

Andrew: Verbalising our reflections over the phone rather than writing, I think made our conversations much less pressured, which allowed for more spontaneity. Early on Julie, you articulated that you were struggling with your attempts to write?

Julie: Things flowed a bit more than being a struggle would suggest. I think part of it was letting go of the idea of it as 'work'. Then it was surprisingly easy in that Zahra and I just wrote, and it seemed to hang together. But I think part of that was just stepping back from trying to work out too much of what it was we were doing.

Maybe it wasn't really a time when you could nail things down to strong forms because everything was a changing pot anyway. It just really felt good to agree on a time to do-some writing.

Zahra: I think it's interesting that there is an inverse here. How our thinking and writing has moved from conversation to writing and how yours (Katrina and Andrew) has gone from email to conversation.

I was also very surprised about the ease. I guess I wouldn't have known before we started the extent to which we had been in a verbal conversation before writing separately meant that our writing was a direct conversation with each other.

Julie: You said at one point that there were pieces that either one of us could have written.

Zahra: Yeah, there were entire paragraphs which I thought could have come out of either one of our mouths, and I think that's a pleasant surprise. But I also agree that it was getting past the point of thinking too much about what we have to create, or what is the product? I think the way you conceptualized the form Andrew helped us get to that bit. We were liberated in that we didn't have any expectations.

Katrina: I think it's also interesting what you said Andrew, that others, other Call Centre artists or correspondents have been unable to make something, or pull something together. It's totally fine of course. I don't mean it as a judgement or something, but it's interesting in that there are a particular set of challenges.

I'd heard from a friend that - 'now is not a time to make any grand gestures or declarations'. It is, and was, a tricky landscape, just dealing with the ins-and-outs of how we are conducting ourselves right now, how we are a living.

Andrew: We'd also spoken of things that had been made in this period, asking if anything we'd encountered had been any good or not. Perhaps it's too early to say? Perhaps it relates to the 'grand gestures' idea you mention.

Julie: It's a different set of skills almost. Edging into things, sensing things, it's more liminal. I think it's not a time for big statements because I don't think anyone really knows the full impact of what we've been through, because we can't, can we?

I get the impression with a lot of people that it's almost too big now, and yet too small, it's within the small details of our lives. We've gone through something with the magnitude of which we will not know for a long time. So, asking what are the skills needed for that, I think is quite interesting.

Zahra: I just wanted to reflect on the thing of being 'in' it versus being 'out' of it. I feel like there was a shift for you and I Julie, a point when things had started opening up a little bit. Once you'd moved back to London, we were able to talk about a fixed past-tense, saying this, that, and the other happened, and this is how we experienced it.

I remember early on having conversations about a particular experience of lockdown, which is this very specific period of time where we are all not meant to be going out and doing social things, versus, whenever you want to date it from, say February 2020, when the future of the UK will never be the same again. Do you know what I mean? I think there is a very interesting thing in defining that, in order to process it, or have some sense of how to talk about that moment.

Julie: So, you mean the event of lockdown is kind of manageable?

Zahra: Yeah, it's like I can think about the event(s) of lockdown, but I find it much more difficult to think about or to speak of what is life now.

Julie: I think that is what we don't know. That's the thing.

Katrina: I was on this island on the West coast of Canada in the Pacific and I could see all these Orcas come up to the beach and rub their bellies on the rocks, and there were also humpback whales in the distance, it was super beautiful. I was staying in a tiny little town, with my two very good friends and their two-year old daughter.

We'd stopped for a coffee and we went up to a farm where there was this honesty box and you're invited to open up these doors and pick whatever you like: courgettes, eggs, rocket, Russian relaxation tea, whatever you want. And around all of this was now these hand sanitizer pumps. So, I was there with my friend Laura and her daughter Heidi, 2-years old, and when Laura pumps the thing for her hands Heidi is like 'I want some'. Then a woman who we hadn't seen was there, out of the blue just says - 'for a whole generation of children, this is gonna be their memory' -and we just turned toward this local woman, who was just standing there, observing us.

Those are the kinds of things that I've been thinking about the most in this, like what are we going to lose, and what are we going to keep. And what of that is good and what of that is bad, in both.

So, it was just a funny observation that came my way, a little surreal experience that kind of summed up quite a few things, including fears, including a kind of speculative perspective future...

Julie: I've been getting obsessed with how many face masks you just see discarded now and you just think 'gosh more landfill'. It's everywhere.

Zahra: Yeah, use once – bin it. It's interesting, what you were just saying Katrina about the experience of a two-year-old growing up in this moment.

I was talking to a friend yesterday who is very hyper, efficient, and an effective person who likes to have everything under control and everything meticulously planned. She was saying that there is a massive part of her soul which just cannot deal with the pandemic because she cannot handle the uncertainty. But in all of the times that she does, she's learning to hold uncertainty in such a different way than she has historically.

I think it's fascinating, because I think, so often, that's the thing that holds people back from being able to conceive of change, or dream, as people are like - 'I know what I know and these are the things I can control or be certain of'. But when everything is thrown up into the air and we don't know what next year looks like, we don't even know what next week looks like, I wonder about the children of this era and what are the deep skills that they are learning.

Andrew: At the same time as this, it feels as though there is also a broad general consensus that this is a blip, a brief moment in time where things have gone a bit wobbly, and it will soon stabilise itself and we will just get back to normal.

Which makes it difficult, if you are thinking about it outside of those terms, which we are trying to do here, where this doesn't feel like it will ever return back to any kind of 'normal'.

Julie: It reminds me of grief actually. It reminds me of that feeling I had after I lost Mark. The continuity of the world being so intense that you only feel like you are in the shadows because you are operating in this different zone, where you know everything can just break down in a matter of moments. Almost being an outsider looking at the world thinking this is just weird, but knowing that this narrative needed you to be gone, or to recover quickly, or to go through your how many steps really quickly.

It's interesting because there was a sense of sort-of revisiting that investment in normality. But when that fell apart it's like wow, I thought in a sense that a big loss was a preparation for that, but there is still something that holds. I think there is a huge thing in us that wants to hold onto some sort of normality. It's a big narrative, it's been sustained for a long time hasn't it, we've built cities on it.

Katrina: The difference also being the scale, from a personal rupture or disruption of where the world continues going past and you are unable to carry along, where as in this there is a

difference where it happened to all of us and everyone found themselves in this situation.

Zahra: Except, that's the interesting thing in what you were saying Andrew, actually there was a level of choice where some people chose to acknowledge – 'ok so this is the end' or 'the beginning of the end' – and there is a lot of people who chose to believe that this is a blip, and I think the belief in how long that blip will last might vary.

But there is something interesting in this moment where we are still invited to do the 'carry-on', to 'bounce back', and all of that kind of language. Then there is the underside of it where there are rumblings or collectives of people thinking otherwise.

I resonate with that experience of watching the world go by, being like - 'I don't know if you've heard but there is a pandemic on?'. I've had this moment so many times where I can't tell if others are pretending because they think I'm pretending; or they're pretending to convince me to pretend with them; or they are so ok with it that they are not even bothering to pretend. It's a weird air of pretence and denial that we are on much more stable ground than we are.

Katrina: It's also something that we are discussing all of the time with people that we meet and see right? - again, it's happening to everybody. So maybe it's about getting onto the same page?

It's like with each person you have to establish their relativity. Not only comfort - do we hug or not? - but also in terms of how people are collectively and individually perceiving this moment within each daily interaction (now that there are some, and increasingly).

Julie: I think a lot of it is this 'how is it for you?' conversation. One friend was saying recently - 'I've been doing yoga everyday' - and then another friend said - 'I just drank, for a while'. It's been interesting coming back to London, I've been back a month now and I really think I couldn't have done lockdown here, I take my hat off to anyone who did, and I feel, in a sense, like I'm having a belated lockdown now because I don't quite know how to – 'just get on with it'.

My question is get on with what? - I can't really remember what it is we are meant to do.

19. Alan Smith – Only the Lonely

Serial instructions from the hospital tell me to continue shielding and take care not to expose myself to others who might pass covid on to me via this silent game of virus tag.

I'm sitting in our dining room. When we first moved into the schoolhouse 26 years ago we painted it deep deco red. The walls are now covered with artwork, they serve as reminders of times past when people would come here and made things - and made things happen.

The familiarity of this room, this house of memories has moved from a normal familiarity to a new outlandishly normality that is not so familiar. Memories are now masked by emotions that strain to live once again. Covid has provided far too much time for searching for a purpose for this period and pushing me to realise that memory is as much to do with internal feelings as it is with tangible recall.

Perhaps this is not dissimilar to dealing with bereavement? It feels odd, but thinking deep and sometimes dark has become increasingly necessary through this obligatory covid solitude. Without covid it is highly unlikely that I would be in a mind-set to engage with the difficult subject of loneliness and have found a new way of remembering, what I've come to know as ghost memories.

So why am I experiencing this feeling of loss, what is it that's missing, could it have something to do with not being able to share things, places, time, journeys, human contact (no matter how brief) and spontaneous actions... remember them? All of my memories in the schoolhouse recall people in it and without them it's hollow and so fucking quiet.

Alan I sat with you once in the schoolhouse back in the winter of 2013. We recorded our conversation. You made tea, introduced me to Dylan who was pottering around somewhere, and we talked about your ornaments, what it meant to live here in this place. You have received many visitations. Allenheads is a pilgrimage site as much as the Merz Barn and

John Bunting's chapel. You could not receive us in the pandemic, we could not visit. These were not equal but alike griefs. New ways of remembering our ghosts, new ways of making rituals, obeisance, deposition. I remember your paintings that you had deposited in the mine. There is a hollowness in Allenheads without people, one day you and Helen may no longer be there. Your ghosts will make themselves visible, like night visiting songs in folklore you will visit each room in turn. These were places of loneliness, so fucking quiet, but there will be many more years before that final leavetaking and we will be with you to party again, beyond the mediation of our screens.

20. An emerging correspondence: John & Martyn

In June 2020 John Bowers and Martyn Hudson began a correspondence as part of Call Centre. John and I have been friends for some years and we share a love for and affinity with Allenheads so we wanted to explore some of the things that we often talk about in person.

John Bowers:

So, we are to correspond about how we have found ourselves during the New Plague Years and take this as an opportunity to scrutinise some of our mutual preoccupations. You listed: the sound of the world, ecology, methods, Middlesbrough, landscapes. I will add: haunting, walking, dreaming, exile and nostalgia, escaping.

This first letter is by way of preamble and proviso. With a good joke at the end.

Let me admit straightaway that I have enjoyed my exile in my North Tyneside hermitage. The New Plague Years have given me a focus and a continuity I rarely have otherwise. While I greatly miss loved ones from whom I am separated, I do not crave the company of others. My confinement has been an escape of sorts.

I do not live with: poverty, job insecurity, an abusive partner, chronic pain, damp, uncomfortable furniture, pest infestation, fear of an aggressive landlord, fear of the police or vigilantes, poor internet, unpaid bills, children to care for or educate, a vulnerable parent, a feuding neighbour, claustrophobia, severe depression, a mark on the wall that obsesses me. Or without: electricity, gas, good air, a garden, books, a chess set, paints, inks, sketchbooks, notebooks, a laptop, jigsaw puzzles, musical instruments, a television, a radio, a mobile phone, food delivery, places to walk, company.

Anything I write must be set against my very many privileges, of which I have listed only a few. We are not all in it together. A different sense of solidarity is needed.

Let me tell you one of my favourite jokes.

I was begging on the street the other day when I was given a £5 note. I looked up and recognised my benefactor. "Shaggy Shawcroft!" I said using his schooldays nickname. "Bowsaaaaah!" he replied. I took in how elegantly dressed he was and how fit and healthy he looked. "My, how our circumstances have changed," I said, "what's your story?" "Well, I didn't have much money when we left school but I saved carefully and when I had £10 I bought an old shed. I painted the shed and repaired it and sold it for £20. With that money I bought two old sheds. I restored them and sold them for £40. I then bought four old sheds with the money I had made, did them up, and sold them for £80. I was about to buy eight old sheds when my grandfather died and left me ten million quid. So I thought: fuck the sheds!"

Martyn Hudson:

Thanks for the letter - one day we will be sat together again laughing at our own jokes! I have been thinking so much about planets and ecologies from the inside of the house - from this small microsphere as Ben Ponton has called it to the macrosphere and beyond. I have been particularly taken by the discovery of a new type of Black Hole in the vast darkness beyond.

The new plague seems miniscule in comparison as does our needs and wants and lives. Of course everyone ordered their copy of *The Plague* by Camus as the viral disaster hit and even though I do love that book I have been thinking a lot about that old plague year of 1665 and thinking back to the London streets of my youth (as well as all the other plagues that came up the old great north road with the travellers hawking clothes from village to village). As far as I recall Defoe in the *Journal/Fabrication/Novel* refers to this shattered plague-ridden city as an 'Aceldama'. Hurriedly I remember dashing to the notes section to find that this was the place where Judas died - a 'potters field' strewn with half-finished and broken pots - a place both of making and betrayal - which strikes me as what all art is really. This is even more apposite as I live with a ceramicist and sculptor whose pots loom large all around me as I write. Is England a potters field now in the midst of this catastrophe?

I have always loved reading letters, writing them less so. I recently was disappointed to read the letters that Auster and Coetzee wrote to each other - both of whom I admire but the letters evaded their interior worlds entirely (indeed in favour of jokes). I really do love the love letters that Rosa Luxemburg wrote to Leo Jogiches, her lover, and many of her friends - that wonderful letter that Tim Snyder noted a few years back that she wrote from her prison cell as she watched the birds outside the window.

My favourite letters, however, are those penned by Hannah Arendt to Heinrich Blucher and to Karl Jaspers. Jaspers had taught Arendt at Heidelberg where she had studied under Heidegger. Jaspers had a Jewish wife and after the rise of Nazism and Heidegger's own complicity with fascism he became persona non grata and eventually escaped to Switzerland. He never forgave his old colleague Heidegger and refused to reconcile with him after the war. In 1945 he was convinced that Arendt, as a Jew, had died as a number in the death camps. Yet she had survived and fled, with Blucher and carrying Benjamin's 'Theses' to New York. She also thought that Jaspers was dead but wrote to him anyway and they were joyful to hear each others fate and that they had survived - they corresponded and met until the death of Jaspers many years later.

Anyway - my point is this - there was a world before 1945 and a world after - indeed many worlds before and many worlds after and I don't want to make some crass analogy between the present viral disaster and the horror of the Holocaust. But there is a phrase that Arendt and Jaspers used in their letters all of the time - they talk about the world 'before the deluge' or the drowned, lost world of the past. They are constantly surprised at their survival and in the new world they unexpectedly found (Jaspers in Europe, Arendt in New York) they lived wonderful and rich lives - indeed that was their revenge against totalitarianism - survival and happiness and indeed the compulsion to write - letters and philosophy.

PS I want to tell you two jokes - one about Togliatti and one about Pasternak - but in both only Stalin laughs. Another time.

21. Conclusions & social futures

Some brief thoughts to complete this part of our Call Centre journey.

Our conversations were dialogic, triologic, multilogic conversations – indeed defied the logical, suspended the laws of nature and discourse.

We talked a lot about monsters and ruins, trauma and capital, ways to move beyond the present crisis and into embracing new unfurling and unfolding social and artistic futures. There were many shadow spaces in our mediations. We were not together in the same room but in our own stranded, lockdowned microspheres and our interactions were shaped by our screens as we looked at each other, ourselves and the rooms we inhabited.

We thought a lot about our homes and where we were unhomed, how we had ended up in these places, our borders, our territory, locale – rivers between us and the permeability of walls. Where we got to, to bring us to this conversation was sometimes a destination by

intent and sometimes by pure accident. How we found ourselves together, distant, enmeshed was a product of serendipity.

Our bodies as borders and permeable membranes as well as our homes. We were sometimes clinging to other people, children, parents, ghosts, animals as if we were clinging to the wreckage and we spoke a little bit about love and what solidarity means in crisis.

We constantly moved backwards and forwards from the microsphere to the microsphere. We talked about the cup of tea we were holding and black holes and planetary collisions. We moved between worlds from the prehistoric to the medieval to the afternoon we have just had.

We had grief amongst us and in our satellites for our partners, our daughters, our lost world. We have grieved for the things we have missed and will not get back or return to. The crisis has changed everything. More than anything else we will grieve for the future that was not ours to have because of all of this.

Visitation, conviviality, friendships, places, movement on our motorbikes, all became part of our nostalgia and our compulsion towards what comes next – the sounds of the world, the scenes of the world – all of which became part of mediation rather than directly experienced. And what of our futures of practice – where are we in meetspace and meatspace – where is the world beyond this studio and room, beyond this locale, residence, even this mode of thinking? I am going into the Zoom now, lets see what will be revealed or repealed next, see the revolving slides of each of you. Kerry has just made tea, Helmut is stroking his beard, Cole clings to Annie's shoulder, Ben's face is in shadow as he turns out of the dark, Tracey smiles in a brightly-lit room, Andrew's hat catching the last, fleeting shadow of the later summer afternoon before the dark comes. We zoom in, call out each other, call out to each other. This is around which our planets and cosmologies move. This is the centre.

[MH1]



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