

From the Old Brewery S1-EP7.mp3

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Ian [00:00:22] Hello and welcome to From the Old Brewery, a podcast from the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture here at the University of Aberdeen. My name is Ian Grosz. I'm a Ph.D. research student in creative writing and co-hosting today's episode with Marianne Fossaluzza. Hi, Marianne.

Marianne [00:00:41] Hello. I'm as well a Ph.D. student, but in visual culture for myself. And you might possibly remember me from the second episode of the podcast, if I'm correct. So, if you want to learn more about my boring research... [laugh]

Ian [00:00:58] So, today's guest – we're joined by artist Lise Olsen, who's current artist in residence with the Murray Way 'We Must Walk' project, and she's also a Ph.D. research student working in sonic arts here at the school. I'll just hand over to Marianne who will tell you about Lise's background.

Marianne [00:01:18] Of course! So, Lise, you work in between a sphere of space and the sonic, and the perception of in-between experiences is the main focus of your practise-based research. Your work aspires to uncover the traces of what is hidden and reveal ephemeral moments using stories, sounds and images. Now, you believe that the in-between has an ambiguous status. However, you seem to consider, it is a dynamic space for creative possibility, which sounds extremely interesting. So, you're using your work to create a platform for social participation and shared experiences and your art practise involves facilitating community sound projects, sound walking events and creating immersive sound compositions. Now, you aim to explore new media and immersive 3D sound technologies to encourage people to think about our connexion to place, nature, and society. And finally, you question, can in between experiences enable a deeper level of engagement or even create a happening of truth within an immersive soundscape. Deep question. Lise, hi, welcome, thank you for joining us today!

Lise [00:02:34] Thank you for having me.

Marianne [00:02:36] I think we can kick off and start with our very first question. Your training and practise were initially focussed on visual arts. So how did you come to the sonic arts?

Lise [00:02:48] Well, I think initially it was one of the first projects I did, that involved walking. I walked the length of the River Tay from source to sea. And as I was walking along the landscape, I got myself into the valley and I was right beside the river. And obviously you can hear the flow of the river and I heard this tiny little tinkering, I think it might have been, you know, something maybe, just banging a gate or something like that and you could hear it vibrating and resonating right across this valley. And it was a very small noise, but it seemed very prominent with this backdrop of the river. And I was just like, Oh, I really need to capture that. And obviously, I didn't have any sound equipment of my own, and I just caught it with my mobile phone. And then listening back, it was very disappointing and it was a terrible recording.

Ian [00:03:47] You painted such an atmospheric picture there, as well – you really built it up! [laughing]

Lise [00:03:50] yeah, but it didn't really capture it. So initially it was like, Oh, well, you know, I really want to explore this. I really want to learn how to capture certain sounds that are in the environment. So, I think that's the initial, that's what made me become curious for sound. Then I also think about spatialisation and spatial sound, and I was very curious about that. And I was doing all kinds of silly experiments, like taking microphones, swinging them about. I was really trying to get movement – I'd like to take a sound and try to create, recreate movement within a sound. So, you know, it was quite experimental, as well as capturing sound in the environment.

Ian [00:04:46] That's fascinating, that sense of space, I suppose. And swinging a microphone, you get that sense of volume in the space, maybe?

Lise [00:04:53] I created this sculpture called Stargate. It was a portal into another world. And it was about six foot tall. And I wanted the sound, a sound to move around it. So, I was creating things, but I always wanted a sound element to enhance the experience. And I think this is maybe the first step into being curious about immersive soundscapes.

Ian [00:05:26] So to begin with, it augmented your existing art and then it's become much more of a feature in itself...

Lise Yeah, totally.

Ian Just in terms of doing a Ph.D., you're already a practicing artist and have been for quite a while, and I just wondered what framing your practice within or by a Ph.D. brings or adds to that for you? What does that bring for you?

Lise [00:05:50] Well, I think without... Before I started, the Ph.D. felt quite empty, like, the art that I was creating or... I just didn't seem to be focussing deep enough or doing enough research. So, the work I seemed to do, or this is how I felt about my work. It would just seem to be on a surface level and I wanted to go deeper and it felt, it just felt a little empty. So that's one of the reasons, I guess, that I wanted to do a Ph.D., but then I also love learning. And I was very interested in my subject. I wanted, I was keen to learn more.

Ian [00:06:39] Yeah, I think that's what brings us all to it. We just become obsessed by our subjects. And it just seems like a good way to have brought that extra depth.

Marianne [00:06:49] And your work focuses on the liminal, the fleeting and familiar how you, as you call it. Could you expand a bit more on that? Is it a way to become more mindful of where we are or a way for us to gain a deeper connection to place, to space?

Lise [00:07:09] So I thought about this word mindful, and obviously that's being aware. And the liminal moments... I'm not sure awareness is enough. I think it's more about being open and being in a place where you can listen, particularly for sound, but listen deeply and give it a level of attention. So yes, in one respect is being mindful. But it's not – it's not pre-predicting what you're looking at. It's being open.

Ian [00:07:47] Open and aware, and a focussed attention?

Lise [00:07:50] Yes.

Ian [00:07:51] Whereas sometimes I think people think of mindful as being a kind of open – an open-wide spectrum of attention. But I guess from what I understand you're saying,

you're talking about being open to something that might catch your attention and focussing in on it?

Lise [00:08:06] So, when I think about in-between-ness, it's in between the sense and the perceived, which are slightly different. So, if I was creating a work that was trying to work with those, with that aspect, I would try to create an effect that plays against those things. So maybe you sense one thing, but you perceive something else, and it's kind of like those mixed signals. And so that's what I would try to do when I was creating a piece of work.

Ian [00:08:39] Is it like, the unreliability of the senses then: the unreliability of memory in a way? Just the way that we...

Lise [00:08:44] Well, this is one of the things that really attracted me to sound, that I hadn't mentioned before, was that I can create, or I can record something, or I can edit that and compose that sound. But I have absolutely no control over how a listener perceives that sound.

Ian [00:09:04] And that's the exciting space for you?

Lise [00:09:07] But it's not. It's more than that. When I think of maybe the visual arts, we deliver so much to the viewer, but for the listener, I'm only activating whatever is in their mind. So, if they have a memory that's activated by a sound, it's their memory, and I have no control over it, whether they have that memory or not. And that's something special. So, yeah...

Ian [00:09:38] When were we were chatting about your recent exhibition, last time we had a chat – you have an exhibition here at the university – you mentioned about the uncontrolled reaction?

Lise [00:09:50] Yes, I had an exhibition in Wasps in Dundee.

Ian [00:09:54] Oh, in Dundee. Sorry, not here, yeah.

Lise [00:09:56] And somebody came in to have a listen to the installation I had installed, which was a parachute, which had images projected on it. But then it also had sound that was surrounding the parachute and the person walked inside, and then they started listening to the sounds. And then, first of all, they put their hood up and I was like, Are you OK? And they said "Yeah, I just don't like the sound of water." And then knowing that the sound was a real sound of water. But then it slowly moved into, what you could perceive as maybe an under the water sound. And that was it. She literally ran out the room and I was like, no, no, this is not, this is not what I wanted.

Ian [00:10:50] It's amazing that it can have that visceral reaction for somebody.

Lise [00:10:55] It's a real, realistic sound.

Ian [00:11:00] Yeah, immersive... Moving on from that work in general. We know you are an artist in residence at the moment with the Moray Way, and it's the 'We Must Walk Residency'. Would you be able to tell us a bit more about that, how you became involved with it, how long it's been running for; when you started; when you're likely to finish?

Marianne [00:11:17] Should you say how long it's been walking for? [laughing]

Lise [00:11:23] Well, initially it was an open call and I applied, and I think that was a sort of the early part of last year, which was 2021.

Marianne [00:11:36] Yes.

Ian [00:11:37] Yeah. It's been a long year!

Marianne - Hasn't it?

Lise [00:11:41] I know, and I got the position, which was actually wonderful. It's working with – Scotland has a Culture Collective, which is a lot of artists, organisations all around Scotland that are doing work, sort of a post-pandemic, because we had such a break during COVID and during lockdown.

Ian [00:12:08] Yes, it had a massive impact on a lot of artists.

Lise [00:12:10] So it was a way of getting creative practitioners back out there and back working in with the community. So, the people that I'm working for is, AIM, that's Arts In Moray and the Moray Way Association. So, there's two partners and initially I had proposed – it was a very simple proposal. I said that I was going to walk, observe, record and document, and that's what I've been doing. So, the Moray Way is a one hundred mile circular route. I've been walking from Forres, and I think the first question that came to me was which direction do I walk in? And I think that's all I could think about for a whole week. I, you know, would ask people and some people said, "Oh, you want to walk towards the coast first." And then other people said, "No, you want to walk down the Speyside Way" and others would say, "Walk up the Dava". But once I actually made my mind up, I decided to walk from Forres, along the coast to the Spey Bay and then up the River Spey.

Ian [00:13:25] Heading upstream.

Lise [00:13:28] Yeah, because I wanted to walk down the Dava and there was, several reasons why I wanted to do that, because I wanted to walk by the coast in summer and I wanted to do the Speyside Way in autumn because it has, it's a massive forest.

Ian [00:13:43] Yes, it's a beautiful river valley in the autumn.

Lise [00:13:46] It's utterly stunning. And then the Dava is a very open moorland, very exposed and possibly the hardest time to walk it is in the winter period, but it's also the most dramatic. It's brown, it's black, it's purple. It's, you know, covered with snow and the wind howls. So, this is quite a dramatic place, so...

Ian [00:14:12] Have you, do you go there beforehand to look at these locations and get a sense of the time of year you want to visit and things like that? Or is it just an intuitive decision?

Lise [00:14:24] Well, I'm not a durational walker. I'm not into pain. [laughing] So, I like to just walk small sections. And sometimes if you walk somewhere, if you walk in one direction and if you walk backwards, it's a completely different experience. So, I just do small sections at a time and obviously in a pre-predicted direction. And then if I find – I'll carry some sound equipment with me, and photography and film equipment. But if I find

somewhere that I want to go back and revisit, I'll do that. But then, I'm also interviewing people along the way. So, the more times that I can revisit a section, the more I can understand that part of the community, because the project overall is about social engagement. But, the community is a one hundred mile circular route and also the community is nomadic. So, the more times I visit, the more I can.

Ian [00:15:30] Oh, the community of the Way, you mean, rather than the communities you visit...

Lise [00:15:36] No, the people who walk the Moray Way are, in essence, nomadic people.

Ian [00:15:42] Yeah, that's really interesting, just to think of the people who are walking the way as being the community in themselves. That's something that hadn't occurred to me.

Marianne [00:15:50] Talking about community, at least it's perfect for my next question. You talk, and even now, about creating a platform for social participation, I'm really personally really interested in that. So, could you tell us how you go about getting that social participation and maybe a bit more about those interviews and what you're trying to get out of them? What is, what interests you in that?

Lise [00:16:17] So the reason I'm recording lots of sound and interviewing lots of people along the way is, that I'm creating a sound map. So, people can walk the different parts of the Moray Way and on their phone, it can be activated by GPS and they'll get a story or a sound that's connected to that part of the area. So I'm doing that, but I'm also – I've also been doing events like sound walking and things like that, because it's about engaging with the community. But then I realise there's many different types of social engagement and how people – and I think that all art is engaging at some level and whether that's a reflective process, or whether that is because they put input into the work, or even that they have a bigger role, that they actually direct the work. And you essentially become a facilitator. So, it's walking the route, I come up with different – or new opportunities happen. Initially, at the start, I did a soundwalk. So, that's a kind of engagement where people are listening to your sound and walking a set route. So, you are, you're directing them, you're giving them instruction. That's one level of engagement, but then they're also reflecting on the work. So, it's not just like looking at a picture, but they are actively participating. And then I guess, as I'm walking, I'm interviewing people, and this will be for the big sound map. So, that would be, when people listen that's a different type of participation, they'll only be listening and reflecting on the stories that are being told.

Marianne [00:18:14] It's going to be a map of many voices then.

Lise [00:18:17] But I've just got to Aberlour and I've met this amazing storyteller. His name is Ben, so, I'm now working with him to create stories, or to capture his stories of his area, and then adding soundscapes to that. So, all these things are just building, so, maybe afterwards I'll be able to see what this community engagement is, because at the moment, I'm still in the process.

Marianne [00:18:46] Of exploring it, yeah.

Ian [00:18:47] Have you heard of deep mapping?

Lise [00:18:50] No.

Ian [00:18:51] Because it sounds very much to me – it's an approach to, well, going off-piste, you know. But it's an approach to map a place or an area through these multiple approaches. So, you could traditionally map it with G.I.S or something like that, but you can also map it the way you are doing with sound and through walking, through story and images, music even. And it's a technique that's become popular within creative writing, actually. But it's multidisciplinary though - it's not confined to one, you know, it's a multidisciplinary approach, and it just sounds – the way you describe it – sounds like you are doing a deep map of the Murray Way.

Lise [00:19:35] I'm going to have to look into that. Sounds good.

Ian [00:19:38] Yeah, it's, well, it might be relevant. But going back to walking, then: that's been something that seems to be a consistent kind of approach in your work. Going all the way back, you talk about walking the Tay, and I know you've walked the Dundee tram lines? And obviously this project, and I just wondered – that feels like a natural draw for you, if that's right – and I just wondered what that draw was, and how you managed to marry this urge to walk a landscape, and the way you practise your art?

Lise [00:20:15] That's a big question.

Ian [00:20:16] Sorry, I know, I went on for ages! [laughing]

Lise [00:20:20] It has a connection to writing as well, I think. So, what I realised is, I struggle with writing. So, I find it quite hard, although I do quite a lot of it. So, I thought, when I was doing writing or I had to write something, I would always go for a walk. And usually that would be, to think about walking. And then if I came across a problem or if I wanted to do a piece of art, if I wanted to explore something, it would usually start off with a walk. I'd maybe go to that area or go and visit what I wanted to explore, and that would always involve a walk. And then I think I started to realise that a walk is very much like this linear narrative. You know, it has a beginning, and a middle, and an end. And I think there was some way – it was a building block of how I could work as an artist. It was like, this structure to my practise. And if I go for a walk, I would never, I never ever seemed to be stuck. Or if I never get, touch wood, I never get artist block, if you go for a walk, because you've just overcome that block straight away

Ian [00:21:43] Frees up a different...?

Lise [00:21:44] Because you've just started, you've started the walk.

Ian [00:21:47] Ah, I see.

Lise [00:21:48] So, there's always things going on. So, I think that's how walking became so majorly important to my practice.

Marianne [00:21:58] That's wonderful. It's very interesting to hear it like that. For someone who likes walking like me, it's just... But thinks about it much less. It's a very...

Ian [00:22:09] But I bet you find when you go for a walk, your mind slips into a different gear and frees up some space to think about things.

Marianne [00:22:16] It is a different space. I think it's – wasn't it Aristotle who was advocating walking to think better. So it makes sense. [laughing]

Ian [00:22:26] Yeah, it totally does.

Marianne [00:22:27] When I did your little presentation at the very beginning, we finished on quite a massive, very interesting question that caught my attention, especially the second part where you wonder if it is possible to create a happening of truth within an immersive soundscape. And could you explain in simple words, for people like me...

Ian [00:22:56] And me!

Marianne [00:22:57] ...what [laughing] what the phrase happening of truth means, because I found it very mysterious and interesting?

Lise [00:23:04] So, I I've hummed and hawed over what I meant by that. I thought on how am I going to answer this question? And I think it leads on to what I said previously about the mindfulness. It is about being in a place of uncertainty. It's about not – either as a creator or as a listener – it's not about pre-predicting or prejudging what experience you're going to have or to define something: "Oh yes, that's the sound of the river or that's the sound of a dog", to be in simple terms. So, I'm not trying to do that. But what you're trying to do is just to be uncertain, be unsure, of not knowing where you're going and things reveal themselves, but then they also conceal themselves at the same time. So, you've got this ever turning thing in – where you recognise things, or things, memories come to mind, or you feel a certain way, and all these things connect. And as humans, we are what I call analogue creatures. We always feel things in degrees of, and that's where I think the truth comes within. If you can create something that creates that feeling, where things move and shift in between things, then that is where the happening of truth comes within the work. And that's between the work and the listener, rather than the creator. The happening of truth is, is to do with their experience rather than my experience.

Marianne [00:25:03] You just give the frame for that to happen and just hope for the best?

Lise [00:25:07] Yeah, does the work speak, does it – does that sound speak to the person? Can they hear?

Ian [00:25:14] As a pure sound rather than as the object that the sound emanates from I suppose? Is that...

Lise [00:25:19] No, more to do with the memory or the feelings they provoked in the listener.

Ian [00:25:26] So the emotion and the association? To be open to that, to the narrative of the sound.

Lise [00:25:33] So if a happening of truth, which are big words, happen within a composition or sound, then that is between the listener and the sound, not the creator. The person can't create a happening of truth.

Ian [00:25:53] So it's a very engaging artform, and you know, the person that enjoys your art, really has to come to it with that in mind. Do you try and encourage people to do that or do you leave it completely open for the people just to...?

Lise [00:26:09] I leave it completely open. I'm not here to dictate on how people listen or how people experience or engage with my work. It's up to them. I often think, if they think a sound or if they think something is amazing and if they hear something amazing within my work, it's not because the work is amazing, it's because they're amazing. Because their memories are amazing. Which kind of lets me off the hook, [laughing] because if the sound is not good and they don't enjoy it, it's up to them.

Ian [00:26:46] I suppose it's true of all art, isn't it? It doesn't become a work of art until somebody engages with it.

Lise [00:26:51] Yes.

Marianne [00:26:52] So you plant the seeds, and you hope for flowers to bloom in the people. Obviously, you just give them the opportunity to, to have that space to experience that happening of truth that you defined beautifully, by the way. Thank you very much for putting it into easy words. [laughing]

Ian [00:27:12] It's great. So, moving on...you've talked about your exhibitions and how you create in these soundscapes for people to engage with – hopefully to find that element of truth in it – and you mentioned the technologies that you work with, and that you're working with quite a lot of new technology. I wonder, can you tell us a bit about that, how you incorporate that into your research?

Lise [00:27:37] Well, a lot of the recordings and editing process that I go through use Ambisonics.

Ian [00:27:45] Can you tell us what that is? [laughing]

Lise [00:27:48] So if you think, first of all, if you think of stereo sound, it's usually on a level plane with sound coming from left and right. Well, if you think of Ambisonics, it's 360 degrees of sound where – or a sphere of sound. So, I sometimes use an Ambisonic mic which will record, hopefully 360 degrees of sound. But then you can also use plug-ins and editing software that can move the sound around, in this sound sphere. So you can play about with sound like that. So, I use that. But this technology, although it's new, it was actually created in the 70's. Well, the theory behind the Ambisonics, but it's now becoming more apparent because people are using it for Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality. And, but I think the reason I love it, is because of the spatialisation, because I can – if we go back to the sculpture that I was trying to recreate, the sound that was whirling around it, it was really just the fascination of how, of sound in space.

Ian [00:29:12] So, taking you back to that initial impulse then. It's very complicated though, you've got the walking, the engagement with people, engagement with landscape and space and sound, and then you've got this very technical side. It's a lot to juggle.

Marianne [00:29:27] It's very, very different approaches. And it's in your personal practise, in your work and your Ph.D. as well. You have a lot of things indeed to juggle with. And I was wondering, how do you manage that? Do you – do these different aspects of your life feed into each other? Or do you clone yourself about three to five times? To fit all of that in a day?

Lise [00:29:56] You know, first of all, I write a lot lists, [laughing] but apart from the lists. And what I try to do is make sure that anything that either I apply for, or read, or look into,

or create feeds into something else. So, if I was doing an application for an artwork, I would have to make sure that I could tie into my Ph.D. that it will have some relevance. Or even, and same with my Ph.D., I try to research things that will feed into my practise. So everything has to be interlinked. So, my art practise feeds in into my Ph.D. and my research from that feeds in. And I think that's the only way that I could possibly achieve my goal.

Ian [00:30:56] Mm-Hmm. So, the residency will inform the research. It's part of the research in a way.

Lise [00:31:03] Yes.

Ian [00:31:04] It actually is part of the research, is that right?

Marianne [00:31:07] So it's a big work of rationalisation?

Lise [00:31:10] So, I'll be able to write about it afterwards. And obviously, I'll have the materials as well. So, I'll be able to look at it on a more academic plane, where at the moment it's very much a social, a socially engaged plane, I guess.

Ian [00:31:25] So, just to ask you about the form that the thesis will take, because, you know, I'm coming from a discipline that's largely writing, and it's a manuscript and a dissertation. Does your thesis encompass several installations or works of art, several outputs that you then write about, around?

Lise [00:31:48] Yeah, that's exactly right. So, I will have sound work that I have created, compositions, but then I'll also have sound installations. Obviously, the events that I have worked on, so, these will have to be documented really well. So, I can give people an idea of what that experience is. So, I might video a sound work, or I might video an installation, that's never going to be – it's never going to recreate what that experience was at that point. But it's the closest thing that I can do to document what it was that I was doing. And then obviously I write about it as well.

Ian [00:32:36] Brilliant. I suppose just to ask then, when it completes. When does the residency finish? And does that tie in with the end of the PhD or is that still a way to go?

Lise [00:32:49] I have at least another six months of my residency

Ian [00:32:54] Right, six months of walking!

Lise [00:32:55] I'm halfway through my artist residency.

Marianne [00:32:59] You're at 50 miles then. [laughing]

Lise [00:33:02] but I won't be finishing – as I'm a part-time Ph.D. student won't be finishing until 2024.

Ian [00:33:07] Ok. And what happens after that? What's planned next? Do you know?

Lise [00:33:13] Hopefully I'll just keep doing what I'm doing. I'll keep walking, I'll keep recording sound, I'll keep being curious. But hopefully, I'll do it on a bigger scale and it won't, I won't just focus on the UK, I'll start to do some work in Europe.

Ian [00:33:28] Oh, brilliant. That's brilliant

Marianne [00:33:30] That's fantastic, yeah!

Ian [00:33:31] Before we go then, it's been fascinating talking to you. Do you have a website just to let listeners know where they can find examples of recent work?

Lise [00:33:41] Well, if you're interested in the Moray Way you would visit the Moray Way Association website and there is a link on there to the artist in residency. But then if you want to look at my own personal website, my website can be found on liseolsengenerates.com

Marianne [00:34:06] I would very much like to thank you for putting all of that into word, it was a fasci – a fascinating, sorry, discussion, I'm losing my words, apparently. Especially for someone like me who is very much, you know, into visual arts, photography, painting and a lot of writing. So, getting to talk with someone who experiences a Ph.D. in a very, very different manner, much more active and in space, I want to say – because that has been one of the big themes of our talk – was eye-opening. So thank you very much...

Ian [00:34:40] It is eye-opening!

Marianne [00:34:41] ...for spending that time with us!

Announcer [00:35:07] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.