

Arithmetic of Belief

Inverting Katherine Hepburn's immortal words to Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*: "Nature, Mr Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above" we might ask ourselves how a return, from above, might be possible? Graeme Miller's compositional works from *The Sound Observatory* in 1992 to *Linked* in 2003, via *Listening Ground*, *Lost Acres*, *Reconnaissance*, *Feet of Memory* and *Overhead Projection* are a sonic reminder of a remainder to landscape, those sounds, which though invisible, are on the air if only a way of listening were possible. Not here just the need for an apparatus, though Graeme Miller never underestimates the tactile pleasure we take in the technologies of reception, mini-speakers here, invisible transmitters there, hanging branches of babble, the comfort of headphones, but a *disposition*, an attitude to the charged, human static in the atmosphere.

Charged with narrative, yes, reminiscence, maybe, gossip and rumour perhaps, but in *Linked* an invitation to come back down to earth, to walk, to encourage a pedestrian in the presence of the automobile to engage with two presents. The present that is the first person narrative of the speaker speaking, now in a present that must have been back then, at least eight years ago if the words are to be taken at face value. A second present that is the insistent present of the landscape transformed. And between these two presents a tension, held like a refrain from a faraway room, of the sound of memories coming into being just long enough for them to fail again in the forgetting of the insistent demands of time. There is of course a third present, a gift, that is the speech of those who speak on behalf of others, who, willing to be recorded and thus returned to back then, are willing to accompany us forward into the storm of history.

In this case the storm is the combustion-engine, barely contained by the motorway wall. The storm is the rollers that flattened the tarmac to within a centimetre of itself over a three-mile run. The storm is the weather that like a microclimate fuelled by lead rains down a reminder to those whose sheets still grace this corridor as though beyond that parapet lies an alpine fjord. But where the protest group *Reclaim The Streets* might dig up and depart, *Linked* insinuates and stays. Graeme Miller is less interested it would seem, though not

disconnected from, protestation and indignation, rather working with the tactics of rescue and resuscitation he gently breathes a certain life back into that endangered species, the community of those who have nothing in common. A community who in a sense only were brought into being by their premature disappearance at the very moment they found themselves.

Where a ventriloquist would force the dumb to speak, Miller solicits, listens, records, edits and replays. There is a certain tact at work here which Kant would have recognised as being special to the tightrope walker who adjusts their equilibrium, as they proceed, to circumstance. This tact is by no means an excuse to abnegate the artists' agency, Miller after all shapes the outcome from the opening bars by insisting on the audacious presentness of all that is said, but from that clear compositional frame the small mercies of the banal, the trivial are rightfully given poetic license to flourish. The banal here is of course nothing to do with the stupid and vapid that it has now become associated with, but, as in its origins describing the shared ovens in a French country village, the common and the adaptable to circumstance. In other words the pragmatically beautiful, the accessible and the thoroughly convivial. Trivia was once the essential domestic information shared by women at the Roman crossroads - reflections on the domestic and the household that literally guaranteed the rights of the city to flourish. Again wondrous in their small details in this new, monumental, landscape.

But what kind of memorial or monument might *Linked* be? It thankfully dismisses the aesthetics of marble statuesque permanence with its tuned impermanence. It does no glory to the hero, nor pay homage to the unknown. It has no truck with sentimental reminiscence nor futuristic illusions. It simply, if somewhat slyly, attunes us to the arithmetic of belief. The equation – the more listeners believe, the more the houses exist, the greater their share of credible presence. It manifests witnesses to experience, multiplies them, loops them, situates them until one has quite lost sense of how many were there in the first place. Of course the houses now lost marked by these voices were never witness to a first place, a founding and have to take their place within a litany of other testimonies to lives once lived here. There can be no spurious claims to origin and therefore to ownership which marks these murmurings

out as fatally incapacitated when it comes to practically resisting the inevitable progress of the Leviathan carriageway.

In this proliferation, a sleight of sound one might say to link the composer to the card-sharp, the numeracy of witness becomes overwhelming and moving in a more poetic and profoundly political sense. This is the best form of dissent conducted through a marvellous use of mathematics. For all the stats and vectors of spin, the graphics of water drainage and the dynamics of friction that the road could conjure up, all the totalising number-crunching that a motorway demands before ribbons can be cut, here is an equal, opposite and ultimately resistant set of figures. They do not ghost the road so much as host our ultimately guest-like presence. They greet us and warm to us, intimate within the ear but eminently able to enter our memories later that day or year. They are insidious in the best sense, inside us.

And perhaps most of all when, on another more pressing occasion, we drive by, shooting a furtive glance at a neighbourhood once walked, what of those villains of the piece who drive through, middle finger raised to the complaint of history, the retarded, tethered prostration to the past? Those at one with their moulded dashboard enjoying the infinitely subtle realignment of their posture sensitive seat as they motor here and there and back to here. Well unless I am much mistaken that is me, and you maybe, unless you have worked out a way East that does not require the logistical resources of an eighteenth century Grand Tour. Is the hum of the radials on the 4x4 not the sound of the satisfaction of progress? Are these voices not just the inevitable recalcitrance of yesterday's twilight wishing it did not have to face up to today's dawn?

The car might promise the ultimate protection, a safer place to sleep than the contemporary home in one well-known and shocking advertisement, but it is not always the best place to hear the winds of change. When the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who knew a thing or two about motoring, made one of his most telling observations on the intelligence of feeling "We hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us to all sensations are the things themselves" he was writing on the Freiburg side street, not in his car. The logic of the automobile is now an acoustic

envelope so secure as to prohibit any disturbance to ones sonic equilibrium. But it is the very static of our senses, the porousness of our listening and our inherent tonal faculties, our potential to form narrative that are the things that distinguish our natural history as a species. It is in this sense that Graeme Miller is, in these late days of humankind, reminding us not so much of who we are, or indeed who we were, but who we can no longer be and what might become of us.

When Katherine Hepburn says those words to Humphrey Bogart the landscape that surrounds them simply reminds us that Nature is never just 'out there' but always in the process of being made by us and others. Suspended between the way landscape is determined by us and simultaneously makes us possible *Linked* is a coda to one ecology, the appeal of roots in auto-habitus, and an overture to another, the appeal to transience in auto-biography. The time-signature on this work, 2003, Graeme Miller, might one day remind others of a botanist of the asphalt who revealed the sonic undergrowth of modernity as surely as Gilbert White cared for the life of Sherborne. Both share a pleasure in pedestrianism, in observation over ordering, in collection over classification, in all that is best about an enthusiasm for living and therefore a truly felt relationship with that life, no less than when that life is lost.

During the 1980s Alan worked at Dartington College of Arts curating the Council of Europe Workshop on Theatre and Communities, and at Rotherhithe Theatre Workshop in London Docklands running a neighbourhood space for performance. In the 1990s he lived and worked in Barcelona researching Catalan festival culture, returned to London to direct the Talks Programme at the Institute of Contemporary Arts staging events with leading writers, artists, musicians and thinkers, and subsequently was appointed Professor of Theatre at Roehampton University. In 2006 Alan became the first Professor of Theatre in the 175 year history of King's College London and established the Performance Foundation developing the *Anatomy Theatre & Museum* on the Strand and the *Inigo Rooms* in the East Wing of Somerset House. Alan has received Major Research Awards from the Council of Europe, the Leverhulme Foundation, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the EPSRC. A detailed profile of Alan's collaborations with artists, academics and public institutions can be found here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Read_\(writer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Read_(writer))