The Sculptor Speaks: resounding the archival voice of Barbara Hepworth.
December 2020.

The project The Sculptor Speaks takes its source from a 1961 tape by British sculptor Barbara Hepworth. Unearthed at the British Library, the tape’s initial purpose was for a pre-recorded talk with slides for the British Council. Every recording is a priori an archival object, which can potentially resound anew through a contemporary carrier, physical or digital. This work addresses the resounding of the archival voice as a transformative practice whose properties consist of changing the original status of the archive with manipulations; translating the archive from analogue to digital; relocating the audio signal in time and space; and as such, re-contextualising the archival document for a new audience. The resounding of Hepworth’s voice broadens the experience and understanding of Barbara Hepworth’s legacy through an aural investigation: voice as sonic documentation.
1. REFUGE FROM THE FRONT

When Barbara Hepworth moved to St Ives - the place that changed her practice so radically - for three years she did not carve, she was taking care of her children. She was lacking the resources and the space to sculpt. She walked, sketched and experienced the landscape. When she resumed, her carving had evolved into a much more abstract form.

Shortly before the outbreak of war in September 1939, Hepworth, her husband Ben Nicholson, and their three children took refuge from London to Cornwall. They stayed initially with the writer Adrian Stokes and his wife, Margaret Mellis, until they moved a few months later to their own home, Dunluce. In neither place, did Hepworth have space to carve. Nor did she have much time she said: ‘If I didn’t have to cook, wash up, nurse children ad infinitum, I should carve carve and carve. In fact, the restrictions of wartime meant that there was little material to be carved anyway’ (Stephens 2003: 71).

Due to the critical situation of Covid-19, I have temporarily stepped away from the idea of developing an installation for *The Sculptor Speaks*. The work has become contactless, for the digital realm. As I created a version 1.0 [transmission] of *The Sculptor Speaks* for a radio broadcast on Resonance Extra, the version 2.0, an audio-visual work, is [contactless]. I am hoping that a version 3.0 [installation] will be presented in a gallery in the future. Somehow I have always favoured the notion of a work having several potential iterations. Nothing is fixed, there can be movement and translations. The series *Drawing for Sculpture with Colour* (1941) shows that Barbara Hepworth made five versions of one new sculpture she was hoping to carve.

2. STEPPING STONES

The project of translating Hepworth in sound - as *Hepworth Resounds* - emerged from her extensive body of writings, assembled by art historian and curator Sophie Bowness in the thorough collection: *Barbara Hepworth Writings and Conversations* (2015). The words of the sculptor paved the way for the release of *SculptOr* (2020), a suite of nine pieces. I was still hoping to work directly with her voice as material. Through my research I discovered that Barbara Hepworth had recorded a tape herself in her art studio in St Ives: *The Sculptor Speaks*. The tape has been held in the Tate Archive and British Library Sound Archive. I spent a day at the British Library listening to pre-requested audio documents: upon arrival, I was allocated my own audio booth, there I heard for the first time the sculptor speak. It took a few weeks to obtain the digitised file of *The Sculptor Speaks* and then time for me to approach the archival material. It was at first intimidating to work with the voice of such an iconic figure.
My field research included visiting the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden in St Ives, which led to a video-diary as an account of my journey; The Hepworth Wakefield; as well as the recent retrospective Barbara Hepworth (2019-2020) at Musée Rodin, Paris. I have been in contact with Sophie Bowness, trustee of the Hepworth Estate, and Hepworth’s granddaughter. Ms. Bowness kindly granted me permission to rework The Sculptor Speaks, facilitating for me the access to the tape with the British Library.

3. **RESOUNDING. EMERGING PROPERTIES**

*Resound* - from Latin *resonare* - is to sound again, it is a sound loud enough to reverberate or a place to be filled with a sound. When *resounding* the archive, we listen again to the voice resounding ‘in the external or internal space’ (Nancy 2007: 8). In *Listening* (2007), French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy explores the behaviour of the *resounding*, and states that ‘sound is made of referrals: it spreads in space, where it resounds while still resounding in me’ (Nancy 2007: 7). The practice of *resounding* allows the archival voice to refer to itself. In the age of technological reproducibility - since the recorder itself is an archiving machine - every recording is a priori an archival object, which can potentially *resound anew* in space and time. To *resound*, the voice must have been first captured, then stored in a physical container to be held in public or personal archives. Recorded by Hepworth herself in her workshop in St Ives, the tape’s initial purpose was for a pre-recorded talk with slides for the British Council. Having unearthed the tape at the British Library, I have designed for it a complete new sound environment using Hepworth’s voice as a major element in the composition, carving directly her voice. Hepworth’s voice temporarily muted, in-waiting for a new carrier, is now sounding again into a new space. *The Sculptor Speaks* (2020) was premiered in its first iteration on Resonance Extra - the arts broadcast platform - the 10th of January 2020, coinciding with Dame Barbara Hepworth’s date of birth ([https://x.resonance.fm/episodes/the-sculptor-speaks](https://x.resonance.fm/episodes/the-sculptor-speaks)), and was followed by a 35 mn audio-visual iteration, published online on Vimeo, 15th of July 2020 ([https://vimeo.com/438255942](https://vimeo.com/438255942)).

*The Sculptor Speaks* was nominated for an Ivor Novello Award in the Sound Art category at the Ivors Composer Awards 2020.
3.1 Direct carving and temporal linearity

I work with voice, computer music and digital narrative at the intersection of creation and documentation. Here with the archival material of voice, I am exploring how to repurpose an historical sound object. My practice is built upon a long-standing exploration of the voice, sung or spoken, and its manipulation through digital technology. Working with AudioSculpt (IRCAM) and GRM Tools Evolution (INA GRM), I have sculpted the voice directly on its graphical representation. Applying principles of sculpture to Hepworth’s voice to manipulate its texture, I have carved directly her voice as material. Introduced by sculptor Constantin Brancusi at the beginning of the 20th century, and adopted by Barbara Hepworth, direct carving is an approach where the actual process of carving suggests the final form. The carved sculpture is no longer based on a preconceived model, but is leading to simple forms, exposing the raw material itself, and resulting often in the abstract. The emphasis is on manipulating the material, and revealing the work of art within. The voice of Barbara Hepworth is incredibly melodic. Her Yorkshire accent had faded in favour of a BBC received pronunciation, which can perhaps appear dated. The question was how far do I allow the abstraction of the words. The message conveyed - a formidable insight on her creative process - needed to be transmitted. I constantly negotiated between the semantic voice and the emergence of an abstracted voice - a sculptural entity.

Approaching the analogue material, I worked with the defaults of the tape itself. I did not hide the inherent tape crackles but emphasised the clicks to create rhythmic patterns. Also, the tape is damaged.
when Hepworth is recalling the War time: I did not attempt to ‘repair’ the tape but played with its sonic narrative.

Without disrupting the coherence, I am navigating the thin line of authenticity, to Barbara Hepworth and, to myself. Working from spoken word as unique source, the tape can appear too wordy at times. I created negative space by slightly extending the tape’s duration. I felt conflicted to edit a small part of the text out, but the tape had already been edited by Sir Alan Bowness - British art historian, former director of the Tate Gallery - it was already a transcription of a given reality, a new sound object to which I am giving a new resonance.

It is perhaps because I mostly operate in the concrete, manipulating sound fragments, from a musique concrète lineage that I have embarked on resounding this tape. In my resounding, the whole original material is being reworked, the link to the original purpose is not dissimulated. When Andy Warhol reworks the imagery of icon Marilyn with a series of screen-prints portfolios in Marilyn Monroe (1967), each portrait has a singular coloured background. I could have fragmented Barbara Hepworth’s voice as a collage, but I chose to maintain the temporal linearity of the original material over a renewed background.

3.2 The resounding, a transformative-tool

The compositional process of resounding is at the centre of a tension, oscillating between preserving the archival material, and touching it to manipulate it, intercepting the audio signal with my digital tools. The digital manipulation operates a changed status to the original sound object. Curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud has championed such practice under the term of postproduction. Bourriaud observes that:

since the early nineties, an ever-increasing number of artworks have been created on the basis of pre-existing works; more and more artists interpret, reproduce, re-exhibit, or use works made by others or available cultural products (Bourriaud 2002: 7).

Bourriaud emphasises how it is no longer a matter of elaborating a work of art from a raw material, but a matter of working with objects already in circulation on the cultural market: objects informing other objects. The practice of resounding performs a metamorphose, and a relocation of audio signal in time and space. Hepworth’s voice is sounding from one site - her art studio in St Ives - to then resound into another one - the digital realm, from 1961 to 2020. The tape recorded by Hepworth in 1961 lost its purpose once its original role - which was to accompany a pre-recorded talk - was served. By
repurposing it, the analogue tape is brought to the digital waves via new carriers - the radio Resonance Extra and the online platform Vimeo - thus morphing into a fluid, dematerialised digital entity.

3.3 Transmission of signal, transmission of heritage

By repurposing the archival material, the artists, curators or investigative journalists are not just releasing the voice physically into the air, they are making the archival voice relevant for a new audience, re-evaluating and re-contextualising the archival document. The practice of resounding deals simultaneously with the temporal and spatial transmission of audio signal, and the transmission of cultural heritage and knowledge. In Art and the Archive (2006), art historian Charles Merewether emphasises that:

one of the defining characteristics of the modern era has been the increasing significance given to the archive as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered (Merewether 2006: 10).

Merewether points out that the study of archive was compared by Michel Foucault, in The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969), to the practice of learning about the past through its material remains. In resounding the voice of such iconic figure, my purpose is to broaden our experience and understanding of Barbara Hepworth’s legacy through an aural investigation: voice as sonic documentation. Discussing artistic legacy and patrimonial knowledge in the context of her collaborative doctorate at the Royal College of Art and Tate on the legacy of Barbara Hepworth, Helena Bonett argues that ‘artists’ legacies are not fixed entities with circumscribed arenas of knowledge, but are in constant flux and in continual contact with diverse epistemologies and ontologies’.

With Barbara Hepworth’s tape resounded, we access a distinct dimension to sense her legacy: the dimension of the aural. Barbara Hepworth explored from a metaphysical perspective her rich inner spiritual space with her sculptures. There is something comforting in listening to her voice telling us a story of stones and forms. I have questioned my own creative process and identity through hers: the process of resounding acts as an existential quest through the transmission of knowledge, as we look to our icons for answers and direction.
4. HEPWORTH’S WORKSHOP, AN INTOXICATING ORCHESTRA OF NOISES

Barbara Hepworth’s art exploration began in her childhood with music. Hepworth was classically trained, ‘playing piano as a child, winning prizes, and even a music scholarship when she was twelve’ (Bowness 2003: 25). She then translated that vibration into sculpture, studying at the Leeds School of Art (1920-1921), and the Royal College of Art, London (1921-1924).

Hepworth’s daily environment was stimulated by music, and ‘its relation to the life of forms’ (Bowness 2003: 25). Her musical dialogue was nourished by the lifetime relationship she developed with her musical counterpart South African composer Priaulx Rainier. Sophie Bowness tells us that ‘they developed a collaborative working relationship, of a kind exceptional between an artist and a composer, which was mutually enriching’ (Bowness 2003: 23). They worked together on the first film about Hepworth’s work, *Figures in a Landscape: Cornwall and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth* (1953). The film was directed by Dudley Shaw Ashton, with a score composed by Rainier. The film features narration written by the archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes. Surprisingly Hepworth’s voice remains unheard throughout the film - the sculptor does not speak - as the narration is performed by the poet Cecil Day Lewis; a further reason to unearth the tape *The Sculptor Speaks*.

From her relationship to music, we can expand to her relationship to sounds. Why am I distinguishing sounds from music? Throughout the 20th century, composers and artists have embraced sounds for what they are: urban and environmental soundscapes. We have learned to appreciate these emerging found sounds as rich textures enabling the compositional sonic process: from the sound objects of musique concrète practitioners to John Cage’s notable motto, ‘let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expression of human sentiments’ (Cage 1961: 10). In a 1950 letter to Priaux Rainier, Barbara Hepworth shows that at times she envied the composer’s freedom with the material of music as she writes that ‘there is nothing you cannot do with sounds - infinite relationships’ (Bowness 2003: 23).

Emphasising the importance of rhythm in carving, Hepworth describes ‘the special pleasure which sculptors can have through carving, that of a complete unity of physical and mental rhythm’ (Bowness 2003: 23). Curator Helena Bonett underlines that ‘the rhythm and movement intrinsic to the sculptor’s art can also be found in the sculptures themselves, not only in their subject matter but also in their organic form, and are reinforced by us, as spectators, as we weave our way in and around the sculpture’ (https://www.academia.edu/4429361/Music_and_Movement_in_Barbara_Hepworth). When I visited the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden in St Ives, the tour guide revealed that Hepworth
would often rest on a day bed in the garden for an afternoon nap while remaining attentive to her assistants working, and from the listening experience she could tell:

The sound of a mallet or hammer is music to my ears, when either is used rhythmically and I can tell by sound alone what is going on (Hepworth 1970: 81).

The sculptor apprehends spatially the sounds of her environment as a sonic material. Hepworth has the awareness and freedom to shift from aural to visual dimension, through the whole sensorial experience of carving. The association of noise to music is here made by Hepworth whose appreciation of the rhythms and dissonant textures of the carving tools reveals a modern listening approach. This connection draws from the early 20th century developments in sound with artists challenging the aesthetic necessity of sounds perceived as noise. Hepworth’s workshop in St Ives becomes an ‘intoxicating orchestra of noises’, as anticipated by futuristic painter Luigi Russolo in 1913, in his radical manifesto for action, _The Art Of Noises._

Our multiplied sensitivity, having been conquered by futurist eyes, will finally have some futurist ears. Thus, the motors and machines of our industrial cities can one day be given pitches, so, that every workshop will become an intoxicating orchestra of noises (Russolo: 2006: 14).

Russolo advocates for the conquest of the ‘infinite variety of noise-sounds’, and states that ‘every noise has a pitch, some even a chord, which predominates among the whole of its irregular vibrations’ (Russolo 2004: 12). Russolo is known for the invention of the _intonarumori_ - a series of experimental and sculptural noise instruments - reflecting his idea about the use of noises in music.

5. THE SCULPTOR RECORDS

I was hoping to find out more about the tape itself, and the device used by Hepworth to record. British Library Lead Curator, Literary and Creative Recordings, Stephen Clearly ordered for me, from their Yorkshire unit the tape, as well as the CD created from that tape. He sent me photographs of the original tape and box, providing additional information:

We have the original 7” ‘master’ tape plus two copies (shelved at the same reference number): these are 7” and 5” diameter respectively. The copies were not made by the British Library – they were made by the British Council before we received the collection. These copy tapes have references to Finland and Bucharest, Romania, respectively, on the inner boxes. I presume these tapes were sent to British Council offices in these places. The audio file I have was made from a CD-R transfer of the analogue master, which was made in October 2000.
The emergence of digital preservation has greatly contributed to the transmission of our sound patrimony, facilitating access for the public and researchers. I could easily access the audio content of the 1961 open reel tape at the British Library because the content had been digitised from its analogue state. However, digitisation is a durational process, which requires a constant update of formats, as they become obsolete. Head of Technical Services at the British Library’s Sound and Vision Will Prentice states that ‘if we want our audio heritage preserved sustainably, we need to digitise, and we need to rethink the archival paradigm’ (thewire.co.uk). Prentice points out the rapid technology evolution, and the vast amount of archival material that keeps accumulating whilst current formats die. Underlining our responsibility in transmitting our sound heritage, Prentice emphasises the need to convert the audio to file-formatted digital data, and stresses that ‘this should be done in multiple copies, in multiple locations, and on multiple storage types’ (https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/collateral-damage_archivist-will-prentice).

From the tape’s pictures, I have attempted to pin point which recording device could have been used in 1961. The portable magnetic tape recorder - Nagra III - made its entrance in 1957. Sound capture
became mobile, liberated from technical constraints. Nagra’s main competitor - Uher - developed the reporter’s portable tape recorder, with the report 4000 series introduced in 1961. Because of the reliability of the recorders and their relatively small size, they were used in the broadcast by the BBC as an affordable alternative to Nagra. The Uher was much more prevalent in the UK. With the emergence of the portable technology, Barbara Hepworth can - in 1961 - capture from her own workshop her voice. The sculptor documents her creative process in situ surrounded by her sculptures, anticipating current sound practices with the ubiquitous home-studio. Hepworth the sculptor records and speaks as the artist-documenter, when knowledge is materialised in sound. I am fondly picturing Dame Barbara Hepworth in Trewyn Studio, sat with a tape recorder and a pair of headphones - a set up I relate to as a digital sound artist in my own room. Could she hear her voice through headphones whilst recording? On the original 1961 tape, The Sculptor Speaks, we can hear the ambient sounds throughout her voice. From the sound quality of the tape, we can assume that she did record at different times as the frequency of her voice is fluctuating. Did she operate the recording device herself? We can speculate that she did record herself on her own, even if the recording device was set up by a technician. We can wonder if she was perhaps inhibited by the recording process, or if this recording experience stimulated her artistic vision.

6. FROM THE SEASCAPE EMERGES THE FORM

The Cornish landscape inspired Barbara Hepworth. I drew from her sculptural relationship to landscape to develop the visuals - the seascape - from footage made in St Ives on my research journey.

I become a person in relation to a landscape, a seascape which has endured for hundreds of thousands of years. I have some kind of sculptural relationship to it (Hepworth 2015: 50).

I worked with the superimposition of layers, combining analogue and digital projection. I made twenty slides by cutting small fragments of pink acetate, which were inserted into the slide frame. The slides of geometric shapes were projected onto the seascape in motion as a collage, and the projected result was filmed. Then, emerging from the seascape, a geometric line is being slowly drawn, completing a full meditative cycle.

Welcoming technical fragility as I did with the audio quality of the tape itself, I worked with the slides defects: the dust, fingerprints and its grainy texture. British art historian, Charles Harrison states that slides have a ‘technical innocence, having little history as an artistic medium but instead a practical association with documentation’ (Harrison 2005: 39). It is precisely this technical innocence which
appeals to me in working with slides. Zooming into the image, I accentuated even more the ‘faulty’, noisy grain revealing at times a pixelated image.

Figure 3: pixelated still from *The Sculptor Speaks v2.0 [contactless], 2020.*

7. CONCLUSION

The practice of *resounding* the voice is linked to the reconsideration of the archive, public or personal. The sound artist builds an active relationship with the archival document, no longer static, by unearthing the sound-object, restoring it, and making it sound again through a new carrier, in a new sound space, physical or digital. The term *resounding* is appropriate to the field of sound art, and to hybrid practices that not only deal with the spatial resonance dimension, but also with the technological *resounding* of the archival voice - a voice unheard or temporarily overlooked. It is a transformative practice whose properties consist of changing the original status of the archive with manipulations; morphing and relocating the audio signal in time and space; and as such, re-contextualising the archival document for a new audience. However, the link to the original purpose is not entirely dissimulated, the original voice refers to itself. The archival voice behaves as a moving entity, evolving according to time and context.

The practice of *resounding* is the art of liberating the magnetic presence of the voices from the past sound-objects: it is a re-appearance of the voice - morphed and fluid - operating in the field of the aural transmission. *Resounding* the archive: a resonance anew.
REFERENCES


WORKS CITED


Hepworth, B. 1941. *Drawing for Sculpture with Colour*.


LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: still from *The Sculptor Speaks* v2.0 [contactless], 2020.

Figure 2: original master tape *The Sculptor Speaks*, 1961.

Figure 3: pixelated still from *The Sculptor Speaks* v2.0 [contactless], 2020.