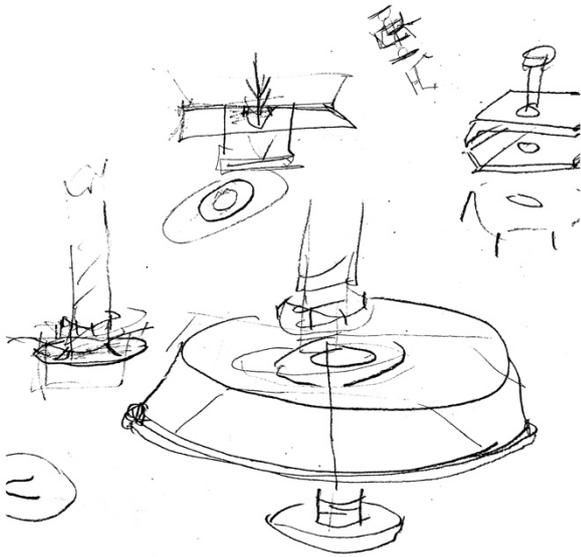


Chris Dooks

The First Week at SSW 5th April 2021



The Aquaphone

I am in residence at Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Aberdeenshire, a place with a forty-year history, where artists forge, sculpt and develop constructions and conversations.

I've spent the past week slowly building an instrument called an *Aquaphone*. I've also been attaching seismic monitors onto metal agricultural paraphernalia in the field. At the SSW site I've been treating the workshop spaces like musical instruments, striking wood and metal with soft timpani beaters. These are the kinds of frolics I carry out when left to my own devices!

I am a digital artist – a meaningless term these days, but I trained as a filmmaker and lens-based creator alongside my experimental music and sound practice which eventually led to a Sound Art PhD in 2015 [www.idioholism.com]. I make videos, photographs and sonic art, in a practice which began many years ago as various kinds of documentary work.

A long time ago I directed TV arts programmes and so my audio-visual skills are quite broad, but my heart is in trying to make soporific or resonant sonics alongside a kind of 'visual séance' with rusting or decayed imagery. One fault I've had in the past, is not organising my chaotic output into specific series or presentations, something I hope to change with my time here. I'm quite a difficult artist to pigeonhole – and while people know me, they find it difficult to say what I am. Am I a visual artist or a sound artist? I am known in different circles for different outputs. I don't know either. I am appallingly bad at

'branding' which, in a world now defined by hashtags. This isn't great for someone who loves many *many* different things. This works quite well when I am teaching community art, but less so for my own practice. The time here then, is allowing me to develop a more streamlined and focused micro-body of work.

I am a bit of magpie, hunting for objects to reanimate for sound. Because of problems I have with energy, I make use of what is already here and apply themes of appropriation repurposing, and re-attributing. I use found objects as compositional elements for potential sonic releases, and I hope to make a short series of field recordings and modest compositions here with not only what I am building, but in local sound collecting also and in the final week, some pilgrimages around Aberdeenshire to play my instruments in the field.

The nearest artform would likely be an electroacoustic music studio or a 'foley' set-up for film sound effects. The studio I've been given here is now filled with my microphones and stands, mixing desks and effects pedals.



Communities Room at SSW as my studio. Some of the instruments belong to Eden Jolly and previous artists. The Ikea plant pots are mine.

I suppose I make work for wellbeing reasons and self-care, as life usurped my career a little. That's OK. I'm a carer and dad of two great children. I just noticed that if you remove one 'e' from 'career' it truncates as 'carer' – a kind of two-word autobiography. I think it's important that carers have a life outside of care work. For my wife in particular also who is a writer. It's just rare that any carers get a chance so I'm very grateful to my family and the opportunities here.

My themes tend to be wellness-orientated only in the sense that I have personal health conditions and they are sometimes about accessibility with an eye on my daughter as a wheelchair user. I'm not part of the stereotype of 'wellness culture' but am passionate about it. I'm not averse to lighting incense, but you are more likely to find me pushing my energy on pilgrimages taking photographs of corrugated iron farm buildings, armed with

several microphones and recorders and ginseng. I believe an art practice is about survival and hope.

Forging work here at SSW doesn't just apply to physical or sculptural practice, it is a general philosophical approach of the host organisation to support artists in multiple ways. The technicians come from a practice-based background and I share a lot in common with them even though I don't know much about welding or practical construction in general. SSW supports and trains multimedia practitioners like myself for that aspect of the residencies.

SSW is one of the hosts of my being here. The other is a festival called *Counterflows*.

Counterflows is a Scottish (and international) underground music festival that has, this year, an impressive online portfolio of international commissions - and serves to offer a counter-cultural mechanism to showcase sonic artists. Some of the work on the 2021 programme has been produced with Scottish Sculpture Workshop. For example, the artist using the moniker THEFURIES has cast bells in the foundry at SSW for a striking autobiographical composition, so there's a very close relationship with the festival via the making of objects before the artist may develop works, post-site.

SSW and Counterflows have for the last few years, been running a caregivers residency here in Lumsden where artists from performative and sonic backgrounds are supported with stipends for caregiving, making work, travel budget, materials and accommodation. Support extends to training and supervision on equipment.

I am one of three artists to be this kind of resident at SSW in 2021.

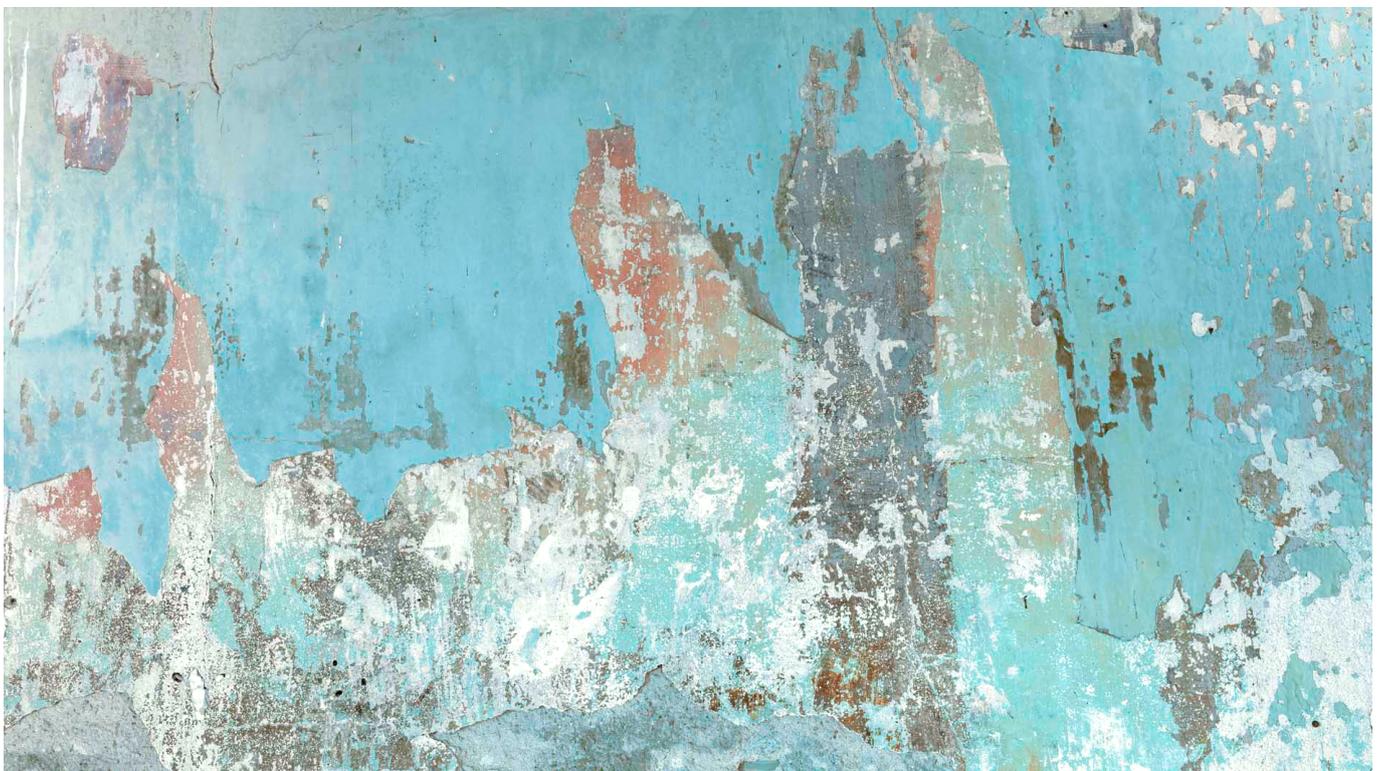
The idea of being a caregiver has been very charged over the last twelve months due to the pandemic, or I should say, the pandemic has highlighted how many caregivers the UK now has, most of them unpaid. The fact that this residency exists at all is a kind of miracle because of the scarcity of residency opportunities in general, plus the fact that caregivers or family artists are often excluded by definition of their responsibilities. The pandemic has halted much of this kind of activity at all. A lot of preparation and Covid protocols have gone into getting me here and I'd never even heard of a caregiving stipend before.

I'm the first artist to be in residence for some time at SSW due to Covid and I am on-site (under social distancing and hygiene protocols) for most of April. At the time of writing, I've done a week. I've also been unwell with my own condition (M.E.), as is common for me after a lot of energetic preparation and travel.

There will be two other artists coming on-site later in the year, for similar residencies. This means I am the only artist here at the moment both in the studio and living spaces. It's

weird. Not unpleasant, but odd. It's quite a big site with evidence of past times and projects everywhere. Rust, wood and empty buildings. The flip side of this is that there are no distractions, which is excellent for me as I am easily distracted at home.

A lot of chatting was necessary in the first couple of days, it can be a bit overwhelming here with the agony of choice as to what to do. My proposal was to make use of the metalworking here to make a sound object to use, alongside other very simple constructions in the field. I made a field trip to a deserted house up the hill, to see if it could be a site of interest for me to make something physical in it, like a sound piece or installation. It's a special locale, this nearby farmhouse. Below is a picture of one of my favourite walls. I may make a print out of it.



I've been in this house before, in 2005, for a different project and host. I found it a riveting place to be inside. Peeling wallpaper, furniture parts, an old huge stove, ancient plaster. Wildlife inside. Lots of artists and locals have left their mark in there. No glass in the windows and fast, strong winds rushing through. This week, I was wondering how much of a presence and informer of my work it would be. Back in Edinburgh, my genealogist wife has been looking at land registers and newspapers for who owned the house and who lived and died here. I will be documenting it on film before I leave and if there's time, hopefully making temporary sound pieces inside it.

There are a couple of challenges for me with that house site, the energy it takes to get up there and the nature of it being in an agricultural field.

I was amazed how intact the building still is. How beautiful the decayed wallpaper is, peeled back over time and how the blues and reds of the inks are still soaked into the walls like a beautiful abstract impressionistic painting. I took some quick snaps, while I let my new geophone contact mic record the wind reverberating the rusted straw feeders outside. I clambered about and got a shock from the pigeons flapping inside. I want to make sounds in it and let the house give me part of its nature.

This week, the technician, Eden, showed me some piano parts (wire and tuning pegs) that had been left previously and I will definitely use them, maybe in the farmhouse. There's also a very detuned piano on site which I'll have a play with. Then, the other technician Michael, showed me how to use a chop-saw and use the 'tap and die' set for creating threads in metal tubes.

This is all for the creation of my main making project here, the construction of the 'Aquaphone' or 'Waterphone' which belongs to the family 'Idiophone' which is by far my favorite term.



The Aquaphone is basically a sort of bed-pan with metal rods sticking out of it that if bowed, will resonate the pan. But that's not all! You can concert-tune it. I'm not interested in the latter, it's more a proof of concept for me. Anyway, to cut a long story short, before I came up here, I was buying a lot of bits and pieces to experiment with – like cake tins.

Thin ones I knew would make a nice sound. So, I bought a couple of them and various screws and attachments which would or might work help me create this instrument.

But the Aquaphone has a grand finale. You pour water down its neck and when you bow it, you also twist it and it pitches the tone around. And the prototype works! It currently only has one rod on it and because I bought difficult-to-weld stainless steel cake tins - it isn't pretty, but it sounds lovely.

Currently its range is limited to a few noises but in the coming days Michael is going to teach me to TIG-weld, and then I'll be able to add different lengths of materials to it, and finally make some nice field recordings. The reason I wanted to make an instrument while here was that I've been a bit sick of software and want to work more with pure field-recordings and 'proto-performative' objects to make time-based work with.

However, there's been another revelation this week.

Eden brought me some church organ parts he was using in his own practice. This is like gold-dust for me. I have a bit of previous in this area. I released a vinyl record as part of my PhD in 2012 which was an exploration about a near-broken harmonium in The Scottish Borders and so this was right up my street. And so, when Eden showed me these wooden valves, and an eccentric sculpture he had made from one of them, I nearly snatched them out his hand.

You basically blow through a valve. Maybe they are termed reeds. Very simple constructions. But they sound like owls.

They sound like owls so much, that I went on an evening chorus hunt to play them with the other birds. And I'll probably reflect on that in my post at the end of the residency.

