

GHOSTS IN THE GRAVING DOCKS  
JAMES BELL

# EDGE EFFECTS



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EFFECTS



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# WHAT DOES POST-FOSSIL FUEL SCOTLAND SOUND LIKE?

## Sonic Meditation Invitation

- You are invited to undertake this Sonic Meditation.
- Search for a place that calls to you and gently settle into it.
- Keep full awareness of where you are as you close your eyes.
- Move your attention across your body and relax tense muscles.
- Breathe deeply as your body calms and opens to receive sound.
- Give your attention to everything that is sounding. How do the sounds hit your face, torso, arms, legs, and the back of your neck?
- How many of the sounds come from things or relationships that rely on petroleum or fossil fuels? What do they sound like?
- How many of the sounds come from things that do not need to rely on petroleum or fossil fuels? What do they sound like?
- Is there a balance between the kinds of sounds or is something dominating your attention?
- What do the sounds do? What reactions do you have to them?
- What would it sound like if petroleum and fossil fuels were absent from use in the place where you are sitting?
- Tell someone about what you listened to or write it down.

**BKDN BKDN – Practising Post-Oil Sense of Self & Culture**

Brett Bloom, Sonic Meditations (2017)

## GHOSTS IN THE GRAVING DOCKS

*Deep* has to do with the complexity and boundaries, or edges beyond ordinary or habitual understandings – i.e. “the subject is too deep for me” or “she is a deep one”. A subject that is “too deep” surpasses one’s present understanding or has too many unknown parts to grasp easily. A “deep one” defies stereotypical knowing and may take either a long time, or never to understand to get to know.<sup>1</sup>

– Pauline Oliveros

Each major domain has its own distinctive systemic edge – this edge is constituted differently for the economy than it is for the biosphere and the social. [...] the extreme character of conditions at the edge makes visible larger trends that are less extreme and hence more difficult to capture.<sup>2</sup>

– Saskia Sassen

How might one come to know or indeed *unknow*<sup>3</sup> climate breakdown? I want to reflect on this question by thinking about ‘abstraction’, or more specifically something abstract becoming material. A movement from the avant-garde music and pedagogy of composer Pauline Oliveros; through the abstract forces of capital and its entanglements with climate change discourse; to the violence the latter enacts on those at the ‘edges’.

I am here<sup>4</sup> to deep *listen*.<sup>5</sup> After a crash-course in the exercises and meditations of American composer, Pauline Oliveros, I follow the instruction, perching on the steps of the former dry dock in Govan where I am to consider the questions: “what does fossil fuel Scotland sound like?” and “what would a post-fossil fuel Scotland sound like?” I close my eyes and hear very little,<sup>6</sup> only the sounds of cars speeding past on either side. In this void, this grave, my mind drifts to the thousands of workers that once laboured in this place; ghosts that now wander the dock; reminders of the decimation of the working class under the emergent neoliberal dogma from the nineteen-seventies on. In answer to the latter question, I say “the same”.

Surveying the landscape from the docks – empty, overgrown, loaded with an idea of a past – to the wider cityscape that surrounds, across the water to the west end, the Clydeside Expressway that snakes past Foster and Partners’ Hydro and Glasgow Science Centre. A tryptic from the ruins of industrial revolution Glasgow, shipyards and community centres gifted by wealthy philanthropist<sup>7</sup> through de-industrialisation, to a skyline given over to representations of advanced ‘ecological’ leisure economies in the shape of an energy company sponsored concert venue.

The practice of *Deep Listening* involves a turning in on oneself, listening and becoming receptive to the discreet sounds around us, as a means of ‘knowing’ the world differently. As with the deconstructive qualities of avant-garde music, we can perhaps transpose these tools to how we learn and produce knowledge within the abstract and homogenous nature of late-capitalism, and the multiple registers it operates in, including climate change discourse. The countering an abstraction with an abstraction if you will, as a means of making visible the component parts of various systems, be that music or capital. The pedagogical

approach of *Deep Listening*, as intended to abstract our *given* knowledges of listening, how we hear and how we perceive what we hear,<sup>8</sup> like other forms of radical pedagogy,<sup>9</sup> in their dissolution of hierarchical forms of culture and knowledge production, may offer alternatives to modes of learning that reproduce<sup>10</sup> and rejuvenate hegemonies like capital, colonialism and patriarchy.

I pause for a moment and admit that I find myself oscillating between the invocation of an ‘avant-garde’ (and potentially privileged<sup>11</sup>) mode of learning and the political expediencies of climate breakdown. The ghosts on the dock bring into sharp relief the contemporary bodies, predominantly in the Global South, who must carry the weight of Western “post-fossil fuel” aspirations and the all too easily glanced over violent histories of colonial excavation and extraction of and on these bodies. It is therefore important for me to close this reflection underlining the importance of social change within the broader climate change discussion, and acknowledge the need for enquiry and alliances across a spectrum of activist positions, from anti-capitalist, migrant to workers’ rights.<sup>12</sup>

From certain vantage points – perhaps an [electric] car travelling along the Clydeside Expressway – we can only know climate breakdown in the particular vernaculars of the insidious ways neoliberalism distorts or ‘makes complex’ its displaced or latent effects on our world. Finding, trying and failing in different ways of learning, learning *deeply*, learning in-difference and in-common, learning in the abstract, perhaps offers us the tools and strategies for discursive and material change.



Brett Bloom & Ximena Alarcon, Breakdown Breakdown – Deep Listening Intensive Workshop (2017)



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<sup>1</sup> Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. New York, NY: iUniverse, 2005. p.14

<sup>2</sup> Sassen, Saskia. *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. p. 297

<sup>3</sup> In the use of the term 'unknow' I draw on feminist and queer approaches to knowledge production as a means of disrupting given 'popular' discourses or particular regimes of knowledge-power, following thinkers such as Jack Halberstam in his assertion that "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well...", in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. pp. 2—3

<sup>4</sup> This short reflection is informed by the experience of taking part in a two day *Deep Listening* workshop, led by Ximena Alarcon and devised by Brett Bloom, organised by Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW), as part of *Edge Effects: Frontiers in Retreat*, that took place late July 2017 in Glasgow. A small group of 8 or so of us practised in the exercises and meditations of Pauline Oliveros at the Pearce Institute in Govan, and Govanhill Baths, a community-pool, both in Glasgow. The nature of *Deep Listening*, made both the group and locations an integral part of the experience, one I found incredibly moving and intimate in the sharing of encounters with place through sound and

listening. Special thanks to Ximena for the thoughtful approach and generosity of her knowledge; to my fellow participants Hanne, Joss, Louise, Rachel and Saffy; and for the care and hosting of Caitlin, Yvonne and the whole team at SSW.



Brett Bloom & Ximena Alarcon. Breakdown Breakdown – Deep Listening Intensive Workshop (2017)

<sup>5</sup> Oliveros distinguishes hearing from listening, stating: "To hear is the physical

means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically." Oliveros, p.13

<sup>6</sup> 'Silence' is a preoccupation of avant-garde and Fluxus performers, contemporaries of Oliveros, such as John Cage's work *4'33"* (1952) is a composition in which the performers do not play their instruments for four minutes and thirty three seconds, with the only sounds being that of the environment within which it is performed. You can watch a video of an orchestra play it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh-o3udlmy8>

<sup>7</sup> On the first day of the two day workshop, we are based at the Pearce Institute in Govan, gifted to the workers of Govan by Lady Dinah Elizabeth Pearce, in memory of her late husband William Pearce, owner of the Fairfield Shipyard, in 1906. More here: <http://www.pearceinstitute.org.uk/about/history/lady-pearce/>

<sup>8</sup> For me, one of the fundamental tenants of avant-garde and Fluxus music is the question "what is music?", and the domino effect that such a question creates in the deconstruction of the compositional, formal, structural and hierarchical understandings of what constitutes "music", and importantly "who can or cannot make music?"

<sup>9</sup> For example the work of Paulo Freire, and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. For a more specific example of radical pedagogy in music education, see: Paynter, John, and Peter Aston. *Sound and Silence: Classroom Projects in Creative Music*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> I use the terms production and reproduction very much within a Marxist tradition, understanding knowledge and culture being produced within the frame of (and arguably with the aim of reproducing) the capitalist system. For further reading on the role of so called *Ideological State Apparatuses* (like education and culture) in their reproduction of the *relations of production*, see Louis Althusser's essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', 1970, available here: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking here of who in the first instance takes part in the workshop, and more generally who is *permitted* into the sacrosanct space of contemporary art – this has been the subject of a lengthy and heated discussion recently on e-flux in a piece by Morgan Quaintance, *The New Conservatism: Complicity and the UK Art World's Performance of Progression*, 2017, which you can read here: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

<sup>12</sup> I must pay special thanks to Dr David Bell for his insights into the more radical left interventions in climate change discourse. David ran a workshop which I facilitated in early July 2017, as part of a Summer School at Collective, Edinburgh, and is part of Out of the Woods, a collective who investigate the intersections of capitalism and climate change. You can read more of their work here: <https://libcom.org/blog/out-woods-new-blog-climate-change-11022014>

This text was developed through and supported by Scottish Sculpture Workshop as part of Frontiers in Retreat, in response to Edge Effects Glasgow in July 2017.

The logo for Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW), consisting of the letters 'SSW' in a bold, sans-serif font, positioned inside a white trapezoidal shape that is slightly tilted to the right.

Edge Effects Glasgow weaved together the geographically dispersed processes and key discourses developed during Frontiers in Retreat to mark the conclusion of the project.

Frontiers in Retreat (2015 – 2018) has been funded by support from the European Commission and Creative Scotland. This communication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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Cover image  
Brett Bloom & Ximena Alarcon, Breakdown Breakdown – Deep Listening Intensive Workshop (2017)

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