

Cornelia Gräbner

# Into the Sound World: Worlding and the Thick Event in Neil Campbell and Seán Street's Collaborative Album *Estuary* (2017)

## Introduction

In May 2023 I was drawn into the unique sound world of *Journey into Space* (2023), a collaboration between poet Seán Street and multi-instrumentalist, composer and producer Neil Campbell, put on as a live event during the annual, month-long Writing on the Wall festival in Liverpool.<sup>1</sup> It featured Campbell on classical guitar and Seán Street on spoken word, with Street sometimes offering paratextual interventions between the pieces. The performance took place in the performance space of Prohibition Recording Studios, a space which is both make-shift and thoughtfully tended. The walls are covered with recycled wooden boards, creating a warm acoustic environment. Clearly visible pipes and cables, as well as offices adjacent to the corridor that leads to the performance space, show that this is also a working environment. A small bar in the back of the room invites social interactions. The furnishings – folding tables and chairs, fairy lights and light chains – suggest that the studios can be easily converted into a different type of space for a different use, thus conveying an atmosphere of creative dynamism, work-in-progress and the possibility of transformation. There are no windows and therefore, no outside sonic interference so that the space enables concentration, focus and attunement. Performers and listeners alike were immersed

---

<sup>1</sup> The organization Writing on the Wall emerged from the Liverpool Dockers Strike in the late 1990s. This was an industrial dispute which involved the lock-out of around 500 unionized workers employed by Mersey Docks, who had refused to cross a picket line set up by fellow workers who had been sacked by another company. Such solidarity actions are illegal under British (anti-) trade union legislation brought in by the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher and John Major. While the lock-out was the spark that lit the fuse, the issues at stake went deeper and involved the casualization of labor and the social and political impact of changes in the shipping industry, such as container shipping. Writing on the Wall is now a community organization that promotes writing as a community activity. See: <https://writingonthewall.org.uk/about/>.

---

**Acknowledgements:** Cornelia Gräbner would like to thank Neil Campbell and Seán Street for the opportunity to meet with them, and for their generosity in sharing the thoughts that inform their creative work, as well as their reflections and insights on poetry, music, sound, and collaborative work.

in the sound world that emerged from the interplay of spoken word, conversational intervention, and music. I grew to realize that I experienced that evening the gradual transformation of a guided journey into a sound world in the form of a performance, into what Nina Sun Eidsheim in *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* conceptualizes as a *thick event*: an event that is multisensorial and dynamic; that is interpersonal and intermaterial; and that cannot be appreciated or understood by dissecting it into its singular, separate facets or referents (cf. 2015).

Eidsheim's study, and the emerging interdisciplinary field around vibrations and vibrational listening, offers a promising approach to intermedial collaborations that comprise musical, poetic, social and spatial facets, such as Campbell and Street's previous collaborative project, *Estuary* (2017), a collaboration which also included singer Perri Alleyne-Hughes. Here, the two artists created a piece that responds to, and emerges from within their perception of, the spatial, ecological and sensorial complexity of estuaries as thick events. Eidsheim begins *Sensing Sound* with a reflection on an occurrence in an ecologically and perceptually complex space: the falling of a tree in a forest (cf. 2015, 1). She defines this as a thick event because it involves a myriad of phenomena and therefore, a myriad of forms of perception. Such complexity, Eidsheim argues, must not be reduced to a singular sensory mode when we try to understand the event (cf. 2015, 4). However, modes of understanding that are channeled through academic disciplines encourage such reductivism. The thick event is dissected into – usually, quantifiable – components by representatives of these disciplines, who then lay claim to offering an adequate understanding of each of these components, thus suggesting that a thick event can be accessed through only one of its components, and that each can be understood without considering the others. According to Eidsheim, this approach is not appropriate for a thick event. She makes this argument with regards to music; however, she quotes poet Billy Collins who identifies an analogous process in the study and reception of poetry, and she suggests that music and poetry, and the approaches they have been subjected to, are comparable. Moreover, she argues that “the way we conceive of our relationship to music could productively be understood as an expression of how we conceive of our relationship to the world” (Eidsheim 2015, 6). This analogy between our relationship to music (and poetry) and our relationship to the world drives *Estuary*: Campbell and Street are themselves immersed listeners to the thick event that is the estuary, and they then create through poetry and music an analogous thick event in the form of a performance (live or recorded), into which listeners are invited to immerse during the process of listening.

Yet, *Estuary* reaches beyond the collaborative piece or performance. On a conceptual and analytical level, *Estuary* offers an excellent opportunity to bring

together the register of music and sound study through the concept of the *thick event* (cf. Eidsheim 2015) and the register of ecopoetry<sup>2</sup> and New Materialism through the concept of *worlding*. *Worlding* is an activity as well as a concept. It responds to the awareness that all beings and all matter are entangled with each other and that a “world” is not an external object, but an active process in which we as humans always participate, as “we come to know and enact a world from inhabiting it, from becoming attuned to its differences, positions and juxtapositions, from a training of our senses, dispositions and expectations and from being able to initiate, imitate and elaborate skilled lines of action” (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 9). The creation of a performance of the thick event that is an estuary participates in a worlding, and the performers extend this opportunity to *Estuary*’s listeners and invite them into the event.

Campbell and Street both have wide-ranging and pluralistic creative trajectories. Campbell is a performer, composer and producer. His repertoire as an acoustic classical guitarist and multi-instrumentalist spans a variety of musical styles, including contemporary classical music, Irish traditional and contemporary folk music, prog rock, and jazz, and he collaborates regularly with other artists. His compositions include several musical responses to works of literature, among them *Frankenstein* (2009) and *The Smoky God* (2024). Recently he has focused on production, and when reflecting on his work he devotes significant time and attention to the ways in which music and sounds affect listeners and how sensorial experiences can be encouraged, achieved and nurtured through composition and production. Campbell is also involved in Liverpool’s lively cultural scene, as the venue director of Hope University’s performance venue, the Capstone Theatre. Street trained as an actor and worked as a radio broadcaster. He is a dramatist, a poet, and professor emeritus of Radio Studies at Bournemouth University. He has published fourteen poetry collections, theoretical and historical works on radio, essayistic-theoretical reflections on sounds, and several books of prose on historical and topographical subjects, most recently *Wild Track: Sound, Text and the Idea of Birdsong* (2023).<sup>3</sup> Like Campbell, he frequently works on short-term and

---

2 Poet Forrest Gander offers a succinct definition of the difference between nature poetry or pastoral poetry on the one hand, and ecopoetry on the other. In the Introduction to the online collection *Ecopoetry and Water*, he writes that “whereas ‘nature poetry’ often takes the so-called ‘natural world’ for its themes, as though it were separate from the human world, ecopoetry asks how we are involved in—and a part of—all that surrounds us. Ecopoets attempt to offer insights, both formally and thematically, into the complex interrelationships between nature and culture, language and perception” (Gander 2024, n.p.).

3 Street’s approach to sounds is characterized by his interest in the dynamic and vibrant character of sound. His usage of the concept does therefore not map onto the ossified conception of Sound that Eidsheim criticizes in her work. Street in his own work often refers to “sound.” To

long-term collaborative cross-genre projects with other artists, especially musicians; among them composer Cecilia MacDowall, for whom he works as a librettist.

*Estuary* was their second collaborative project, the first having been a jazz-based collaboration around Street's chap book *Jazz Time* (2014). *Estuary* was commissioned by Writing on the Wall for the celebrations of the centennial of the Cunard Shipping Line in 2015. The company was founded and based in Liverpool and its former headquarters, the Cunard Building, is one of the three iconic buildings known as the Three Graces, which line the banks of the Mersey. *Estuary* was first performed on the eve of the central anniversary event, which saw three of the company's famous vessels sail up the Mersey Estuary. A second performance, which took place at the Capstone Theatre, featured a documentary film inspired by the recorded piece and a live dance performance, with a dancer responding to the ensemble of film, poetry and music.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the artists recorded it as an album. My reflections here will refer to the album version of the work.

The work is tightly tethered to the vibrant materiality of the landscapes of estuaries, from which its sound world, its ecology and its social world arise. Estuaries are complex spaces which, due to their geographical features, enable unique coexistences and constellations of matter, human life, and the more-than-human.<sup>5</sup> Michael Allaby in *A Dictionary of Geology and Earth Sciences* defines an Estuary as a "semi-enclosed coastal body of water which has a free connection with the open sea and where fresh water, derived from land drainage, is mixed with sea water. Estuaries are often subject to tidal action and where tidal activity is large, ebb and flood tidal currents tend to avoid each other, forming separate channels" (2020, n.p.). An Estuary is thus a transitioning space between sea and river, surrounded by land and opening out into the sea. Its topology is both bounded and

---

avoid misunderstandings and conflation with Eidsheim's use of the singular, I will in this article use the term "sounds" in reference to his work.

<sup>4</sup> See Street et al. 2022 for the film.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of the *more-than-human* recognizes the relational entanglement of all life (human and non-human) and worlds (including matter) and establishes a conceptual alternative to a dualistic conception of humans and worlds. The concept was coined as part of the wider theoretical enquiry into how to articulate the existence of all life as "always already entangled," a – now widely used – expression first used as such by Donna Haraway (1988). The term *more-than-human* has been adopted as an alternative to the *post-human* and the *non-human*, to avoid the dualism expressed in the term non-human, as well as the chronological implications of the post-human. It also sets a boundary towards conceptions of post-humanism linked to the biosciences and to the ideology of trans-humanism. There is a wide plethora of work that uses and defines this terminology. Lorimer and Hodges offer a concise and up-to-date overview of the concept (cf. 2024, 13–15).

dynamic in that it is semi-enclosed and has a free connection to the open sea, thus relating sea and land, facilitating the coming and going of ships which led to so many port cities being built on estuaries. The tidal dynamics and the channels – which feature in some of the poems I will discuss below – demand the navigational skill of humans if one wants to travel on them. The mix of fresh water and sea water finds its reflection in the hybrid cultural socialities that emerge around estuaries, especially in port cities. The tidal rhythms generate and symbolically evoke cyclical rhythms of life along the estuaries, a theme that recurs through the musical motives on *Estuary* and the texts of the poems. The material components of estuaries are “vibrant” in the sense proposed by Jane Bennett and it is in their vibrancy that we detect “a fuller range of the non-human powers circulating around and within human bodies” (2010, ix). When a work of art can make us feel these powers circulating around and through us, we feel more present in that worlding. The process of getting to that point of awareness is what I refer to as coming-into-presence.

*Estuary* consists of seventeen pieces. Five of them are musical pieces composed by Campbell. The remaining twelve are based on poems written by Street, most of which are embedded within a composition by Campbell. Only one poem is a spoken word track only. The poems were previously published in *Time between Tides (1981–2009)* (2009) and *Cello* (2013). All poems address the poetic sound world of estuaries from across the Northern hemisphere: the Mersey Estuary around Liverpool, the San Francisco Bay Estuary, Newfoundland, Donégal, and the Leigh Estuary in Essex. When Campbell and Street created *Estuary*, they started by selecting poems from Street’s publications, whereby Street proposed those he considered most suited for the spoken word and Campbell picked those he wanted to musically respond to. Campbell then started composing and selecting recorded sequences and field recordings that chimed with the project, and the two started to rehearse in an improvisational style. Eventually, as the project advanced, they invited jazz singer and choir leader Perri Alleyne-Hughes to collaborate as a vocalist. *Estuary* features classical guitar sequences, some field recordings and, to a lesser extent, keyboard and electronic arrangements. Instrumental pieces – entitled *Redux* – establish a sense of flow between the various sections of the album.

That said, Campbell and Street’s shared interest lies in sounds and in how music and poetry as practices emerge from and respond to sounds. Drawing on Eidsheim’s distinction between what she considers ossified Sound and Music on the one hand, and a vibrational, dynamic practice of sound on the other, I wish to clarify that Campbell and Street, like Eidsheim, are interested in poetry and music as dynamic practices that engage with sound worlds (cf. Campbell 2024b; Street 2024). This matches my interest as a cultural analyst, as distinct to a literary critic. Like Campbell, Street and Eidsheim, I am interested in exploring the prac-

tice, the dynamism and the import of poetry and any other art form it is placed in a relationship with. Here, I am interested in investigating how an intermedial, collaborative performance of a sound world becomes a worlding. *Estuary* takes listeners on an exploratory journey of attuning sensorially to estuaries' different facets, so that we can then become alive to the multi-layered, pluralistic vibrancy of a space that is a thick event. I will take readers on this exploration following the example of Street himself. In the preface to *The Sound Inside the Silence: Travels in the Sonic Imagination* (2019) he clarifies that instead of offering a "technical exposition" he will "invoke the voices of writers and poets as guides to the sound world" (Street 2019, ix). I will approach *Estuary* in the same spirit, treating Campbell and Street as guides into the concrete sound world of estuaries that they had entered, and into the imaginative sound world they created in response and that enacts a worlding. I will first analyze the introductory poem "Change" as an opening piece that familiarizes listeners with the poetics of the listening journey they are about to embark on. I will then turn to a mid-album sequence book-ended by two instrumental pieces, "Fog Redux" and "Vigil Redux" and comprising the composite pieces "Another Place," "Pier Head with Ferry," and "Tidal." The Redux pieces mark thematic and sonic sections of the performance and sonically relate them to each other; the three composite pieces are set on the Mersey Estuary. An analysis of these pieces will allow me to address different aspects of this specific estuary, as well as the range of sonic, poetic and musical strategies that Campbell and Street draw on in each.

## "Change": Poetics

*Estuary* starts with "Change," a short piece which familiarizes listeners with the mode of travel on this journey. The piece opens with recordings of bird calls and birdsong. It then flows into a musical sequence which evokes the rolling sound of the sea and the pitch of bird calls, from which Street's voice rises with the spoken word track of the poem. The speech rhythm continues the rhythm of the guitar track of the previous sequence; the poignant alliterations and assonances resonate with the pitch of the bird calls and their sonic representations, seemingly translating the sounds of the musical sequence into the spoken word.<sup>6</sup> The sequential unfolding

---

<sup>6</sup> I write "seemingly" because in the sequence of the actual creative process, the musical track was created by Campbell as a response to Street's poem. In the sequence of the creative process, Campbell thus translated Street's poem into a composition, though the performance presents this in reverse.

of perception is crucial. Perception begins with sounds, then moves on to words, then the brain turns sound and words into knowledge and understanding:

Its sounds tell us of the tide's turn first. Down by  
mud flats, deceptive sand, sea sends signals, high  
frequency. It's really worth a close listen  
because flood starts with hiss, then a glisten  
then drowns. Transmission's current. Sound shows us.  
Curlew, Plover, Redshank, they hear, each knows.  
(Street 2013, 78)

As our attention follows the enunciation of the words, we also follow the signals sent by the sea, which announces the turning of the tide before we can apprehend it visually: “flood starts with hiss, then a glisten.” We hear the water coming in before we can see it; the “hiss” comes before the “glisten.” By the time we see, we already know that the tides are turning. Vision confirms what hearing has already let us know. The progression and sequencing of perception in the poem reflects the development of our senses and our nervous system when we are still in the womb; we can hear and sense before we can see, and the “drown” evokes the gurgling we hear when we are still inside the womb. The poem thus appeals to a mode of perception before socialization in which the senses dominate. We have all experienced it but not transformed it into a source of knowledge. Yet, in the poem, it is the predominance of sensorial perception upon which the knowledge addressed in the last line of the poem is predicated.

Human beings tend to consider conscious knowledge their privilege; but here, it is the water birds who are the agents of this process. Collectively, as a species, they hear the sea announcing the turning of the tides. They know how to listen to and interpret these sounds. This is how each individual bird seamlessly turns perception into knowledge.

## The Drift: Fog Redux

The instrumental piece “Fog Redux” closes the first section of *Estuary* and takes the listener into the second section, which consists of composite pieces based on poems emerging from the artists’ experience of the Mersey Estuary around Liverpool. “Fog Redux” is one of five instrumental pieces which, interspersed across *Estuary*, invite the listener to tune in to the sonorous weave and weft of *Estuary*; or, to rephrase it in the terminology used by Jean-Luc Nancy in his reflections on the sonorous and on listening, to become part of *Estuary*’s “sonorous present”: “The sonorous present is the result of space-time: it spreads through space, or

rather it opens a space that is its own, the very spreading out of its resonance, its expansion and reverberation” (2007, 13). These instrumental pieces open such a space. They focus the listeners’ attention on the sonorous alone and, in so doing, set the mode of listening for the composite pieces, in which the spoken word is slightly louder than the instrumental track. Nancy, in the passage quoted above, deploys a terminology that strongly relies on the vibrational and what we will see in the alternation of composite and instrumental pieces is the presence of vibrations in the multiple ways identified by Marcus Boon as “a mathematical and physical concept, as a religious or ontological force, and as a psychological / psychoanalytic determinant of subjectivity” (2022, 3). We will see how listeners attune to these manifestations of vibrations by settling into what Campbell refers to as a “cumulative immersive effect of music” (2024b, n.p.). Campbell points out that instrumental music is potentially egalitarian because no instrument or sound necessarily dominates or stands out, certainly not permanently. The instrumental constellation is akin to the estuary worlding: none of its elements and facets can claim centrality, they all participate in the worlding of the estuary. The focus of listening might shift, but this occurs from within the sonorous presence and worlding and does not assign importance to any one of the estuary’s or *Estuary*’s constituents. The state of attunement created through the instrumental Redux pieces carries over (Campbell refers to this colloquially as a “drift”; 2024b, n.p) into the composite pieces, and listeners will respond to the composite pieces from within the sonorous worlding they have just entered by immersing themselves into an instrumental piece.

## “Another Place”: Imaginative and Concrete Sound

The poem “Another Place” takes the listener into the sound world surrounding the sculpture installation “Another Place” by Antony Gormley, erected in 2005 on Crosby Beach. Crosby is located on the Mersey Estuary, just outside Liverpool City and adjacent to still operational docks which can be seen from the beach. It is home to one of the port’s busiest stretches of shipping lane. The installation is responded to as a reflection on emigration and on the hope for a better life elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Gormley designed 100 iron statues, based on 17 molds of his own body. They are placed across Crosby beach at varying distances from the waterline,

---

<sup>7</sup> Emigration and immigration define Liverpool’s social fabric. It is estimated that between 1830 and 1930, over 9 million emigrants sailed from Liverpool to the U.S., Canada and Australia. (<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/archivesheet64>). The city has one of the oldest Chinese-descendant communities in the country, as well as a large Irish community. It is believed that



some of them on the beach and some of them on mud flats. Some are partially submerged in the sand. Each of them faces outwards towards the sea. As the tides come and go, the statues are gradually submerged by the floods at high tide and gradually emerge as the waterline recedes for low tide. People can (and do) spend hours watching the tides change in relation to the statues, attuning themselves to the rhythm and the temporality of ebbing and flowing. Gormley himself has noted that “many people have expressed to me the consolation or the use that they put *Another Place* to, either to deal with personal loss or just as a place that’s there constantly in the changing conditions of the year, the sea, the sky, but also our moods, and that this work can become in a way a foil to or measure of our life course” (Jones 2015, n.p.). Originally, the statues had been intended to be taken to New York and to be installed there, at the point of arrival of many European emigrants; however, it was decided that they should remain in Crosby and not emigrate. Over the years, their appearance has changed: all are showing signs of corrosion, some are covered in barnacles, sea snails and other marine life, and many of them are temporarily adorned by passers-by with clothes, hats, glasses, or other items. As a result, each statue has acquired its own characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Sound Inside the Silence*, Street mentates throughout the book on the ways in which we adorn mute objects – mostly, pieces of art or nature – with imagined sounds (cf. 2019). He is particularly interested in public art because of its availability and present-ness. Public art can become a part of each of us “because one comes upon it rather like a rock or a cleft in the landscape. It is there as we are, on equal terms, and it is invested with a voice in the same way that everything that surrounds it interacts with us as we pass through” (Street 2019, 156). Statues in particular speak to and in our imagination. Street observes that we as human beings often imagine sounds for mute objects like statues. These sounds he terms “imaginative sounds,” and he places them in a dynamic, complementary relationship to “concrete sounds” (Street 2019, Ch. 2). The statues of “*Another Place*” stand within the rich soundscape made up of the concrete sounds of the seashore: the swishing of the waves and of the wind, the water trickling into the sand as the tides come and go, the sound of the wind in the dunes, people’s voices. Street has described beachscapes as “rooms with all portals open, and just as we change a space by our presence in it, so unforeseen forces alter the sound of a shoreline as they pour in through the windows of air, brushing, touching,

---

50% of Liverpool’s population are Irish-descendant, whereby this often includes other ethnicities as well.

8 See: <https://www.antonygormley.com/works/exhibitions/another-place> for illustrations.

striking and shaping its character” (2020, 96). In his work on soundless art, Street reflected on statues and their appeal to the imagination:

We have heard of legendary statues that have become empowered with the ability to walk, weep and speak. Imaginatively, every statue that engages us fully seems uncannily to possess the potential to do so. Placed within the landscape, with all the elements singing around it, this potential seems only a whisper away. (Street 2019, 156)

Gormley’s installation inspired such a response in Street:

We hear Antony Gormley’s statues of human beings against the backing track of the landscape, the sound of which constantly evolves, while the figures seem to observe the terrain, lost in their own thoughts. They may shock, or at least startle us, at first sight, these apparent aliens who are reflections of ourselves, yet when we approach them, they seem to possess a poignant voice that enters us by other means than the auricular. (Street 2019, 155)

In the poem “Another Place” Street imagines the voices of these statues. These imagined voices interplay with music and song on *Estuary*, which evokes “the elements singing around them” (Street 2019, 156). It is composed of a classical guitar track and Street’s poem. The guitar track embeds and holds both speech and song, like the elements hold the statues. Street’s spoken word alternates with vocals by Perri Alleyne-Hughes. The poem consists of five stanzas. Stanzas 1, 2 and 4 are read by Street. These stanzas first contemplate and characterize the statues and then, imagine thoughts and intentions for them, or affective responses to them.

He is left behind by imperatives  
of outward freight and ferry,  
Their time passing his, rooted in sand.  
He imagines the shipboard sight of him,  
looking astern at a man intense even  
from their distance, transmitting  
to departure his diminished longing.  
(Street 2013, 72)

Stanzas 3 and 5, sung by Alleyne-Hughes, contemplate and evoke the affective forces of nature in terms of a tidal dynamic of “two presents”:

Purpose and escape arc away, slow  
arrows falling beyond oceans’ curve,  
weft through offshore’s hefting forest.  
Two presents pull these weathers  
apart, tided by wind’s dynamic.  
(Street 2013, 72)

The two presents, like the tides, give each other energy and create the poem's dynamism: high tide and low tide, ebb and flow, stay and go, embracing and setting free, the view from the statues and the gaze of passengers on passing ships upon the statues.

Correspondingly, the alternation between the two voices invites a meta-reflection on authenticity and origin. Just as the statues were created by one person and on the mold of one body, the poem was originally written by one person and the poetic voice throughout is Street's. Yet, wind, salt water, animals and humans have set to work on the statues and as a result, each now looks different. The elements are to the statues what performance is to the poem. Similarly, a different voice and elocution style – Alleyne-Hughes' – performs the poem's words and turns them into song. Neither the statues nor the poem have abandoned their respective origins; yet they are changed. We might even extend this metaphor to suggest that the social dynamics of emigration affect the personalities and cultural identities of human beings in a way analogous to the effect that the elements of wind and sea have on the statues and indeed, to the effect that the performance has on the words of the poem. The social, the elemental and the artistic all change the original, without transforming it altogether. As we emigrate and are receptive to our new environment, we change and transform without losing who we were before we came to "another place."

## **"Pier Head with Ferry, Evening": Stillness**

The title of "Pier Head with Ferry, Evening" is reminiscent of a naturalist painting; it captures a specific moment in time and space. The performance of the poem is sparse; Street reads it without musical accompaniment. It is set in Liverpool, by the Pier Head. The Pier Head is located in the town center on the banks of the Mersey, just by the Three Graces, and it is the point of departure and arrival for the ferries that cross the Mersey towards the town of Birkenhead, on the opposite Wirral Peninsula. This is also where the Mersey is at its narrowest, and the location is known as "The Narrows." The poem is created from the poet's immersion in the moment of dusk, looking out from the Liverpool Pier Head towards Birkenhead:

. . . estuary  
 dusk burst by navigation's green and red, rumours  
 gathering on the far shore, granary and spire  
 flowering silhouettes, shipyards' last echoes ringing  
 clear across the river's deepening sea habit  
 (Street 2013, 74)

The green and red signal lights are more strikingly visible during dusk. The spire and the granary refer to buildings in Birkenhead, the outlines of which are visible as silhouettes from the Pier Head, as is the shipyard. Also visible from across the water is the Belfast ferry, which sails from Birkenhead docks every evening at 6.30 pm. Boarding begins at around 5.30 pm. If the poem is set at dusk, it must be set in early April or in early October. The atmosphere is of attentive waiting (for the Belfast boat to board and set off) and of detailed observation; of a stillness that Street has described as “not a stasis, but the infinite silence of possibility” (2019, 8). In this stillness, as we are perfectly attuned and receptive to all aspects of vibrations in ourselves and with our surroundings, we tune in to sounds through cochlear and non-cochlear listening alike. Cochlear listening refers to sounds that we apprehend through the ear; non-cochlear listening are the vibrations of sound and matter that we perceive vibrationally, through the sensitivity of touch. In *In The Blink of an Ear* (2009), a work that Street repeatedly refers to throughout his own reflective work (cf. Street 2019), Seth Kim-Cohen makes a case for a non-cochlear, conceptual art; that is, a sonic art that abandons “the confidence in the constitution of the sonic self” (2009, xx) that is constructed by way of cochlear listening and instead, explores the wide-open field of the interplay of cochlear and vibrational listening. This, he argues, does not discard cochlear listening; rather, it questions its dominance and instead engages “both the non-cochlear and the cochlear, and the constituting trace of each in the other” (Kim-Cohen 2009, xxi). The attentiveness to both modes of listening and their constant interplay with each other – Kim-Cohen adapts the phrase “to pass into one another indefinitely” from Derrida (2009, xxi) to characterize their interdependent dynamic – liberates us from constantly listening *for* or *to* sound; instead, it encourages us to explore what is *around* or *pertains to* certain sounds (cf. 2009, xvii). Kim-Cohen argues that this mode of listening “allows for sound’s interactions with the linguistic, the philosophical, and the social” (2009, xvii). “Another Place” already featured this interaction through the theme of emigration; “Pier Head” develops it through the metaphor of navigation.

Apart from the obvious reference in the title, the first line of the poem emphasizes navigation: “At low water through mud banks’ shine and slip they’ve learnt | to navigate a deep channel out there downstream” (Street 2013, 74). Navigation conjoins attentiveness to materiality, sociality, ecology and subjectivity. Learning to navigate without modern technology requires the ability to be still, attentive, receptive, and responsive. As John Mack notes in his study *The Sea: A Cultural History*, “being ‘attuned’ is one of the qualities that all descriptions of navigational practice insist on” (2011, 114). Such attunement relates the individual with all the other forces that are at work in a given moment; in the case of “Pier Head,” this manifests in the poem’s peculiar representation of agency.

“Pier Head” lacks individual agents. Instead, it mentions collectivities (“they” have learnt to navigate, “we” wait for the tides down river, “we” are a widening tidal place), and it is very much alive to the force of actants, as Jane Bennett understands them through her reading of Bruno Latour. She summarizes his definition as “a source of action that can be human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (Bennett 2010, ix). In “Pier Head,” relationality with “the presence around us” (2019, 16), metaphorized by Street as the moment of “chiming” with the tides, makes us alive to the most powerful actant in this poem and the following one, the tides:

The Belfast boat, due out late evening, is boarding.  
 We wait for tides down river, we’re a widening  
 tidal place ready to chime with the next high or  
 the one after that. There goes the ferry again  
 weaving its dance home. Departing lights shape darkness.  
 (Street 2013, 74)

## “Tidal”: Cochlear and Vibrational Listening

After the absence of the instrumental on “Pier Head,” the next composite piece “Tidal” initiates with a sequence of guitar arpeggios, guiding the listener into a lateral, vibrational mode of listening; and “Tidal” indeed invites the listener to engage in constant, minute shifts between lateral and focused forms of listening, between vibrational and cochlear listening.

Throughout his reflective work, Street is attentive to the difference between, and the interplay of cochlear and vibrational listening (cf. 2017, 2019). “Cochlear listening” refers to sounds that enter the ear; “vibrational listening” refers to the receptiveness of the body to vibrations. Cochlear listening allows us to focus on specific sounds, including words; vibrational listening is similar to peripheral vision in that it gives us a sense of the place or the situation we are in, and of who else is in it with us. Poetry readings and performances tend to privilege cochlear over vibrational listening because the event genre invites us to focus on voice and words. On recordings, the spoken word usually takes precedent over all other sounds. Indeed, poetry performances are usually framed as opportunities to make one’s voice heard, or to give voice. This is a legacy of the lyrical mode, which claims that poetry is an expression of subjectivity. Rarely is a poetry reading or a poetry performance conceptualized as a space that invites listeners to attune to the vibrations of an environment, guided by the poet. Campbell identi-

fied this as a challenge when reflecting on his work as a producer, and I have argued above that taking the reader into a sound world is a defining characteristic of the collaborative work of Campbell and Street. “Tidal” invites readers to engage in lateral, vibrational listening through the instrumental track as well as the reading voice and the style and content of the poem’s words.

Street’s reading voice drifts in and out of the guitar track, replicating the drift effect that Campbell introduces in the instrumental Redux pieces that frame the sequence. The words in the poem are evocative, touching on each other rather than conveying a linear, structured meaning:

With flood, incoming  
memory washes  
shorelines unequal  
to their horizons,  
the quay’s broken stone  
imaging old ship  
tonnage on harbour,  
the rough embrace  
of a returning  
longed for at each tide.  
(Street 2013, 72)

There is little point in listening to the poem in a focused, cochlear manner. One would only pick up half sentences, a collection of charged and meaningful words that do not quite hang together but seem to touch each other in strange ways. If, in contrast, we allow our sensations to tune into the drift of the music and the resonances between the words, then we find ourselves listening from within the weave and weft of the tidal movements and we become ourselves tidal Estuary-creatures. Eidsheim has articulated this process with regards to sound:

Like sound, which comes into being through its material transmission, human beings are not stable and knowable prior to entering into a relationship; rather, we unfold and bring each other into being through relationships. Our potential for recognizing and accepting self and other rests on our ability and willingness to be changed by our encounters, rather than merely by the potentially desirable qualities (or their absence) in others. (2015, 24–25)

Street articulates this same effect poetically, when he writes that we are “sharing lives with sea | swallowed up by land | at a moon’s will, hope’s | shout along cracked wharves” (2013, 75). That state of mindful awareness from within the sound and rhythm of the tides tunes us right into the vibrations of the sea, which is the material weave and weft of the thick event of the Estuary, holding and moving all its elements in a constant, ever-present, ever-changing relationship with each other.

## Conclusion: “A widening tidal place ready to chime”

I hope that I have shown through this exploration of *Estuary* how the interplay of poetry and music can create an intermedial performance that we can approach and experience as a “worlding,” a constellation of facets that together create a thick event and also, respond to the thick event that we participate in through our presence in the estuary.

The interplay of vibrational and cochlear listening, of concrete and imaginative sound, and of stillness and the movement of drift are all crucial to our journey into the sound world of the estuary. If we practiced these techniques separately from each other, they would allow us to explore different facets of the Estuary. But if we engage not only with each facet but with the weave and weft that holds everything together and turns different facets into forces in a constellation, then we can engage with the thick event, with the vibrancy of its materialities, socialities, ecologies and subjectivities. When this happens, we feel fully present and become participants in a worlding through listening. This generates immense pleasure, a sense of agency, and ethical responsibility for the worldings that we are a part of, and for the conditions of their existence.

Campbell and Street curate this coming-into-presence as an experiential process that subsequently grounds itself in a reflective process. In this process, different registers intersect with each other. Kim-Cohen points out that approaching sound as non-cochlear does not mean that one register replaces the other; quite the contrary, “a conceptual sonic art would engage both the cochlear and the non-cochlear, and the constituting trace of each other” (2009, xxi). Similarly, Eidshheim points out that the pre-symbolic order exists at the same time as the symbolic order (cf. 2015, 159–160). *Estuary* places these different registers in conversation with each other.

*Estuary* is an unusual piece with regards to the plentiful and rich contemporary artistic work on space, especially when we approach it from the angle of poetry. In traditional nature writing and pastoral poetry, poets draw on the art of poetry to validate landscapes, nature and the wild, and to advocate on their behalf. In *Estuary*, by contrast, the artists do not anthropomorphize the world of estuaries by imagining any part of them as voice, or by claiming to give voice, or speak on behalf of them; in this way, *Estuary* could be considered an example of ecopoetry. Instead, *Estuary* teaches us to be still and attentive so that we can hear and listen to sounds beyond voice. In that place of attentive stillness, “we’re a widening tidal place ready to chime with the next high or | the one after that” (Street 2013, 74). But once we have become part of the worlding that is this tidal

place, we must protect it because without it, the person we have become will be dispossessed, severed from the relationality that now defines us as part of that worlding. In the performance, collaboration enacts such relationality because collaborations are in and of themselves relational acts. For this reason, such a performance must include several media – in the recording discussed here, speech and music, and in other versions of *Estuary*, those two as well as dance – that stand in an egalitarian relationship to each other.

But – and this is where another ethical dimension comes in – collaborations do not happen out of nowhere, and they do not thrive just by themselves. They emerge in contexts in which the artists are embedded within a relational, social-artistic fabric. These fabrics are held in place, maintained, mended, and spun by organizers. Campbell and Street met because another Liverpool-based poet and organizer – Dave Ward, Director of The Windows Project<sup>9</sup> – recognized an affinity between them and put them in touch, after he had met Street through a recommendation and Campbell through a chance encounter. Moreover, the cultural scene in Liverpool has fostered and educated audiences to act as astute listeners who have built their competence in listening to collaborative intermedial projects since the 1960s. Organizations like Writing on the Wall, which commissioned *Estuary* and showcased *Journey into Space*, facilitate and enable such a culture of experimentality and of listening, and places like Prohibitions Studios and the Capstone Theatre provide spaces for production and performance. It is crucial that these relational fabrics and their weavers receive the support – including the funding – that keeps them going.

## References

- Allaby, Michael. "Estuary." *A Dictionary of Geology and Earth Sciences*. Ed. Michael Allaby. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199653065.001.0001/acref-9780199653065-e-2834> (January 26, 2025).
- Anderson, Ben, and Paul Harrison (eds.). *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2010.
- Boon, Marcus. *The Politics of Vibration: Music as a Cosmopolitical Practice*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2022.
- Campbell, Neil. *Journey Into Space*. Digital album. Liverpool, 2023. <https://neilcampbell.bandcamp.com/album/journey-into-space> (January 26, 2025).
- Campbell, Neil. *The Smoky God*. Digital album. Liverpool, 2024a. <https://neilcampbell.bandcamp.com/album/the-smoky-god> (January 26, 2025).

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.windowproject.co.uk/>.



- Campbell, Neil. Interview with the author (unpublished). Liverpool, July 25, 2024b.
- Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *Sensing Sound: Singing & Listening as Vibrational Practice*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2015.
- Gander, Forrest. "Ecopoetry and Water: An Introduction to the Collection." Poetry Foundation, 2024. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/1607415/ecopoetry-and-water-introduction> (January 26, 2025).
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988): 575–599.
- Jones, Catherine. "Antony Gormley talks about Another Place; Artist celebrates 10 years of the Iron Men on Crosby Beach." *Crosby Herald* (June 26, 2015). <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A463640190/STND> (January 26, 2025).
- Kim-Cohen, Seth. *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Lorimer, Jamie, and Timothy Hodgetts. *More-Than-Human*. London and New York: Routledge, 2024.
- Mack, John. *The Sea: A Cultural History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2007.
- Street, Seán. *Time Between Tides: New and Selected Poems 1981-2009*. Ware: Rockingham Press, 2009.
- Street, Seán. *Cello*. Ware: Rockingham Press, 2013.
- Street, Seán. *Sound Poetics: Interaction and Personal Identity*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Street, Seán. *The Sound Inside the Silence: Travels in the Sonic Imagination*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Street, Seán. *The Sound of a Room: Memory and the Auditory Presence of Place*. London and New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Street, Seán. Interview with the author (unpublished). Liverpool, July 30, 2024.
- Street, Seán, Neil Campbell, Perri Alleyne-Hughes. *Estuary*. Digital album. Liverpool, 2017. <https://neilcampbell.bandcamp.com/album/estuary> (May 13, 2025).
- Street, Seán, Neil Campbell, and Peter Dover. "ESTUARY." YouTube-video, @bashstreetatopplestudios9972, August 23, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yvn6aqMQxCg> (October 9, 2024).

