



Mary Modeen, *Healing Earth*, 2006, Isle of Man (images courtesy of the artist).

## Echoes of Voices Long Gone: Soundsculpture

Visual artists are in a curious position in regard to voices. They are at one and the same time 'silent' as individuals, investing their visual art with the charge of personal and editorial commentary, but also 'audible' when it happens that sound itself is incorporated in their chosen medium.

I am an artist who has only recently ventured into the world of sound art. In an exhibition last year (2006) on the Isle of Man, located in the Irish Sea between Ireland, Scotland and England, I was commissioned by Manx National Heritage to create a three-part outdoor sited installation. This was entitled *Healing Earth* and consisted in part of three sixteen-foot high steel poles, tapered to a three-inch diameter at the base and a six-inch diameter at the top. These were placed in three sites on the island.

In addition to the painted steel poles, a 'sound tapestry' was created for each site. This was comprised of many elements: recorded Manx voices from the archives of the National Library, contemporary voices, ambient sound, simulated sounds and a small amount of music. The viewers at each site accessed the sounds through a 'U-Turn' box, which operates by winding and does not need electricity to play. This and an interpretive text were positioned on a purpose-designed oak table stand near each pole. Viewers could play the sounds, listen to the soundwork, and view the site with special attention to place and placement.

The first site was Niarbyl. It is on the west coast of the island, and has long distant views over hills, coast, and water, down towards the Calf of Man. Long views, too, in terms of history suggesting ancient ancestors, dwelling on the coast, watching out at sea. Several elements of sound were woven into this piece, including heartbeats, historic Manx voices, deep bass notes, ambient sounds with gulls crying and wind blowing, and snippets of Manx Celtic traditional music and drums.

Manx National Heritage's Grove House was the most northerly site, near Ramsey. At the foot of the gardens, a view through trees revealed the flat meadowland rising abruptly into the steep hills: the contrast is between high and low. The alluvial plains meet the hills in oppositions of vertical and horizontal land. A steam train runs down the embankment and the stream flows toward the sea. All this – water, train whistle, gathering storm clouds, and timpani rolls – are audible on the soundtape, embedded as a sound file in the online version of this issue of *Junctures*.<sup>2</sup>

The grounds of the great Laxey Wheel are the third site, on the path to the engine shed. This is the largest working waterwheel in the world, and a visible testament to Victorian industrial engineering. Miners extracted ore deep underground in a pattern of activity and shelter. With the wheel slowly moving, almost in sight of the sea, water flows down deep and shaded ravines.

All three sited sculptures are part of a series of imposing forms that pierce the earth's skin and resonate with overlays of sound. The fixedness of the poles stand to mark this place, one's place, the viewers' place of perception, vision and a moment in time.

This work resonates with the historical aesthetic of what is sometimes called a *gesamtkunstwerk*. It is German for 'total art', that which includes every aspect of consideration. In this genre, light, sound, movement, space, colour and so on were all carefully planned in Medieval to Baroque art, culminating in the works of Richard Wagner later in the nineteenth century. What makes this work more contemporary than historical in its use of synthesis as a method is that it is sited outdoors. Unlike the interior spaces of historical antecedents, this work incorporates the whole environment for each site: train whistles, gulls, recorded historical voices, wind, heartbeats, waves, and storm clouds. Similar to the German Romantics, the intention behind this synthesis is the evocation of all ways of knowing and understanding, not just the reliance on sight or sound. Intuitive levels of deep knowledge are beckoned.

As part of the interpretive text on each panel, I wrote these words:

*We are here on this earth, not just on it, but a part of it. As human animals our lives, at their best, are sustained by ways of knowing that have grown for centuries, tended by our ancestors. Something in the wind's smell, something in the evening sun, something in the lay of the land whispers to us in words we have forgotten. Awaking dormant knowledge, healing begins with a quest for balance.*

*The ancient Chinese developed a philosophy, a medicine, and a way of living based on attunement to channels of life energy. These have been called by various names, Chi, Tao or Dao. All refer to a harmony of life force, conducted through Nature and so through the earth, through animals and all living things. Disharmony – or lack of attention paid to imbalances – is the cause of disruption and grief. Acupuncture is one form of healing based on this knowledge. The needle penetrates the skin, and touches the channel of energy, vibrates and resonates with restorative contact.*

*So, too, we humans, animals still despite our intelligence need the grace of harmony. What do we bring? What do we give when we take? Voices from the past echo through the gulls' cry and the wind.*

Voices, especially the recorded Manx voices, have a particular poignancy for Manx people. The tiny fragments used for this project of mine came from recordings of the last of the islanders who spoke Manx as a mother tongue.<sup>3</sup> Members of the Irish Folklore Commission travelled to Man in 1948 to record these elderly men and women. Ned Maddrell, the last surviving native-speaker, died in December 1974. In the set published by Manx National Heritage under

the title of *Skealyn Vannin* (*Vannin* is Man or Mann in Manx), the six CD-Rom set documents men's and women's voices, telling stories, reciting verse, sharing anecdotes and singing.<sup>4</sup>

Their particular blend of Gaelic in a Manx accent had the distinctiveness of words and phrases not found elsewhere. Although certainly closely related to the Irish Gaelic of Ulster and Munster, and to Scottish west-coast Gaelic, and much less closely to the Brythonic languages of Cornwall, Wales, and Brittany<sup>5</sup>, certain words and pronunciations were purely Manx. This is not surprising, as many island-based communities have a degree of remoteness which promotes idiosyncratic variations in dialect and idiom in any language or custom. But also, over generations, truly distinctive patterns begin to emerge in the flux of a spoken language. For example, 'pony' or 'little horse' in Scottish Gaelic is *capull beag*, in Irish Gaelic is *cappal beag*, in Welsh is *ceffyl bach*, and in Manx is *cabfyl beg*.

Variations in pronunciation are not the only differences from Manx's closest linguistic kin. For example, convention in writing and spelling show a certain distinctiveness. In Scottish and Irish Gaelic, the 'mh' sound is closest to a 'v' pronunciation in English. But Manx written language uses the written V instead of the more traditional 'Mh' as is seen in this following example: 'Isle of Man' in Irish would be written *Oileán Mhanainn* or in Scottish Gaelic would be *Eilean Mhanainn*, but in Manx is actually written *Ellan Vannin*.<sup>6</sup> The variations in spelling and written form (orthography) here are that of an Anglicised or phonetic convention; the pronunciation would be about the same in all three spoken languages.

This returns us to the issue of sound. The speakers' voices on these historical and valuable tapes preserves another important aspect of voices. The voicing of the language is at least as fascinating as the words themselves. These are the voices of elderly people; the women have high-pitched wavering notes in their voices. The men have reedy voices, more tenor than bass at this point in their lives. At various points, they laugh, recalling memories and people. They cough, they go quiet, losing themselves in a moment's recollections. The rhythm, speed and pattern of their voices are significant. The fullness of sound is not just the sense – it is the whole experience, the human character, perceptions and memories which underlay the content of the words. Just as in the oral tradition itself, the weight of meaning is the sum of all performative elements – the storyteller's body, gestures and face, the rhythm of the words, and the twinkle in the eye are just as telling as the literal meaning of the words.

This personal, often quirky element makes the living language the treasure that it is. The Manx-speaking voices on Man that have been lost are valued today, in part through the documentation of sound recordings, but also in the resurgence of interest and commitment to the revival of the Manx language. Five of the island's pre-schools and one primary school teach solely in Manx; it is taught as a second language at all of the island's primary and secondary schools. Signs, place names, traditional names for flora and fauna, and even the resurrection of old family names<sup>7</sup> are further evidence of indigenous pride at the value of the language in solidifying culture and identity. Manx is far from being a moribund language: today it is witnessing a true renaissance.

The importance of language as bearer and shaper of culture is incontrovertible. In many cultures around the world today where identity – particularly indigenous identity – has been subsumed by colonisation, Westernisation, and the influx of population from elsewhere, a

resurgence of interest and commitment to preservation of native languages remains high on the agenda. Māori language, for example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Basque language in Basque Spain are indicative of cultural voices that refuse to be silenced; in both of these cases youngsters are being taught the language of their cultural heritage at every level in education. As with the Manx, the true renaissance is in the voices of the people in their native tongue, rich in its diversity, genuine in its 'locational identity'.<sup>8</sup>

Voices, then, on the Isle of Man will resound in times to come with children's voices added to those of the elders speaking in Manx. The shouts and laughter of children's play are embedded in the soundworks of *Healing Earth*, in tapestries of water, wind, gulls' cries, the sound of thunder, of the distant past, the recent past, and of now, in a pattern as old as time itself.

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- 1 All the images included here were first illustrated in *This Place Called Home*, ed. Mary Modeen (Douglas, Isle of Man: Manx National Heritage, 2006).
- 2 Grove House, steam train, 3 minutes: 34 seconds (AIFF file, Mary Modeen, 2006).
- 3 Information cited in Manx National Heritage and Isle of Man government websites. *Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh* is the Manx Gaelic Society which was founded in 1899. The very active Manx Language Society is *Caaryn ny Gaelgey*.
- 4 *Skeelalyn Vannin*, Douglas, Isle of Man: Manx National Heritage, 2004. Six CD audio tapes in a set with transcriptions, produced from original recordings in 1948 by the Irish Folklore Commission.
- 5 The *Brythonic* category of Celtic languages includes not only Welsh, but Breton, Cornish, and Pictish, amongst others. This is in contrast to the *Goidelic* family of Celtic languages, the closest neighbours to Manx which are cited here above.
- 6 Orthography of Manx Gaelic, Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manx\\_lang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manx_lang) as last accessed on 20 October 2007.
- 7 Peddyr (Peter), Breeshey (Bridgit), and Aalish/Ealish (Alice).
- 8 This term is used by Miwon Kwon in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2002).

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