



JOHANNA HÄLLSTEN

Performing Hekla

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
THE SCHOOL OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

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Project details

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| Output author | Johanna Hällsten |
| Collaborators | Hljómeyki Choir and Juxtavoices. |
| Project title | <i>Performing Hekla</i> |
| Output type | I – Performance |
| Location | Reykjavík, Iceland; Nottingham, UK; Derby, UK |
| Dates | 2014-2020 |

Supplementary information submitted via URL:

Flow performed by Juxtavoices (2019). Directed by Johanna Hällsten. Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, UK.

Rupture performed by Juxtavoices (2019). Directed by Johanna Hällsten. Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, UK.

Rupture performed by Hljómeyki Choir (2014). Directed by Johanna Hällsten. Nordic House, Reykjavík, Iceland.



Figure 2. J. Hällsten, Flow, Juxtavoices,
Nottingham Contemporary, 2019

Research content and significance

DESCRIPTION

The work investigates the translation processes occurring across and within music, language and the natural environment. It aims to test ways of translating the full complexity of sound within the particular environment of a volcanic site, through multiple processes of translation; drawing upon the Icelandic composer Jón Leifs orchestral works that concern the Icelandic landscape.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can multiple processes of translation enable or disrupt an effective transmission to the audience?
- How does the verbalisation of the musical notation alter the way in which the performer engages with the interpretation of the work through the performative act?
- In turn how does this affect the way in which they act as a group, performing the act of translation in action?

PROCESS

The use of voice, and in this case a choir, explores the dynamic of a shared voice whilst also being able to draw attention to the individual's role in communicating as part of a symbiotic system. The video projection presents the choir with a time-based visual score, formed from environmental and animal sounds. The projection is visible to the audience and the choir, thus creating a tension between listening to the choir and 'visually reading' the score as it moves. It shares relationships with the conventions of improvisational scores (Cage, Stockhausen et al), however through the introduction of movement through the score being a moving image, the act of translation for the choir and the act of receiving the work for the audience is tested, and to an extent they share the processes at play.

DISSEMINATION

The project has been disseminated through various conferences and their associated events and an exhibition, thus being received by the research communities and general public concerned with these areas of practice and theory.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The use of intersemiotic, and interlingual translation methods (Jakobson, Benjamin) in the processes of making and reading and performing the work simultaneously challenges how we understand language (communication) and creates a new communal space.

Introduction

The research seeks to explore how we communicate with others, both human and non-human through the use of voice (singular and as part of a group). The project consists of two different visual scores that are performed by choir; Rupture (2014/19) and Flow (2019).

The scores have been performed by two different choirs, a classical choral choir from Iceland, Hljómeyki and an antichoir from the UK, Juxtavoices.

The scores are informed by the Icelandic classical composer Jón Leifs (1899-1968) work concerning the Icelandic landscape, and some of his scores are understood to be near impossible to perform.

The scores for Rupture and Flow centre on how animals in the local habitat of a volcano enter into a dialogue once an eruption is to take place and the aftermath of said event.

The use of a choir, explores the dynamic of a shared voice whilst also being able to draw attention to the individual's role in communicating as part of a symbiotic system.

The work has been performed at Art in Translation, Nordic House, Reykjavík, Iceland, 2014 – performance of Rupture by Hljómeyki Choir; In Dialogue, Nottingham Contemporary, UK, 2019 – performance of Rupture & Flow by Juxtavoices antichoir and exhibited in Anonym, Artcore, Derby, UK, 2020.

Furthermore, the research theoretical and contextual elements have been presented as a paper “Communing with others: performing voices” at the Life with and without animals: the second (un)common worlds conference, University of Derby, UK, 2020.

It is positioned in the fields of sound art, translation studies and animal/human relations, through the cross-disciplinary processes and in particular through the use of specific translation methods, such as intersemiotic and interlingual, and the introduction of movement in the score, the work questions the established ways in which visual scores are produced, performed. These processes enable a different engagement with our relationship with the environment we are with(in).

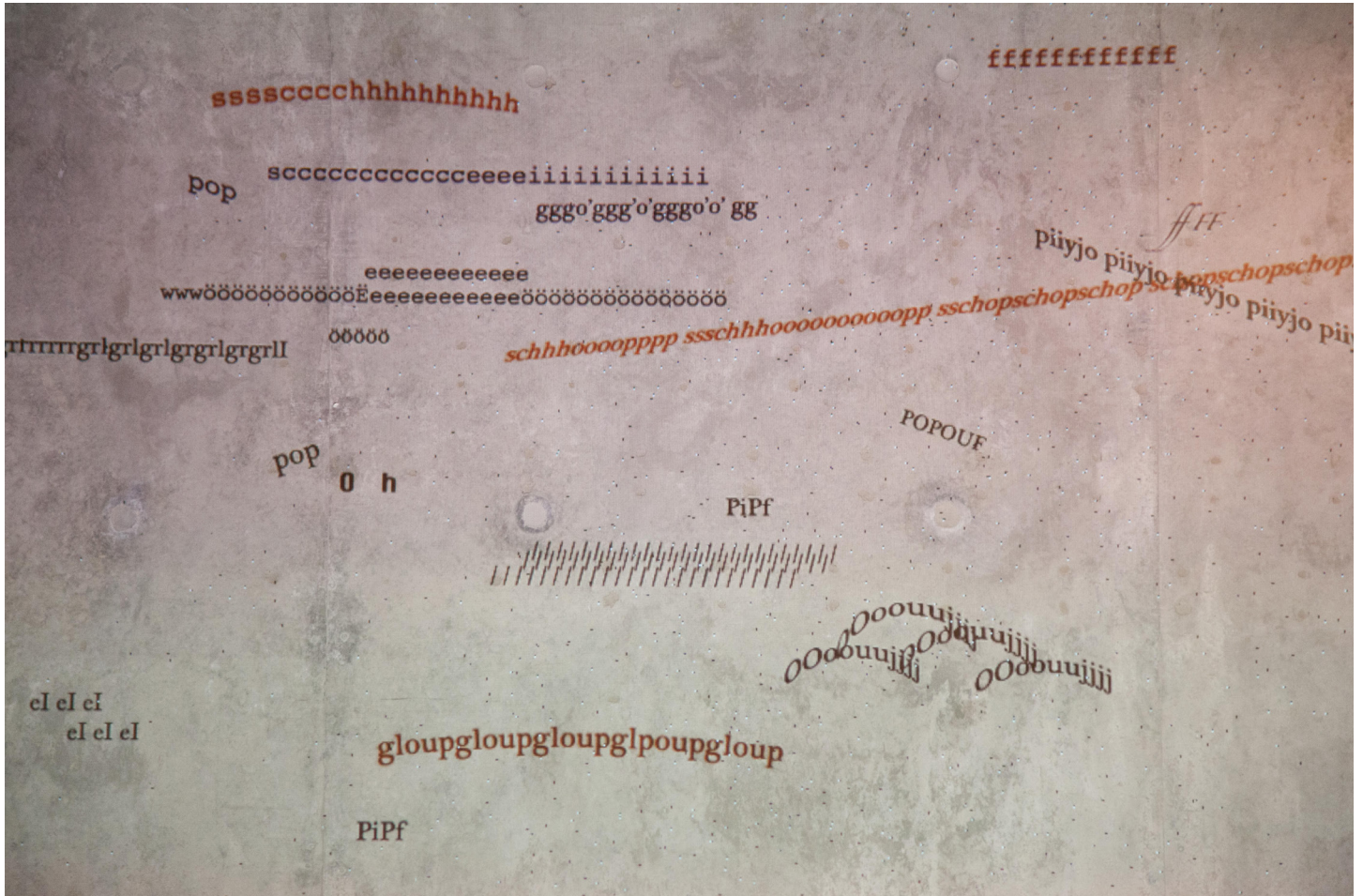


Figure 3. J. Hällsten, Flow, detail of score projection, Nottingham Contemporary, 2019

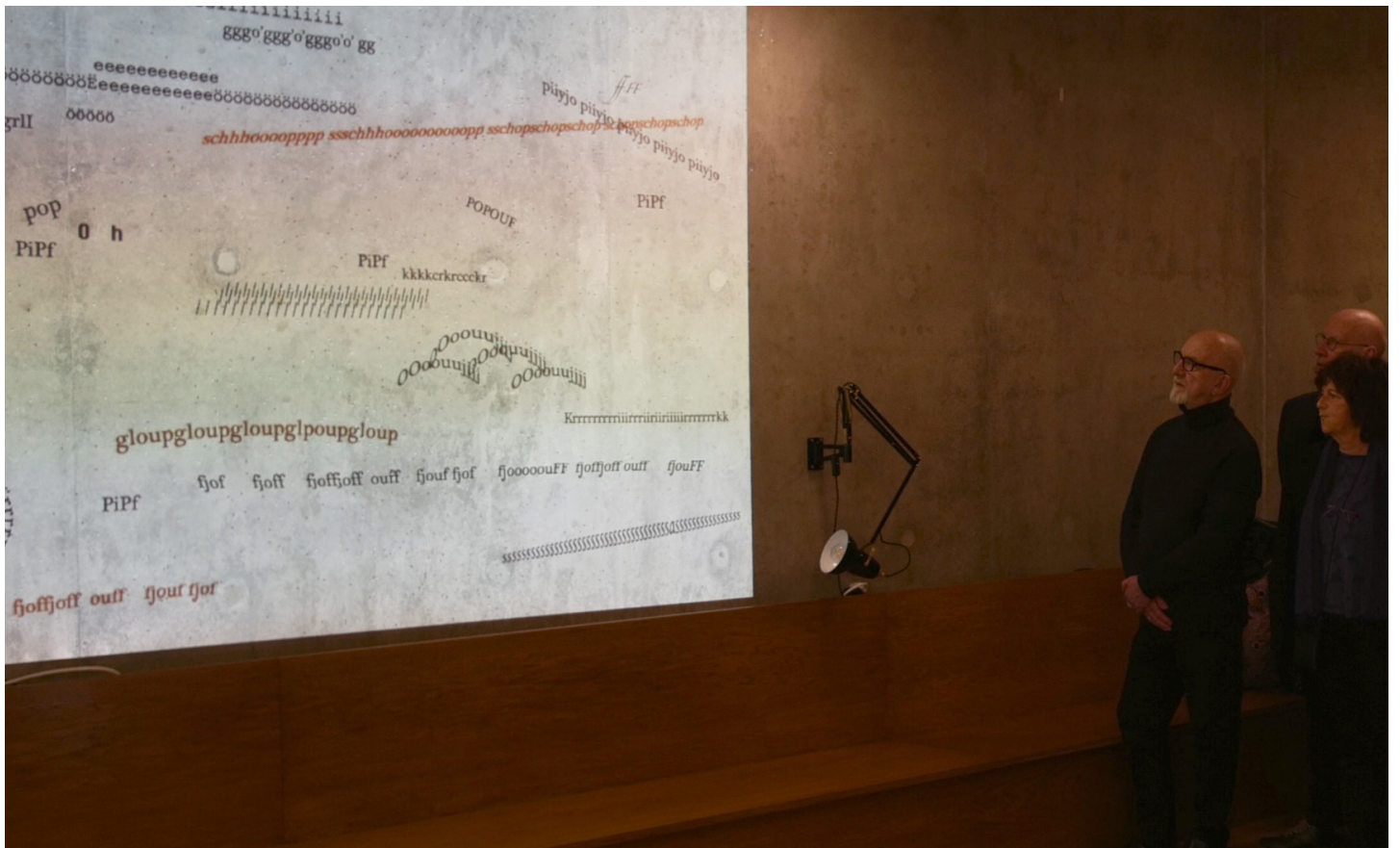


Figure 4. J. Hällsten, Flow, Juxtavoices, Nottingham Contemporary, 2019



Figure 5. J. Hällsten, Martin Archer of Juxtavoices, Nottingham Contemporary, 2019



Figure 6. J. Hällsten, Juxtavoices performing Rupture, Nottingham Contemporary, 2019

Figure 7. J. Hällsten, Rupture, Hljómeyki Choir, Nordic House, Reykjavík, 2014

Research context

The research seeks to position itself within three areas of research and practice, namely; sound art, translation studies and human/animal relations, using each to test the other to some extent. In other words, to see how translation processes can be used to understand animal/human/environment communication; and in turn how that challenges the way in which we may create scores for voice. Finally, to seek to understand whether the use of voice can enable a different understanding of said environment and its inhabitants.

Many scholars (Jakobson, Benjamin et al) have written on the difficulties of translation and how this affects the understanding of a text, a poem, a sentence etc. The syntax, the grammar, the intonation, are all key and specific to a certain language, therefore making it near impossible at times to translate a sentence accurately from one language to another. In relation to this, this research utilises different translation methods, such as intralingual and intersemiotic to test and push the way in which we read and translate not only the recorded sounds but also the visual score.

This context allows for the generation of research questions related to the visual score, movement and performance in relation to translation. Furthermore, it

necessarily questions how we move between languages, including visual, auditory and written languages such as musical scores and what it means to 'have' or 'use' a language. Benjamin refers to as 'the basic error of the translator' of preserving 'the state in which his own language happens to be', by 'allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue'; to 'expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language' (Benjamin 1999: 81), this work does not seek to preserve, but to alter, to reveal through the process the curious aspects of how we listen and verbalise.

The Icelandic composer Jon Leifs¹ (1899-1968) endeavored to translate the Icelandic landscape into orchestral and choral works, such as *Hekla* (1961), a landscape that is sonically very complex. At the same time John Cage published his *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (1961). *Hekla* being the antithesis to Cage's piece 4.33" (1952). What is of interest here is how many of Jón Leifs' works often are so complex that it is either physically impossible to perform by singers or has so many instruments and other parts that they do not fit onto the average music stage, rendering them silent only to those who can read musical notation. The use of the score to be performed by the singer, voice

artist, musician has a long tradition as demonstrated in the recent *Sense sound/ Sound sense* at Whitechapel gallery (2019-2020) draw attention to the use of visual scores to create 'music' 'noise art' 'sound art'. I position this research in relation to this tradition, however, the primary interest here is the process of translation, of interpreting the score and being aware of those around/next to us when in the process of performing and translating.

Rupture and Flow are a dialogue between the environmental language and that of the animals inhabiting it. By choosing to work with the voice of a choir, they have to try to get to grips with how to verbalise the visual moving score, through the use of time, rhythm and interval. At the same time, they have to establish their own

voice, thus there is a struggle between the choir acting as one and individual at the same time. This might be understood as calling upon and to approaching 'becoming animal' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), where they are in a state of flux. In other words, through the instantaneous translation process of verbalising the score whilst also engaging as one in the choir, trying to be one with the choir, the performer enters a state of 'becoming animal'.

1. Leifs was an Icelandic composer classically trained in Europe who later in his life returned home to Iceland where he wrote pieces based on the Icelandic sagas and the natural environment. *Hekla* (1961) for example, explores the ways in which our environment communicates through sound, an aural language without words, through complex orchestral work that include many non-conventional noise-producing items such as stones, chains and anvils.

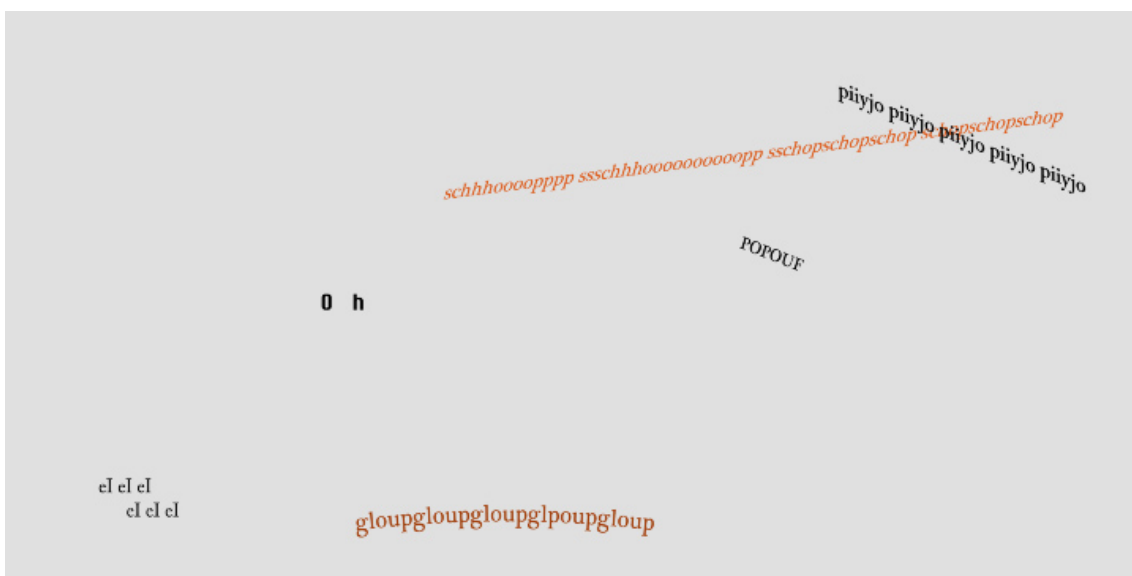


Figure 8. J. Hällsten, *Flow*, detail of score, 2019

Research process

The research process includes different methods, such as listening, gathering primary and secondary information in Iceland, field recordings, translation processes, audio-visual practices (audio editing, video editing etc), performance and voice theory, to name a few. These are used multiple times and at various stages of the research process.

In 2014, a research trip to Iceland took place. This allowed for the opportunity to record sounds from mount Hekla, geysers and the volcanic landscape. Material was gathered on Jón Leifs in order to gain an understanding of Jón Leifs work as a whole, paying particular attention to his later works such as *Landfall - Overture*, Op.41 (1955), *Geysir*, Op.51 (1961) and *Hekla*, Op.52 (1961), where he seeks to create an aural tableaux of the Icelandic landscape. This included speaking with the choral master Hörður Askelsson of Hallgrímskirkja Mötet Choir who have performed several of Leifs works. Together with this I spent time with at The Iceland Music Information Centre, where I also discussed and learnt how Leifs use of the music score, together with many meetings with Icelandic composers such as Hildigunnur Rúnardóttir, in order to get a fuller understanding of the complexities of Leifs scores and how some have been performed (some of his scores are too complex to perform

by a choir for example). The recorded material and information gathered formed the basis for the making of the sound scores. The sound scores are a translation of volcanic, environmental and animal sounds; different translation processes were used for each piece. For practical, and safety reasons, I made use of sounds of animal and volcanoes recorded by others. A key method in the research is listening practices, informed by Hildegard Westerkamp's (2006) and Pauline Oliveros's (2010) sensitivity to being in the environment through listening. Further to this Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening* (2007) stresses the importance of the process of listening, the durational establishing and re-establishing of meaning. Thus, he draws attention to the frameworks and conventions to test, uncover, scramble and reassemble the subject in question.

Both works went through several layers of translation processes, from auditory to visual and back and to text in various ways, and included editing where particular attention to rhythm and positioning took place, taking into consideration how the choir may or may not be able to translate the score and perform it simultaneously. The use of two very different choirs (classical and anti-choir) was a decision taken to test the scores and how differently or

similarly they would be translated and performed. The key aspect here lies in the performativity – the differentiation between verbalisation and vocalisation, where verbalisation, almost always in a semiotic and linguistic way, tries to make sense of something, whilst vocalisation is counter-punctual. However, what is interesting when engaging with the musical score is how these two – verbalisation & vocalisation – interact or disconnect from each other at varying points. And it is through these ruptures, these slippages of translation between

verbalisation and vocalisation that I aim to position the choir and score of *Rupture & Flow*. Richard Taruskin in *Text and Act* (1995) draws attention to a similar issue when he posits; ‘the fundamental distinction between music as tones-in-motion and music as notes-on-page’ (Taruskin, p.70, 1995). Thus, it was important that the choirs were not given too much information about the work, and that minimal rehearsals were undertaken, once in both cases.

2. Only licence free sounds were used.



Figure 9. J. Hällsten, sound recording around Hekla in Iceland, 2014

This was to allow for the score to be translated in real time, there and then in the performance at the different venues. Much like interpreters perform simultaneously: he or she has to translate the text, Text, extra-lingual qualities (intonation, register and emotional state) of the utterance, whilst listening attentively and coordinating interaction between the parties (Wadensjö, 1998).

Once the rehearsals took place, I responded to the feedback given (too fast, 'text' too small to 'read' e.g.) and made amendments. The scores both choirs translated on the day of the performance had therefore not been rehearsed before, an important aspect of these kinds of scores is how they allow

for each performance (whether with the same performers or not) are different from one another. With many sound scores there are some instructions as to how to read the score. For the first, Rupture, there were minimal information given to Hljómeyki choir, and none other than what it was concerning for Juxtavoices. I chose not to include information for Juxtavoices for two reasons, to see what the difference would be in terms of sonic translation and because Juxtavoices are experienced in working with sound scores.



Figure 10. J. Hällsten, test recording performances at Nottingham Contemporary, 2019.

Rupture for choir (9.46mins)

3.5 components:

Volcano

Volcano intermittent additional sounds

Fox

Raven

I would say this:

There are 5 types of sound that form the composition:

volcanic rumble

Volcanic eruption

Lava Flow

Raven

Fox

3 sections/phases in the piece

1.Rumble, leading up to the eruption (5.30mins)

main sound throughout the 1st phase:

rhythmic movement of the volcano – upward scales 3 different harmony, repeating over and over, slight undulation in volume, each phrase contains 6 scales (I'm not sure what this means or whether its correct – six scales would suggest six different scales, which would be six octaves?)

Interspersed sounds of fox and raven during this phase, escalating towards the eruption, together with occasional additional volcanic sounds

2.Eruption (ca. 2mins)

Volcano sound only, it is rhythmic and starts slow, increasing in pace to become a fast pulsating sound – leads to a pitch change and movement upwards in scale – finishes with a pop (is this the 'scream' or harmonic tremor?)

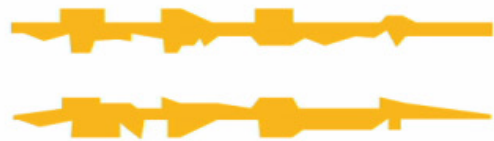
Silence afterwards for a brief moment

3.Lava flows (2.25mins)

Predominantly Volcano sound, rhythmic movement similar to a heavy breathing out, or similar to waves heaving heavily up and down. interspersed with Slight moderations in volume and pitch.

Raven calls towards the end of this phase, 3 sets in quick succession and 1 slightly after on its own.

Figure 11. J. Hällsten, draft score outline for Rupture, 2014.



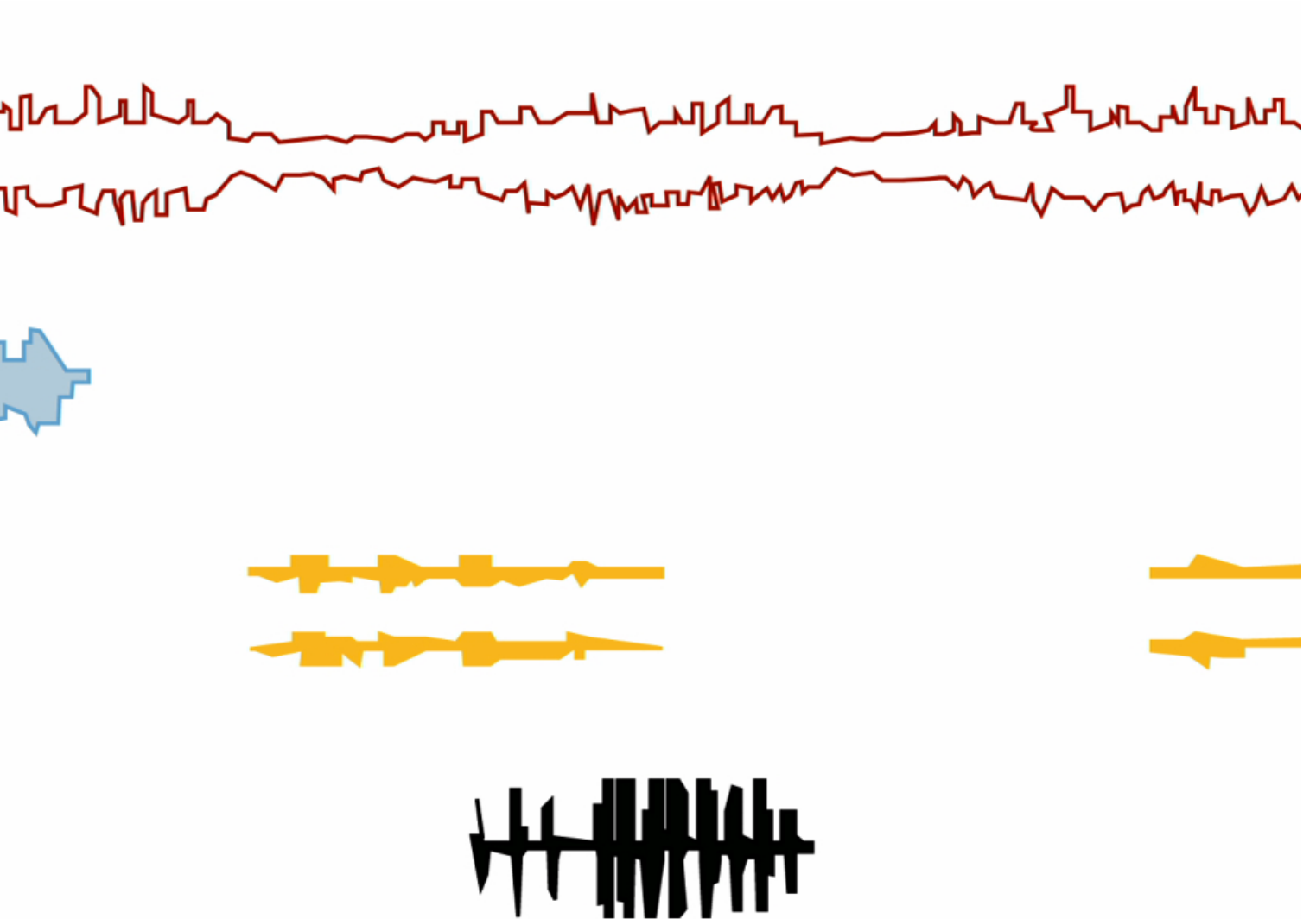


Figure 12. J. Hällsten, detail of final score for Rupture, 2014.

Research insights

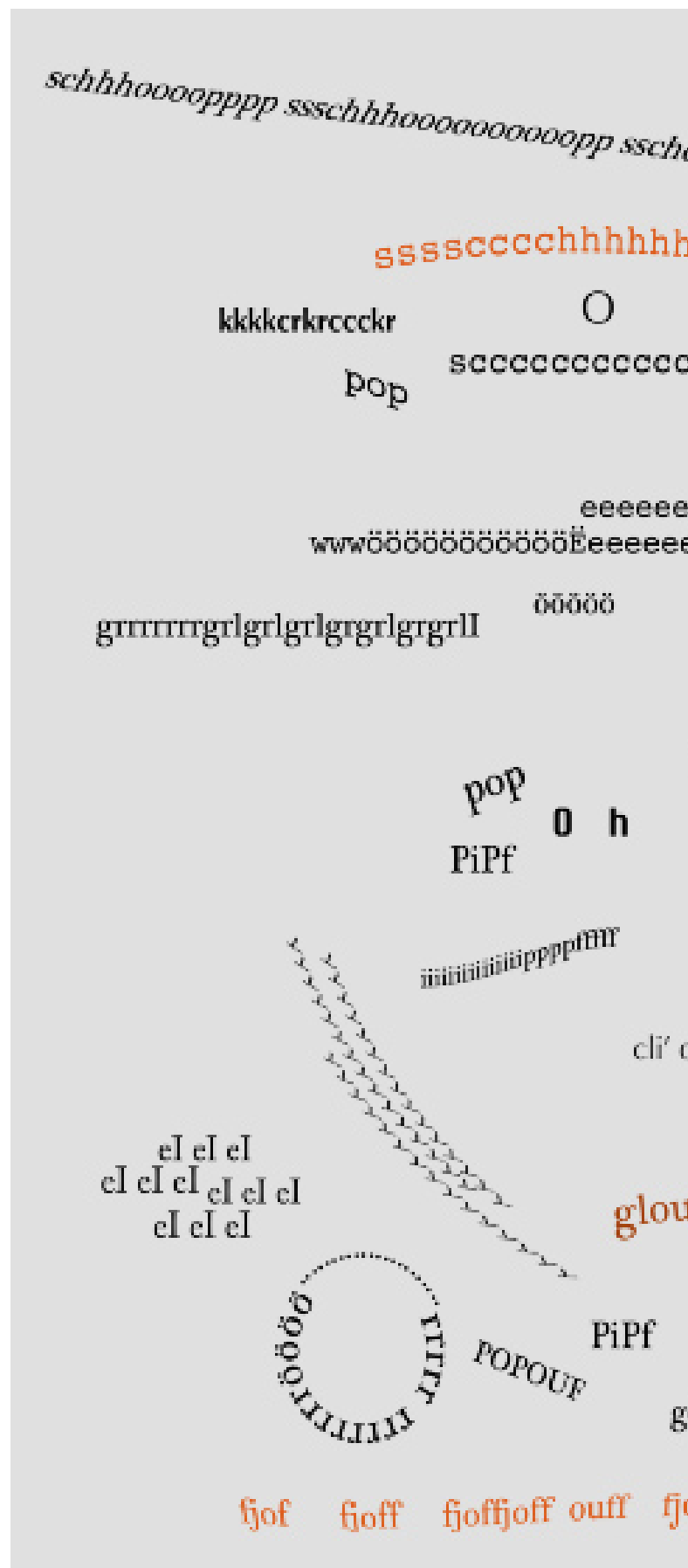
The main insight is that the more complex the translation process was from original sound to score, such as in *Flow*, the greater the difficulty was in translating in motion for the choir (*Juxtavoices*), which resulted in the most varied and unique sounds being vocalised. That in turn led to a significant increase in the choir being able to translate the original soundscape to the audience, it became immersive for the audience in a completely different way to how *Rupture* was received. Here, I should state that I only heard *Juxtavoices* perform the works at the same time as the audience, for the first time; I was present at the rehearsal with *Hljómeyki* choir. By immersive I mean, that the audience had to struggle too to decide whether to read/translate the projected moving score or to focus on the choir, this was further accentuated by the audience being so close to the choir, no stage between them and the choir, they shared the same space. The space became communal, a shared commons where both performer and audience were invited to be, to open their senses and being to that which cannot be translated fully. The research and pieces are not attempting to fully translate one to the other equally, but to let the process reveal how we translate and engage with the sonic environment around us, and that we are part of; thus opening up a

possibility to understand otherness, to becoming animal.

The use of the moving score, especially in *Flow*, where there was no linear movement but random, the performer had to switch between relying on the others in the choir and their own ability to spot the change to much greater extent. *Rupture*, had its own surprises for the performer, but it moved on a semi-stable timeline, as the sound waves of sounds move, thus it was recognisable and not different enough to create the desired vocalisations. For *Flow*, I drew on the Japanese concept of *Ma* – space time interval (Fridh, 2004), where the spaces between the notes is as equally important as the note, if not more so. This is different to European ideas of pause, or silence, it is not silence or empty, it is full, or at least as the potentiality to be full. This in relation to the movement created the most chance for the desired aim of enabling the choir to test their abilities to translate in action, and at the same time communicate with the audience the sonic environment they were discovering.



Figure 13. J. Hällsten, Flow, Juxtavoices, Nottingham Contemporary, 2019



Dissemination

The research project intersects and draws upon three main research areas: translation and sound, dialogic practices and animal/human relations in the environment. The project has been disseminated to all three areas through the following conferences and their associated events and an exhibition, thus being received by the research communities and general public concerned with these areas of practice and theory. All have been peer reviewed.

PERFORMANCES

Rupture by Hljómeyki Choir (2014). Directed by Johanna Hällsten. Art in Translation Conference. [Nordic House, Reykjavík, Iceland. 18 September 2014].

Rupture & Flow by Juxtavoices antichoir (2019). Directed by Johanna Hällsten. In Dialogue, [Nottingham Contemporary, UK, 21 November 2019].

CONFERENCE PAPERS

Hällsten, Johanna. (2020). 'Communing with others: performing voices.' *Life with and without animals: the second (un)common worlds conference*. University of Derby, UK, November 2020.

EXHIBITION

ANTONYM: Life With and Without Animals (2020). Artcore Gallery, Derby, UK.



Figure 15. J. Hällsten, Juxtavoices
performing Flow, Nottingham Contemporary,
2019



Figure 16. J. Hällsten, Juxtavoices
performing Rupture, Nottingham
Contemporary, 2019



Figure 17. J. Hällsten, detail of score for Flow, 2019

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