

BIO Ellen Southern (b. 1977)

I am a visual artist, singer-composer and performance maker, based in Bristol, UK. My work spans the mediums of performance, voice, drawing, music composition, sound art, video and artistic direction.

I grew up in rural Wales, and spent much of my time outdoors in the landscape, amongst castles and ruins, with just a sketchbook and my voice. I still consider these to be my fundamental creative tools. After studying Fine Art at UWE Bristol (1995-9), I spent several years abroad, including creating collective arts spaces and collaborative projects in squatted buildings and disused sites in the Netherlands, and co-running an art and multimedia workshop in the historic shipyard in Gdansk, Poland.

In the last few years, while studying music at Morley College, London, I started singing by joining amateur choirs, in styles ranging from early music (medieval and renaissance) to jazz and gospel, classical and folk / traditional / Welsh language. In response to this, I formed an ensemble of female voices and instrumentalists to develop my own performance-compositions, and produced a number of collaborative and live works in and around London, including a critically acclaimed debut at Brighton Fringe Festival ("selected music event" – LoveFringe 2011).

While on a Performance MA at the University of Brighton (2011-13), these activities evolved into being a combination of music, sound, visual art (drawing), and performance practice. By researching and experimenting with the physics of acoustics, mediated voice, sound art, historical vocal forms and spatial performance practices, I formed the basis of my current work – an exploratory contemporary practice around polyphony: combinations of 'voices'.

In the summer of 2014 I returned to Bristol after fourteen years away, and began the *Site Singing* project as a way to both re-engage with my home region of the South West, and explore my voice in new ways. In this self-initiated on-going project, I venture out to conduct solo vocal experiments at a selection of English Heritage sites in the region, working directly with the acoustics to 'vocalise' ruined sites. (I like to highlight the existence and accessibility of these lesser-known free sites by reaching them only by walking and using public transport. As well as making it more of an adventure and more ecological, it also reflects my long standing engagement with 'DIY' cultural principals; *Site Singing* has an immediacy of approach which can evolve on a low budget without a need for funding bodies or selection panels). Using just a hand-held recording device, I craft the resulting voice-based field recordings into evocative polyphonic 'sound sketches', and draw sketchbook impressions of my experiences on the journey home.

Press quotes about the *Site Singing* exhibition at Centrespace Gallery, July 2015:

"Engaging sound-sketches, inspired by visits to some of Bristol's finest heritage sites" – Bristol Life

"Southern is a genuine polymath...the execution [of her sound-sketches] requiring dedication, planning, and hard work. [They are] all created by the artist using her own voice [with] each piece drawing on her fine art and drawing background" – Louise Trimby, Bristol 24/7

Links:

Homepage: www.ellensouthern.co.uk

Project blog: www.sitesinging.wordpress.com

Audio examples from Site Singing: <https://sitesinging.wordpress.com/audio/>

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See also: #SiteSinging

Press:

- Read a press review of the *Site Singing* exhibition at Centrespace Gallery, Bristol:

<https://sitesinging.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/site-singing-exhibition-ellen-southern-article-in-bristol-247-july-2015.jpg>

- Read an exclusive interview, with pictures and audio, for the SOUND ART TEXT blog:

<https://sitesinging.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/site-singing-featured-in-sound-art-text-blog/>

Audience quotes, *Engaged Voice*, vocal residency at The Edwardian Cloakroom (2014):

“Thankyou, a whole immersive experience – really enjoyed the sound work, very specific use of space”

“Great show – thanks for opening up my mind and ears to sound” Jami

“Very enchanting and interesting concept – made hairs stand on end!” Liz, Bristol

“Interesting sound textures breathing life back into a classic building. Well done!” Matt, Bristol

Recent Artistic Activity works and commissions include:

- **July 2015** Invited to return to the Edwardian Cloakroom to re-work recordings from *Engaged Voice* (2014) and create a new semi-improvised drone-based live performance as *Dead Space Chamber Music*, in collaboration with cellist Liz Muir (Saltings, Bristol COMA), for the first Bristol Hum festival (<http://thebristolhum.weebly.com>).
- **April 2016** Debut EP released by *Dead Space Chamber Music* (<https://dscm.bandcamp.com>).
- **November 2015** Multiple performances in three capacities as part of Theaster Gates and Situations' *Sanctum* in Temple Church (<http://sanctumbristol.com>): firstly with my acapella shape-note choir (<http://www.bristolsacredharp.org>), secondly in an experimental voice and drawing-as-visual-score collaboration with artist Louisa Fairclough (of *Bristol Expanded and Experimental Film* <http://www.beefbristol.org>), and thirdly as half of *Dead Space Chamber Music*, a music duo formed with Tom Bush, in which songs from as far back as the 14th century are re-worked, and combined with improvisations based on some of my *Site Singing* sound-works (<https://dscm.bandcamp.com>).
- **October 2015** Interactive presentation of *Site Singing* project as an installation-tour in the dark by torchlight, at *Eastonia*, an artist and academic event series around landscape and voice at All Hallows Hall, a new independent cultural space for Bristol. (<https://sitesinging.wordpress.com/2015/10/14/site-singing-presented-at-eastonia-event-series-bristol/>).
- **November 2015** *Amalgams*, a collaboration with *Onomato Collective* (<http://www.onomato.co.uk>) to create a site-specific multidisciplinary immersive work at the historic Wesley Chapel, Bristol, for Bristol & Bath Art Weekender 2015 (see video excerpts: <https://vimeo.com/147182482>).
- **July 2015** *Site Singing: Work In Progress*, a solo exhibition at Centrespace Gallery, a long-standing artist-run space in Bristol, featuring sound installation, Ordnance Survey maps displayed with photographs, a reading and drawing space for visitors, installed drawings and video. (<https://sitesinging.wordpress.com/2015/07/07/site-singing-exhibition-3rd-7th-july-3015/>)
- **May 2015** *Sounding Spike Island*, a roving vocal intervention in which I worked directly with the acoustics and activity of the annual *Open Studios* weekend (<http://www.spikeisland.org.uk>), resounding through the stairways and corridors to create a 'sonic portrait' of the artist-run Spike Island building (<http://www.ellensouthern.co.uk/styled-2/index.html>)
- **April–August 2015** Invited to create collaborative works for audiences; co-led a shape-note singing workshop at Supernormal Festival (<https://www.supernormalfestival.co.uk>), and led a participatory performance and interactive tour at *The Cube Microplex* (<http://www.cubecinema.com>) and *Spike Island* respectively (<https://ellensouthern.bandcamp.com/track/intervals-at-the-cube-microplex>, <https://ellensouthern.bandcamp.com/track/spike-island-tour-mnemonic-collaborative-drawing-and-sharing-voices>).
- **July 2015** *Water Voices*, a vocal sound-work selected by *Cities and Memory* for an international collaborative sonic-art remix and digital release on the theme of water for World Listening Day 2015 (<http://citiesandmemory.com/2015/07/world-listening-day-giving-a-voice-to-water/>).
- **March 2014** *Sulis*, a vocal sound work and installation created for Waterweek 2, a multidisciplinary forum on water bringing together scientists, ecologists and artists, Herstmonceux Castle, Sussex (<https://ellensouthern.bandcamp.com/track/sulis-mouth>, http://www.clarewhistler.co.uk/sections_02.html).
- **November 2014** *Engaged Voice*, 'vocal residency' to produce a site-specific voice based sound-work and participatory performance series at The Edwardian Cloakroom selected by Bristol City Council's Creative Spaces Programme. Read guest blog: <https://bristolcitycouncilcreativespace.wordpress.com/2015/04/29/guest-blog-by-ellen-southern/>, see video: <https://vimeo.com/124502731>).