

Web www.ellensouthern.co.uk
Email mail@ellensouthern.co.uk
Twitter @ellen_southern
<https://vimeo.com/ellensouthern>

Ellen Southern

Polyphonic Practice and Vocalising Site.

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. After studying Fine Art at UWE Bristol (1995-9), I spent several years creating collective arts spaces and collaborative projects in squatted buildings and disused sites. In the last few years, while studying music at Morley College, London, I started singing by joining choirs, in styles ranging from early music to jazz and gospel, classical and folk / traditional / Welsh language. I formed an ensemble of female voices to develop my own compositions, and produced a number of collaborative and live works in and around London. 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 organised sound, historical vocal forms and spatial performance practices, I formed the basis of my current work – an exploratory contemporary practice around combinations of ‘voices’.

My work is inspired by the physicality, experience, and pleasure of singing and vocal sound-making, by which the often uncharted relationships that individuals have with their voices, and with sound in the world around them, can be explored.

To me, human voices are endlessly fascinating, and each person’s voice is like a multi-faceted sound world just waiting to be discovered. We instinctively associate the voice with human presence, even when ‘disembodied’ through processes such as recording and reproduction. Voices connect the ancient to the contemporary, the individual to the collective, and the human to the wider environment. Vocal sounds can be used to perceive, provoke, define and reflect back our physical and sonic surroundings, and in my current work I test out ways of using my voice to in turn ‘vocalise’ (to give voice, or multiple voices, to) a particular site.

Using voices as both compositional tool, and as a direct sound-based method of interacting with a site, I often base my work on the idiosyncrasies of such ‘voices’, encompassing and sometimes combining live, mediated and pre-recorded elements. I visualise my sound-making through drawings, which sometimes become like scores in themselves. My life long connection to drawing is fundamental to how my work evolves and takes shape. As well as using traditional materials, I approach drawing as an interdisciplinary practice, for example, site-specific singing as a form of vocal drawing: drawing using voice.

These working processes culminate in performances and sound works which explore degrees of human presence in spatial, site responsive / specific, and experiential ways. In doing this, I am also increasingly interested in the sensory potential of participatory performances and ‘encounters’, and how an audience’s presence and the experience of their listening can form a work.

In exploring these themes work by work, project by project, I am developing a voice-based practice around concepts of polyphony – the co-presence and interaction of many ‘voices’ – and investigating the interdisciplinary artist as a ‘conductor’ in the widest sense.