Musical Composition and Improvisation in Response to the 2014 Mackintosh Fire

This output is a body of work responding to the first fire in the Charles Rennie Mackintosh building of The Glasgow School of Art, 23 May 2014. It is themed around a dialectic of composition and improvisation and comprises two video works and one reflective artist's paper in peer-reviewed journal *Performance Research*

- A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) (Single Channel HDV: 14min)
- A Beautiful Living Thing: Part 2: Improvisation #1 (2016) (Single Channel HDV: 56min)
- 'A Beautiful Living Thing,' Special Issue: 'On Libraries,' Performance Research, 22:1, 2017, pp. 115-119. (artists' pages)



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) Single Channel, HDV Dur 14 min Film still: Bill Chandler, Violin

Prof. Ross Birrell

Project Details

A series of site-specific and music-related films made inside the Charles Rennie Mackintosh building of The Glasgow School of Art in the aftermath of the first fire of 23 May 2014 and titled A Beautiful Living Thing. The films are directed and edited by Birrell and approached through a dialectic of composition and improvisation in response to Mackintosh's architecture and design and the improvisational destructive force of fire. Birrell conceived and directed the filming process but the collaboration with improvisational musicians in the second film maintains a principle of polyphony; a process employed in his other collaborative projects (e.g. with classical musicians and equestrian long riders) and described as 'polyphonic orchestration.' All films were funded by the GSA's Mackintosh Restoration Research Project Funding (£3000).

A Beautiful Living Thing (HDV 16:9; Dur. 14min)

Filmed in the remains of the burned out Mackintosh Library and other parts of the Glasgow School of Art's Mackintosh building in late December 2014 and early January 2015, A Beautiful Living Thing features a composition for solo violin devised from Mackintosh's description of a work of art, performed inside the ruined library by Bill Chandler (RSNO). Camera: Hugh Watt. Producer: Jo Crotch.

GSA RDF, Mackintosh Restoration Research Project Funding ($\pounds 1500$).

A Beautiful Living Thing – Part 2: Improvisation #1 (HDV 16:9; 56min)

A Beautiful Living Thing [Part 2]: Improvisation #1 features performances by 18 members of the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (GIO) filmed inside the Mackintosh building of the Glasgow School of Art, in the aftermath of the devastating fire on May 23, 2014. Filmed in 13-15 Sep 2015. Edited 2016.

Conceived and directed by Ross Birrell, filmed in collaboration with Hugh Watt and Produced by Jo Crotch.

Note: A 6 channel HDV installation, A Beautiful Living Thing [Part 2]: Improvisation #2 (28min) made with improvisational dancer, Tom Pritchard in the cleared space of the Mackintosh Library was edited over 2017/18 but has not yet had a public presentation due to the second Mackintosh fire on 15 June 2018.

GSA RDF, Mackintosh Restoration Research Project Funding ($\pounds 1500$).

Ross Birrell (2017) 'A Beautiful Living Thing,' Performance Research, 22:1, 115-119.

DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2017.1285579

Artists' pages/text, reflective critical and contextual account of the development and production of A Beautiful Living Thing film series for peer-reviewed journal, Performance Research, special issue 'On Libraries.'

Research Question

Central Research Question:

How might dialectical methods of composition, modes of lament and improvisation develop collective creative responses to traumatic events; in this case, a loss of heritage?

Research Output

A Beautiful Living Thing (Single Channel, HDV 14min)

In 1902 Charles Rennie Mackintosh, designer of Glasgow School of Art's world-renowned principal building, gave a lecture titled, 'Seemliness,' in which he offered the following description of a work of art:

'Art is the Flower. Life is the Green Leaf. Let every artist strive to make his flower a beautiful living thing, something that will convince the world that there may be, there are, things more precious more beautiful - more lasting than life itself.'

Taking its title from Mackintosh's description of a work of art, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) was developed in collaboration with Jo Crotch and filmed in collaboration with Hugh Watt. It documents the destruction of the Mackintosh library and building and features an original composition for solo violin. The music is in the mode of a lament and is based upon the transposition of Mackintosh's words into musical notation. It was performed by Bill Chandler (RSNO) inside the ruined library:

 C. R. Mackintosh, Lecture on 'Seemliness,' 1902. For complete transcription of lecture, see: Pamela Robertson, Charles Rennie Mackintosh The Architectural Papers (Wendlebury: White Cockade Publishing, 1990), pp. 220-5.

2. Please watch

'Birrell_7547_Musical_Composition_Film_1_Beautiful.mp4' on the USB stick now:

Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015)

(HDV: 16:9, Single Channel, Dur. 14min)











Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (Single Channel, HDV 14min)

Research Output

A Beautiful Living Thing – Part 2: Improvisation #1 (2016, Single Channel, HDV, 56min)

A Beautiful Living Thing Part 2: Improvisation #1 is themed around improvisation and features performances across all 4 floors of the Mackintosh building by members of the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (GIO).

The second film is structured around a series of soloists, beginning in the basement studio where the fire started and ending in a large ensemble in the Professors' Studios in the top floor of the building.

There were 5 soloists and 13 musicians in the final ensemble:

- Basement Wind instrument / Voice (Saxophone, Soprano)
- Ground Floor First Floor / Mezzanine Strings (Cello, Harp, Guitar)
- Professor studios ensemble of brass, percussion, strings, electronics

Please watch 'Birrell_7547_Musical_Composition_Film_2_Beautiful.mp4' on the USB stick now:

Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing – Part 2: Improvisation #1 (2016)

(HDV, 16:9, Single Channel, Dur. 56min)



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing – Part 2: Improvisation #1 (Single Channel, HDV, 56min) Sequence of film stills

Research Output

Ross Birrell (2017) 'A Beautiful Living Thing,' Performance Research, 22:1, 115-119. DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2017.1285579

This article for Performance Research, special issue 'On Libraries' sought to offer a reflective critical and contextual account of Birrell's experience of the fire-damaged Mackintosh building in the aftermath of the fire of 23 May 2014 and the development of his research project A Beautiful Living Thing. In addition, given the publication context of a themed issue 'On Libraries' the text offered consideration of the parallels between the library and the studio as sites of artistic research.

'For all the destruction – or rather because of it – the Mackintosh building, and the Library in particular, possessed a compelling beauty. As an artist who had worked in the Mack for twenty years, who had taught classes on 'destruction in art' (in the Mackintosh Lecture Theatre two floors below) and who had even destroyed parts of his own library in artworks – Burning Kafka and Dialogue with Marcel Duchamp (both 1996) – I was perhaps predisposed to the raw aesthetic qualities of fire and the ambiguous attraction of burned books ... I was not alone in recognizing the aesthetic properties of the building in its new state or of the urgency of the need to document it. What was to be documented, for me, was not simply a forensic inventory of the fire damage but the existence of a new work of art. A new architectural composition had been formed by a combination of design and destruction, of Mackintosh's composition and the improvisation of fire. Moreover, the deep emotional impact of the fire upon those who had ever studied or worked in the building and who knew its contours as intimately as those of their own skin, should be reflected in the mode of documenting this new composition.'

'For me, the fire and the destruction of the Library intensified the Mackintosh building's resonance as a work of art as it assumed new physical forms and became the site of production for a series of new art works, new visual and acoustic performances and embodied experiences and evocative films that seek to testify to its enduring existence as 'a beautiful living thing'.

Ross Birrell (2017), 'A Beautiful Living Thing,' Performance Research, 22:1, 115-119

A Beautiful Living Thing

ROSS BIRRELL



Film still from A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) Ross Birrell (director), featuring violin recital by Bill Chandler in the remains of the Mackintosh Library. Countray of Ross Birrell. Glowing paged Film still from A Beautigit Living Thing (2015) Ross Birrell (director), close up of burnel books in the Mackintosh Library. Countray of Ross Birrell.

On 23 May 2014, as final-year students were installing their degree show, a fire broke out in the basement of the Charles Rennie Mackintosh building of The Giasgow School of Art (GSA). As students and staff were evacuated, filmes travelled up the timber-clad walls and ventilation shafts, consuming studios and rooms above, the intense heat blowing out windows of studios and corridors. Firefighters from Strathcyde Fire and Rescue Service tackled the blase for several hours before bringing the fire undre control to save the historic building – but not before the world-renowned Library, recognized as Mackintosh's masterpiece, had been consumed by the filames. The inherent richness of the library interior, wrote Charlotte and Peter Fiell two decades earlier, signified its importance's as the spiritual and intellectual heart of the building [Fiell and Fiell 1997;62]. The Mackintosh Library testified to the heights of the artistic achievement of the Sottish architect and designer and its destruction was mourned around the world as the tragic loss of an interivable work of art. It is the status of this architectural space as both "library' and work of art' that underpins the duality of terms employed by the Fiells in their description of the Mackintosh Library as the "intellectual and she.'

The fire damage to the Mack motivated emotional, academic and artistic responses. The loss of the Mackintosh Library perhaps prompts further reflection on the role of the library as a creative and critical space in the context of an artschool. While such a study is beyond the scope of this contribution, the experience of the Mackintosh Library as both an architectural artwork (which may have been described as a performance' in terms of the totality of its interior and architectural design) and an academic archive (holding several thousand books and journals) frames the two films that I will outline below. Both of these were shot on location in the remains of the Mackintosh Library in the aftermath of the fire.

A library is a paradoxical space. It is simultaneously a gathering and a clearing. A library is a gathering of archives and volumes, a space of encounter with the manifest and material evidence of past presence, the accumulated fragments of other lives. A library is an active assemblage that recognizes the value of others and preserves their volces (and vices), reminding us that those outside of ourselves or from beyond our own epoch can entre us to inform, interrupt and inspire. Libraries are the groundwork for a philosophy of mingled

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Aims and Objectives



The films seek to document the resulting 'chance composition' created between Mackintosh's architecture and the improvisatory destruction of fire, to document the transformation of the building at a pivotal moment in its history, to explore the potential of improvisation as a method, with the principle objective of testify - in a series of moving-image works - to its continued existence as 'a beautiful living thing.'

Context

Vedran Smailović, Cellist of Sarajevo (1992)

During the Siege of Sarajevo in the Bosnian war (1992-1995), Bosnian Cellist Vedran Smailović became known as the 'Cellist of Sarajevo,' for playing Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor amid the remains of shelled buildings.

'On May 27, 1992, an artillery shell exploded in front of a bakery while people were lined up to buy bread. Twenty-two people were killed. More than 100 others were badly injured. The next day, Smailović dressed in his formal wear for a classical concert and carried a chair and his cello out into that courtyard. He began to play Tomaso Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor as a memorial to the massacre. When he had finished, he picked up his cello and chair and returned inside to safety. He repeated his performance in the square every day, for 22 days, varying the time of day for security reasons. It was one performance for each civilian who had been killed.'

https://daytonpeacemuseum.org/peaceherostories/vedran-smailovic/

The 'Cellist of Sarajevo' offers an immediate visceral context of the potential of music as a healing response to collective trauma and obvious visual precursor for the performance of music amid ruins. However, the scale of the Mackintosh fire and the loss of an historic art work is not on a level with the devastation and death of the Siege of Sarajevo. As there were no casualties in the Mackintosh fire, the research was able to foreground aesthetic concerns and methodologies. The films also drew upon experience of previous site-specific music film work *Duet* (2011) which featured the performance of a lament for solo viola performed by both Israeli and Palestinian musicians in the bomb-damaged Spiegelsalle of Claerchens Ballhaus, Berlin.



Vedran Smailović, Sarajevo, 1992. Image credit: Mikhail Evstafiev

Context

The Ruin

In her 2011 essay 'Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins,', Svetlana Boym claims that 'the fascination for ruins is not merely intellectual, but also sensual. Ruins give us a shock of vanishing materiality.' In addition, we become perceptive to the return of nature as it encroaches on the architectural designs of the human: 'Suddenly our critical lens changes, and instead of marvelling at grand projects and utopian designs, we begin to notice weeds and dandelions in the crevices of the stones.' (Boym, *The Off-Modern* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 43). Boym's emphasis upon the sensual and the transient materiality of the ruin, and of the interplay with nature, informed the focus upon details of the ruined interior of the Mackintosh library and picking out details of exterior light and sound filtering through the broken windows.

The figure of the violinist performing amid the ruins of the library held echoes of Vedran Smailović, the 'Cellist of Sarajevo,' and Brian Dillon's observation that 'the ruin is made meaningful by the interposition, between object and viewer, of a frail human figure,' Brian Dillon, 'Fragments from a History of Ruin', Cabinet, Issue 20, Ruins, Winter 2005-06.

https://mylo.utas.edu.au/d2l/lor/viewer/viewFile.d2lfile/6607/107979,1/CABINET-%20Fragments%20from%20a%20History%20of%20Ruin%20-%20Brian%20Dillon1.pdf [np]

Although ruined libraries and burned books hold associations with the irrevocable loss of shared cultural heritage, the Mackintosh Library as an acclaimed work of art of global significance, recognises the importance of the library as a site of research in the art school alongside the studio. It is only fitting then, that in its destruction the library becomes a site of production for new artistic research and a series of works of art: 'Perhaps Mackintosh foresaw that the library and the studio would ultimately combine to form the synarchy of contemporary 'artistic research,' a conjunction reflected in the hybrid identity (or mingled body) of contemporary art: 'research-based,' 'relational,' 'dialogic' and so forth. If the walls between the two worlds of the library and the studio did not physically collapse with the events of 23 May 2014, it was perhaps because Mackintosh had already destroyed them more than a century earlier.' Ross Birrell (2017) 'A Beautiful Living Thing,' *Performance Research*, 22:1, 115-119; 119





Context

Architecture and Music

Often attributed to Goethe, architecture has been described as 'frozen music' (Eckermann 1970 [1850]: 303), although it is Hegel who uses the formulation: 'Friedrich von Schlegel has called architecture 'frozen music,' and indeed the two arts do rest on a harmony of relations which can be reduced to numbers and for this reason can easily be grasped in their fundamental characters.' (Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. II. 662). The aesthetic correspondence between music and architecture has been explored by many leading architects, including among others Stuart Hall and Daniel Libeskind and there is a course led by Prof. Konstantina Demiri in the Dept of Architecture, NTU, Athens, on counterpoint as a structural metaphor in architecture. Birrell has explored the relationships between music and architecture elsewhere in the 'tensile architecture' of the contrapuntal form of the fugue, but in the context of the Mackintosh fire this was a much more direct correspondence: 'If architecture is 'frozen music,' then surely you just add fire and listen.' (Birrell, 'A Beautiful Living Thing,' *Performance Research*, 22:1)

Architecture and Fire

It is also important to consider the originary association between architecture and fire, identified by Luis Fernández-Galiano, which suggests that we should approach architecture, not as a fixed arrangement of optical spaces, but as situated in a temporal relation to the body and contingent forces:

'The close bond between construction and fire is clearly reflected when architecture is reduced to its most elemental and primitive form ... In all beginnings and origins, in myths and rituals as well as in the preconscious or unconscious mind, construction and fire are intermingled and intertwined.' (Luis Fernández-Galiano, Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy, 2000: 4; 8–9)

Architecture's relation to music, the temporal and the contingent was thus explored in the dialectic of musical composition and improvisation.

Architecture and the Senses

Responding to the fire in the Mackintosh building through music, listening to the new conditions of the building in its porous condition (street noise and birdsong filtering through the open roof and broken windows) and documenting the resulting material transformations as new compositions, resonated with the work of Juhani Pallasmaa on architecture and the senses:

'The authenticity of architectural experience is grounded in the techtonic language of building and the comprehensibility of the act of construction to the senses. We behold, touch, listen and measure the world with our entire bodily existence, and the experiential world becomes organized and articulated around the centre of the body. Our domicile is the refuge of our body, memory and identity.' (Pallasmaa 2012: 69)



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015), Gennadius Library, documenta 14, Athens, 2017 Image credit: Freddie Faulkenberry





Methods

Dialectic of Composition and Improvisation: Composition by Transposition

'Composition, is the sole definition of art. Composition is aesthetic and what is not composed is not a work of art.' (Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy?, 1994, p. 191).

'I had already made a series of works that involved composing music sores for specific sites in Berlin, Rome and Switzerland. The scores were based upon transpositions of related texts into musical notation (Duet, 2013; Sonata, 2013; Motet, 2014). The music was then performed in the location for which it was written, becoming the basis for a film. I sought to extend this series by creating a work for the Mack. The composition for first film in the Mack building would be based upon Mackintosh's description of a work of art as 'a beautiful living thing'. Following the fire, this phrase seemed to take on a greater significance and resonance in that it seemed both to capture the resilience of the Mackintosh building in its ability to survive the fire and to describe the intensity of aleatory forms that had been created as a result.'

Ross Birrell (2017) 'A Beautiful Living Thing,' Performance Research, 22:1, 115-119; 117

The first step was to composing a score for violin to be performed as a lament in the ruined remains of the Library. I employed an aleatory method of transposing the 7 letters of the alphabet which correspond to musical notes (a, b, c, d, e, f, g) where they happen to appear in a source line or phrase, in this case Mackintosh's description of the work of art as 'a beautiful living thing.' This method had been previously employed in the development of *Lift Me Up For 1 Am Dying* (Swiss Institute, Rome) and Sonata. The musical notes then form a refrain and are developed into a full composition. A key task was for the resulting music to reflect the deep emotional impact of the fire upon all those who had ever studied or worked in the building. This composition would be performed and recorded in situ by Bill Chandler, violinist with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO), who had previously performed in the Mackintosh Library as part of Jo Crotch's MSA postgraduate course on architecture and embodied experience.



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (Single Channel, HDV 14min)

Context

Dialectic of Composition and Improvisation: The Lament

'A short film by Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing, followed, panning shots of the burned remains moving slowly across the screen, to a solo violin score. It was downbeat, a lament, and captured the sense of loss and the pain the city feels while the Mac lies wounded on the steep slopes of Garnethill.' (Rory Olcato, 21 Apr 2015) <u>https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/practice/culture/join-the-aj-on-a-tour-of-the-burned-out-mac</u>

The first film responds to the acute sense of tragedy and sadness that was felt in Glasgow and around the world at the news of the loss of Mackintosh Library in the fire of 2014. As Garrido et al state 'cultural techniques play an important role in helping communities to recover from trauma.' Garrido, et al. 'Music and Trauma: the relationship between music, personality, and coping style (frontiers in psychology, Opinion, 10 July 2015.

The form which the music took was therefore a threnody or lament for solo violin to be performed in the ruins, a music form which held echoes of Vedran Smailović performance in bombed out buildings in Sarajevo (1992), the tradition of 'funerary violin' and the 'highland lament' (pibroch/piobaireachd).

'Even in suffering,' writes Hegel, 'the sweet tone of lament must sound through the griefs and alleviate them, so that it seems to us worth while so to suffer as to understand this lament. This is the sweet melody, the song in all art.' (G.W.F. Hegel, 'The Beauty of Art or the Ideal', Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. I., p. 159). For Walter Benjamin, the lament 'contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath; and even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns.' Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', One-Way Street and Other Writings (London: Verso, 1979), p. 121. More closely related to the immediate context of the Mackintosh fire is Benjamin's friend, Gershom Scholem's reply to Benjamin: 'There is no stability of lament... [...]... Language in the state of lament destroys itself, and the language of lament is itself, for that very reason, the language of destruction.' Gershom Scholem, 'On Lament and Lamentation' (1917-1918) (p. 7)

In the context of Highland Lament and Pibroch, the composition held resonances with the cumha and the 'functional' pibroch. Pibroch are usually performed on bagpipes but also on the fiddle (including, notably, MacIntosh's Lament of 1786), and *cumha* are 'mourning tunes' often written for those 'displaced from their homeland'. In addition, Roderick D. Cannon describes 'functional' pibroch, laments 'commonly written for or have come to be associated with specific events, personages or situations' Roderick D. Cannon, <u>Gaelic Names of Pibrochs: A Classification</u>, Scottish Studies, 2006.



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (Single Channel, HDV 14min)

Methods

Dialectic of Composition and Improvisation: Fire and Improvisation

'... to improvise is to join with the world...' Deleuze and Guattari, '1837: Of the refrain', A Thousand Plateaus, p. 311

Conceived as an exploration of the dialectic of composition and improvisation, the film projects responded to the destruction of the original composition of Mackintosh and the new improvisatory composition of fire. As fire eats and consumes whatever fuel it finds in its path, the vitality and force of its destruction seemed to find its essence in improvisation. A second film, therefore, would feature performances by members of the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra. Both films would be structured, then, around a dynamic dialectic of 'composition' and 'improvisation.'

It has been recognised that improvisation is integral to our capacity to respond to unforeseen events: '... to deal with unforeseen elements, with the complexity and uncertainty of a new and different environment. We begin to improvise. We explore the constraints created by the new conditions, but also the possibilities they offer.' Alfonso Montuori, 'The complexity of improvisation and the improvisation of complexity: Social science, art and creativity', Human Relations, Volume 56(2): 2003, 237–255. As Chris MacDonald argues, improvisation also provides an ethical model for managing responses to a crisis:

'We gain important perspective on the ways in which organizations, in particular, handle crises if we frame the challenge in terms of the freedoms and constraints to which the improvising jazz or blues musician, for example, is subject. [...] Improvising musicians take their cues from, and draw inspiration from, each other... when more than one musician is on stage, the activity is necessarily collaborative. Likewise, response to ethical crisis is going to require close and effective collaboration between senior leadership, the company's technical experts, and perhaps individuals in charge of ethics-and-values or compliance policy and training.' Chris MacDonald, 'Crisis Management as Ethical Improvisation', Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation, Vol 9, No 1 (2013), p. 1-2.

The compositional method and ethical imperative of free improvisation (as outlined by practitioners and commentators such as Bailey and Cardew) and ensemble collaboration based upon a 'dialogic act of listening' (Peters) was both an aesthetic and an ethical mode of response to the unforeseen 'crisis' event of the fire.



Methods

Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (GIO): Free Improvisation, Transience & Contingency

A Beautiful Living Thing – Part 2: Improvisation #1 was collaboration with Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (filmed in Sept 2015) where 'improvisation is presented as the form of composition.' (Jacques Attali, Noise: The Political Economy of Music (Minnesota 1985), p. 114.

'Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra is a large improvising ensemble of around 20 musicians from diverse artistic backgrounds. They perform across the UK and Europe, host an annual festival of improvisation and run regular events.' <u>https://www.glasgowimprovisersorchestra.com/</u> GIO have collaborated with contemporary artists, Bik van der Pol at CCA Glasgow (2010) and had performed in the Mackintosh building of Glasgow School of Art prior to the 2014 fire.

Drawing upon 'improvisation's responsiveness to its environment' (Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature & Practice in Music*, p. 44), 18 GIO musicians were invited to respond to the context and conditions of spaces in which they performed. 5 soloists worked to respond to the fire damaged conditions of individual spaces in the building (studio where fire started, Mackintosh Lecture Theatre, Large open studios, small mezzanine storage space) ending with a large ensemble performance in the Professors' Studios in the roof. The film opens with a 15 min solo improvisation by saxophonist Raymond MacDonald (co-founder of GIO) performing in the basement studio where the fire broke out. It is performed in a single breath and recorded in a single take. This was to register a central element in fire is oxygen and the musicians perform at the limits of their breath. Like the fire, the film travels up the building, and the instruments change into string instruments (cello, harp, guitar). The instruments are constructed of metal and wood and are of an intimate scale. Their form interplays with the architecture and interiors. The solos are respectively solemn and somber, tender and reflective, dynamic and aggressive. The film concludes with a cacophonous ensemble performed by 18 musicians (percussion, brass, strings, electronics) to echo the final full conflagration of the fire. The music finally burns itself out.

Birrell conceived, directed and edited the film. However, the GIO musicians had a free hand to perform in response to the damaged spaces they inhabited. One difference was that in the final ensemble of 13 musicians Birrell introduced an element of 'orchestrated improvisation' (drawing upon the conducted improvisation (or 'conduction') of Butch Morris. This provided an overall structure or architecture of the final group improvisation. Within this structure, each musician remained free to improvise in response to the architectural and sonic environment. As Deleuze and Guattari state 'to improvise is to join with the world', and key aspect of improvisation identified by Gary Peters in *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago, 2009) is 'the ability of the improviser to inhabit the given' as improvisers work with 'what is there and ready-to-hand' (Peters, 118-9). I worked with free-improvisers, therefore, as free-improvisational music is music 'committed to contingency.' (Peters, 69).



Methods

Site-Specific Moving Image

- The principal methods employed in filming were predominantly the single take tracking and panning shot; Pasolini describes the 'single take' as 'present tense' of cinema and the movement of the camera through the damaged building enhances the sense of the camera as a living optics.
- Use of diegetic sound through *in situ* field recording of musicians and ambient sound and working with natural or extant available light, to work with the given conditions of the context of a building in the aftermath of a major fire, traffic / street sounds, wind increase the sense of the porous and precarious condition of the present.
- Cornelius Cardew asserts that 'Improvisation is in the present' and its most 'beautiful characteristic [is] its transcience.' *Treatise Handbook*, (Edition Peters 1971). The approach of the single take captures both the real time and transient condition of improvisation.
- Close up panning shot to document in 'forensic' detail the new compositional formations created in the aftermath of the fire, and continuing to be transformed due to the porous condition of the building and the work of the Mackintosh restoration team.



Contribution to the field

Music and the Moving-Image

The emotional and pychological affective potential of music in the context of film and moving-image has long been recognised and is the field of inquiry of the journal, *Music and the Moving Image*. As Siu-Lan Tan summarises: 'Music plays a key role in the power of a film to hold us in its grip: to absorb, to transport, to intensify emotion and accent action, to direct attention, to frame scenes and set our expectations, and to shape our impressions of the characters and storyline, often without our conscious awareness.' Siu-Lan Tan, 'Music and the Moving Image' Keynote Address 2015: The Psychology of Film Music: Framing Intuition', *Music and the Moving Image*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2016), pp. 23-38.

In film studies, a distinction is drawn between the use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound. A key element of Birrell's site-specific method and context responsive approach across a series of films which focus upon live or real time performances by musicians (*Guanatamera*, *Quartet*, *Duet*, *Sonata*, *A Beautiful Living Thing*), is the use of diegetic sound. In their status as 'field recordings' such *in-situ* recordings incorporate the contingencies of the conditions of recording. In addition, the 'spatial anchoring' associated with diegetic sound was relevant in responding materially to specific sites or architectural contexts. Building upon these previous projects, music in the Mackintosh films series is not employed as a separate score to manipulate the attention of the viewer and deepen the emotional and psychological impact of the work. In their focus and structure, the films enact a 'film-and-music synthesis,' a form which Tan's research finds to produce the 'strongest emotional impact.'

A key difference in the use of diegetic sound and spatial anchoring in the films is the rejection of 'narrative,' in that there is an absence of any contextual information which might guide the viewer beyond the immediate material experience of the film as a audio-visual form (the rejection of 'linear narrative' has long associated with a tradition of avant-garde filmmaking). To the extent that the films combine music and moving image there is what might be termed a 'synaesthetic approach' In relation to but different from the avant-garde tradition of artists film (Brakhage, Frampton, etc.). The Mackintosh films instead maintain a 'combinatory' or 'contrapuntal' aesthetic, allowing the dialogic simultaneity of the different aesthetic voices (of the eye and the ear) in line with a key aim of the projects to reflect the emotional intensity of the loss and to document the new composition produced by the intervention of fire.



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) Playfair Library, Where Language Ends, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 23 Apr 2015

Contribution to the field

- Film 1 was on 23 April 2015 presented in the context of **contemporary art** as a screening and talk event (with Talbot Rice Gallery curator Pat Fisher) held in the Playfair Library, as part of Ross Birrell/David Harding, Where Language Ends, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh (2015) which collated a series of site-specific music and moving image works from 2010-2015.
- Film 1 was also presented by Birrell & Crotch at the Glasgow University research symposium, 'Shining a Light on Depression After Psychosis', The Institute of Health and Wellbeing, College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences, Glasgow University, held at The Lighthouse (a building designed by C.R. Mackintosh), Glasgow, 27 May 2015.
- Film 1 was subsequently presented a a contribution to **architectural knowledge** by Jo Crotch at Reading Architecture Across the Arts and Humanities, University of Stirling, 5-6 Dec 2015.
- Film 1 was primary point of reference for the symposium: 'The Glasgow School of Art: A Beautiful Living Thing,' held at Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), London, on 23 May 2015 the anniversary of the fire as a screening and discussion event for 'Mackintosh Architecture' exhibition (18 February 23 May 2015). Panel chaired by Hugh Pearman, editor *RIBA Journal*, Contributions from Ross Birrell, Robyne Calvert, (the GSA) and Malcom Mitchell (Page\Park)
- Further recognition of its significance to architectural understandings of Mackintosh's iconic building, Film 1 was also reviewed in the Architects Journal. 'A short film by Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing, followed, panning shots of the burned remains moving slowly across the screen, to a solo violin score. It was downbeat, a lament, and captured the sense of loss and the pain the city feels while the Mac lies wounded on the steep slopes of Garnethill.' (Rory Olcato, 21 Apr 2015) https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/practice/culture/join-the-aj-on-a-tour-of-the-burned-out-mac



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) Playfair Library, Where Language Ends, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 23 Apr 2015

Contribution to the field

In the field of site-specific moving image work in contemporary art A Beautiful Living Thing parts I & II were exhibited in documenta 14 (Athens & Kassel, 2017), and documenta is recognised as one of the world's most important exhibitions of contemporary art. A Beautiful Living Thing was exhibited at the Gennadius Library, Athens, 9 Apr – 16 Jul 2017. In addition, A Beautiful Living Thing – Part 2: Improvisation #1 (HDV 16:9; 56min) was screened FilmLaden, Kassel, in Director's Cut, a series of films selected by Adam Szymczyk, Artistic Director of documenta 14, the and shown in the final week of documenta 14 in Kassel, Sept 2017.

The documenta 14 curatorial team considered that A Beautiful Living Thing provided a 'counter-narration' to the exhibition context of a 25,000 volume library. Also exhibited in the Gennadius Library was Learning from Timbuktu, a project by curator Igo Diarra, founder and director of La Medina, Bamako, Mali. In the garden was Banu Cennetoğlu's work, Gurbet's Diary, consisting of 145 lithographic stones. https://www.documenta14.de/en/venues/15312/gennadius-library

In his recent book, the philosopher Richard Fletcher, aka Minus Plato, comments on the 'intense intimacy' of the first Mackintosh film presented in the context of Gennadius Library and 'the expanded use of music' in documenta 14:

'The expanded use of these ancient sites beyond the concert context not only relates to the modern Odeion and the expanded us of music at documenta 14, but also to some of the pit-falls of the use of sound without a building to somehow ground it. While the soundscapes of Postcommodity at the site of Aristotle's Lyceum and Benjamin Patterson's frog-orchestra at the gardens of the Byzantine and Christian Museum are subtle and intriguing expansions, they miss some of the intensity of enclosed space, which is maintained in wonderfully different ways by the intense intimacy of the violin in Ross Birrell work, which you have to listen to on headphones amid the hushed silence of the Gennadius Library.'

Minus Plato, No Philosopher King: An Everyday Guide to Art and Life Under Trump (New York: AC books, 2020), p. 227.



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015), Gennadius Library, documenta 14, Athens, 2017 Image credit: Freddie Faulkenberry

Dissemination

Public Exhibitions / screenings

documenta 14, Gennadius Library, Athens, 9 Apr-16 Jul, 2017

https://universes.art/en/documenta/2017/documenta-14-athens/11-gennadius-library/ross-birrell

'New Work from Glasgow', Curated by Pluck Projects, New Work From Glasgow, Anatomy Theatre, University of Cork in association with Cork International Film Festival, 12-28 November 2015

A Beautiful Living Thing: Part 2: Improvisation #1 (2015/16), Director's Cut, FilmLaden, Kassel [screening & talk] https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/25051/a-beautiful-living-thing-part-2-improvisation-1 https://www.art-it.asia/en/u/admin_expht_e/6jrixmay7qwrsyggnu92 https://www.artrabbit.com/events/the-glasgow-school-of-art-a-beautiful-living-thing

Playfair Library, Where Language Ends, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 23 Apr 2015 [screening & talk]

Glasgow Short Film Festival, CCA, 2016 [screening & talk]

Busan Independent Film Festival, November 2016

Inverness Film Festival, Eden Court, 10, Nov 2016 http://2016.invernessfilmfestival.com/a-beautiful-living-thing/

*mumok kino, alongside work of Susan Hiller, Museum of Modern Art, Vienna, 1 Apr 2020

(*Postponed due to Covid 19 lockdown)



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) Playfair Library, Where Language Ends, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 23 Apr 2015

Dissemination

Academic Conferences & Symposia

'Building on Mackintosh', Friday 17 April 2015 as part of the Building On: Mackintosh symposium

'Mackintosh, our Contemporary', Glasgow School of Art

'The Glasgow School of Art - A Beautiful Living Thing', RIBA, London, 23 May 2015. Panel chaired by Hugh Pearman, editor RIBA Journal, Contributions from artist Ross Birrell, Robyne Calvert, (the GSA) and Malcom Mitchell (Page\Park)

'Shining a Light on Depression After Psychosis', The Institute of Health and Wellbeing, College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences, Glasgow University, The Lighthouse, Glasgow, 27 May 2015

Reading Architecture Across the Arts and Humanities, University of Stirling, 5-6 Dec 2015

New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art, CCA, Glasgow, 23 Jul 2017, panel with Ranald McInnes (Head of Special Projects, Historic Environment Scotland) <u>http://nacca.eu/meeting/naccas-fourth-training-event/</u>

Peer-reviewed Journal

Ross Birrell, 'A Beautiful Living Thing', Special Issue: 'On Libraries,' Performance Research, 'Vol 22 No 2, Spring 2017: 115-119



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) Playfair Library, Where Language Ends, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 23 Apr 2015

Evidence

Media previews, interviews and reviews

Moira Jeffrey, Ross Birrell on film inspired by the GSA fire', 7 Mar 2015 https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/ross-birrell-film-inspired-gsa-fire-1510861

https://www.list.co.uk/event/484632-a-beautiful-living-thing/

https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/17218227.glasgow-school-art-defends-fire-measures-use-mackintoshbuilding-robust-series-statements-msps/

Rory Olcato, Join the AJ on a tour of the burned out Mac, 21 Apr 2015

https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/practice/culture/join-the-aj-on-a-tour-of-the-burned-out-mac

https://www.britishcouncil.gr/en/events/documenta-14

Scottish Parliament, Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee Glasgow School of Art Written submission from Dr. Robyne Calvert

https://www.parliament.scot/S5_European/General%20Documents/CTEEA_20181114_DrRobyneCalvert.pdf



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing (2015) Playfair Library, Where Language Ends, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 23 Apr 2015

Acknowledgements

Musicians

Bill Chandler (RSNO) Raymond MacDonald, Gerry Rossi & Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra

Dancer

Tom Pritchard

Film crew Producer: Jo Crotch Director of Photography: Hugh Watt Camera: Michael Mersinis Sound: Richy Carey, Finlay Crotch Grip: Stephen Higgins

GSA/Mackintosh Building

Liz Davidson (Senior Project Manager, Mackintosh Building Restoration) Danny Clark & Philip Munro (Taylor & Fraser) The Glasgow School of Art, Research Development Fund

documenta 14

Adam Szymczyk, Artistic Director documenta 14, documenta, Fridericianum, Kassel, gGmbH Gennadius Library, Athens

Appendix

A Beautiful Living Thing [Part 2]: Improvisation #2 (28min)



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing [Part 2]: Improvisation #2 (28min) film stills

Appendix (cont.d)

A Beautiful Living Thing [Part 2]: Improvisation #2 (28min) (2017, 6 channel HDV installation)

A 6 channel HDV installation, A Beautiful Living Thing [Part 2]: Improvisation #2 (28min) made with improvisational dancer, Tom Pritchard in the cleared space of the Mackintosh Library was edited over 2017/18 but has not yet had a public presentation due to the second Mackintosh fire on 15 June 2018. In contrast to the outpouring of sympathy and grief which greeted the destruction of the Mackintosh Library in the fire of 23 May 2014, the second Mackintosh fire of 15 June 2018 was met with incredulity and recrimination. In this context, the public presentation of this project was placed on hold as it was felt that to promote the film in the aftermath of the second fire would appear as 'unseemly' (keeping in mind that the overall project title comes from Mackintosh's 1902 lecture on 'Seemliness').



Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing [Part 2]: Improvisation #2 (28min) HDV 6 Channel Installation

Ross Birrell, A Beautiful Living Thing – Part 2: Improvisation #2 (2017)

(HDV, 16:9, Single Channel edit of 6 Channel Installation, Dur. 28 min)

[please note: the above film is not included in this output, because it is not yet in the public domain]