

Change is the only Constant

Dr. Jessica Argo, Glasgow, 13 May 2025.

Ian Birse and Laura Kavanaugh, in their artist collective Instant Places, have an uncanny ability to construct a collective and boundary-dissolving art space - often transcending the walls and floors of the white cube physical architecture of a gallery; or the stage/seats boundary of black box theatres/concert halls. They do this by composing and digitally painting generative sound and images that are ephemerally conjured like alchemic, glitching smoke - building custom programming software and blasting these into liminal web platforms (seen in “As the crow flies: a GIO Global commissioned film”, Jessica Evelyn Argo, 2023). Instant Places have pioneered this form of New Media art since the turn of the millennium (Instant Places, 2025), but more recently Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra have been privileged to see Ian and Laura put *themselves* in the frame, over ZOOM teleconferencing software in the Theatre of Home project that began in 2020, upon the international COVID-19 lockdowns (MacDonald, Denora, Sappho, Burke, Birrell 2025). Over ZOOM, Ian and Laura’s faces peered through their musical laboratory apparatus, ducking under spaghetti of modular synth patches and bricolage objects bounced off a tabletop guitar, whispering chopped languages into the zoomosphere. These scenes were dappled with their wraparound, kaleidoscopic glitch art, as if they were in a non-Euclidian stained glass cathedral (Segerman 2017) or Bjork’s ambisonic soundscapes and vapor-like dancing projection screens in Cornucopia (d&b audiotechnik, 2020).

Now, in Dunlop Art Gallery, Instant Places *print* this practice into a physical gallery space (also refracted off Yujie Gao’s work (...?).

The visitor is first “greeted” by a wall-sized snapshot – a still image that has been grabbed from a constantly flitting array of colour spectra in Instant Places’ video work – a non-representational picture *fixed in time*, and *affixed to a wall*.

Birse and Kavanaugh set up a tension (or a mirror) between *fixing* versus *movement* in Change is the only Constant - Hand drawn painting on paper, versus generative video software on digital screens, or sound only improvisation.

Fixing/inferred movement

In the physical gallery space, there are fixed works on paper but the viewer can still tangibly perceive movement *in* these objects - the act of crumpling and bending paper inscribed with hand-drawn, improvisatory abstract-expressionist mark-making in rave-reminiscent neon colours, translates the sense of *swarming*, *collapsing*, *expanding*, *stretching* and *dissolving* the video canvas that is splattered with the artists’ digital brushstrokes in their internet works (where the paintbrush is digital code).

On these fixed works on paper, *past* movement is inferred – the audience imagine Birse and Kavanaugh *pushing*, *dragging*, or *dancing* the paintbrushes across the surface of the paper, transcribing their choreography over time, across the dimensions of space, leaving a trace of their gesture.

Future movement is also inferred. The paper works are charged with the potential to stimulate musical energy, evoking the unspooling of an 1880s piano roll with holes punched to trigger piano keys - perhaps even the scrawling of a prehistoric cave painting thought to be a “prehistoric voiceprint” (Hendy, 2013). Graphic scores created by bending painting/drawings into cylinders range across two long shelves placed at eye level, giving visitors the impression of images mapped on urn-like forms that appear to expand and float across their field of vision. The 12-foot length of the shelves that hold the scores suggests the potential to play these forms in music that unfolds over time – an interplay of physical space and temporal space. The artists are both folding space, and folding time (Argo 2022).

Kavanaugh and Birse have opted to span/sprawl paintings on paper across the floor, rather than pinning them to a wall or hanging a framed canvas. This might be a reference to the artists' collaborations with dancers, as they choose to have the brushstrokes leap across the horizontal dimension, to be walked among rather than hung or elevated at a distance. This may also be a disruption of the Western sense of the "ocularcentric", arising since perspectival techniques in Renaissance painting allowed architectural realism and the invention of printing press fixed thoughts in visual, rather than oral communication. This meant that in western cultures sight became the most privileged sense (to "see" is to "know", or understand), whereas hearing is thought to be more intangible, ghostly, ephemeral even ascribed to diverse knowledges, or indigenous cultures (which colonialism painted as inferior to western culture "lost in time") (Reichel 2020). Is the act of laying the paintings on the floor a gesture to make the visual forms more sound-like, by disrupting the spatial hierarchies inherent within a gallery space? These crumpled paper works are variable in size, from 8 foot by 4 foot, to 3 foot by 2 foot – almost like the pages ripped out and tossed from a giant's sketchbook. Given Instant Places' concern with distributed creativity, graphic scores for improvising musicians and dancers, it may be an artists' joke, to play with patriarchal notion of the fixed artwork being drawn from divine, god-like author-genius (Barthes, 1968).

Movement/mediation

A gallery visitor views their audio-visual compositions 'Meteor Music' on a digital monitor and listens with headphones that allow immersive connections to the accompanying soundscape. QR codes in the space take visitors via an iPad to an evolving collection of online artworks called Underground Comet, a labyrinth of virtual "rooms" that host Instant Places streaming performances, generative audio-visual environments, and Meteor Music animations. QR postcards in the gallery serve as take-away souvenirs that hold the key to enter this virtual artworld.

On May 31st, the exhibition is launched by an ephemeral, improvised sound performance, in an intimate space room separate from all these artworks – where the audience will tune into Kavanaugh and Birse's sonic imagination.

The content of the exhibition will be *constantly changing*, as Kavanaugh and Birse continually edit and transmit the code for the generative audio visuals, and mail new hand-made paper works from their studio in Edmonton, disrupting the "object permanence" often inherent in a physical gallery exhibition. Object permanence is most often understood to be a human relational understanding in psychological attachment theories (the ability to recognise objects continue to exist even when not seen, or heard) (Piaget 1954). However, in *Change is the only Constant*, Instant Places subvert the notion of the fixed commodity of paintings or sculptures in the art world, whilst injecting the ephemerality of generative audio-visual internet media, hinting at *distributed creativity*, *movement*, and *connection of audiences to the work* whether, physically in the gallery or remotely via internet. The distance between artwork and audiences can be annihilated, through *telematic* transmission. George E Lewis adapts Einstein's theories of quantum entanglement, when he calls it "spooky interaction at a distance" (Jessica Evelyn Argo 2022).

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