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The Scottish Journal of Performance
Volume 6, Issue 1; July 2019
ISSN: 2054-1953 (Print) / ISSN: 2054-1961 (Online)

Publication details: <http://www.scottishjournalofperformance.org>

To cite this article: Forbes, G., 2019. Performance review: *Tide Times*, by Timothy Cooper & Laura Bissell. *Scottish Journal of Performance*, 6(1): pp.91–95.

To link to this article: <http://doi.org/10.14439/sjop.2019.0601.07>



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DOI: 10.14439/sjop.2019.0601.07

Publication date: 14 July 2019

Between April and August 2018, writer Laura Bissell and electroacoustic composer Timothy Cooper made five visits to Cramond Island as the basis for their multi-disciplinary site-responsive installation *Tide Times*. Cramond Island is a small tidal island located in the Firth of Forth, just north of Edinburgh on the East Coast of Scotland, accessible by foot across a stone causeway which is left uncovered at low tide and is flanked on one side by an imposing line of concrete anti-boat pylons. The island is less than half a mile long yet packs a rich variety of geographical features: sandy beaches, rocky beaches, hills, cliffs, a wooded area, and a smattering of derelict buildings. Cramond itself is a popular recreational destination and in summer this locale is at its best: a quiet cacophony of bicycle bells, chatting voices, laughing children, seagulls, gusts of wind, the jingle of an ice-cream van. This is the enticing soundscape that Bissell and Cooper present us with in the ten audio tracks which form the central component of *Tide Times*.

Tide Times is a multifaceted work. Its resources involve ten audio tracks, which have first to be downloaded onto a phone or mp3 player and listened to whilst walking over the island, and a laminated A4 map which indicates the relevant audio track to listen to at various points on the island. The installation encompasses a remarkably wide framework of artistic and intellectual practices: poetry, epistolary storytelling, field recordings, found objects, treasure-hunting, electroacoustic composition, acoustic ecology, autoethnography and soundwalking. The aim of *Tide Times* is to invite and encourage the participants to

explore, create and play in this scenic and intriguing location.



Photo: Laura Bissell

The subjective experience of each individual participant in *Tide Times* is crucial, but it will always be mediated by the specific experiences of Bissell and Cooper as relayed in the audio tracks—by the way they express and communicate their experiences, and by the way they frame the experience for others. Some of the spoken-word audio tracks involve monologues (mostly by Bissell), some follow a charming ‘scripted postcard’ conceit between Bissell and Cooper, and some directly address the participants. Altogether, there is rather a lot to listen to—42 minutes, to be precise—and possibly too much for those who would rather be instigated by the audio tracks and then left to explore by themselves. Having so much audio may well be an obstacle to having an authentic solitary experience on the island (let alone an interpersonal experience, with each participant isolated by their own headphones). This can make *Tide Times* feel a little unlived by the end, with the possibility of leaving the island without necessarily having engaged deeply with it on your own terms, although the audio tracks are

certainly essential as a didactic tool to help guide any hesitant participants.

Some of the most interesting audio tracks are those with Cooper's vivid electroacoustic compositions. They are based on close-microphone field recordings of sounds from Cramond Island and use subtle electronic effects to explore sonic details. Listening to these can help to attune our ears to the ambient sounds of the island and provokes us to make sounds of our own using the natural materials we might find: better than *telling* us to make music, we are *seduced* into making music. This is a sophisticated way to help us be like children again: to discover a fresh way of listening to sound, then to try and emulate it. Similarly, there is a childishness to the poetic texts that Bissell uses in her spoken-word tracks but the poems' intentionally naïve onomatopoeic style is likely to appeal to a wide age range. The most effective passages are reflections on the presence of the sea and on what kind of an entity it is.



Photo: Laura Bissell

Little is said in *Tide Times* about the history of Cramond Island, an omission which is well worth considering. In

brief: there is speculation that a Roman outpost may have settled there but until the early twentieth century the island was used primarily for sheep grazing. Artillery bunkers were built during World War 1 and 2 for protection. Bissell and Cooper seem adamant that *Tide Times* should remain an experience rooted exclusively in the present moment. Instead of human history, they opt for geological history, referring often to the gradual formation of rocks and mountains, the lifetime of an individual wave, the topography of neighbouring islands, and so on. In any phenomenological experience, a deep and varied sense of temporality is necessary: perhaps an awareness of both human and natural history, would have given the installation a deeper political resonance and made the sense of *being there* both more transient and more intense.

I visited Cramond Island early in the morning of 28 September 2018. The weather and mood were starkly different from that described in the audio commentary, but having grown up in Edinburgh, I already had good memories of Cramond in its bustling summer peak. This time, the island was windy and cold, overcast with heavy grey-white clouds and melancholy with only a few isolated visitors walking around. The change in atmosphere between the rocky cliffs and the woodland was striking, like a change in pace, or a retreat inwards. The detailed sounds in Cooper's electroacoustic pieces drew me to investigate the materials of the buildings and their acoustical properties. The treasure chests mentioned in the audio tracks, however, were long gone. The experience of Bissell and Cooper worked in counterpoint to my own. While I was there, the site-responsive intentions of *Tide Times* seemed minimal to my engagement with the island: as a composer, I may have been attentive to the sounds and atmospheres anyway. But, looking back, the intricate, expansive framework created by Bissell and Cooper gave me a unique entry-point to this island, and the connections they formed between places, sounds and feelings is likely to stay with me for a long time, at least until my next visit.

About the review author

GREGOR FORBES is a composer, pianist and conductor based in Scotland. He studied Music at the University of Cambridge and completed a Master's Degree in Composition at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in 2016. He has organised and performed in Glasgow Experimental Music Series since 2014, which has now presented fourteen concerts and a workshop in several artistic venues across the city and featured fresh and engaging new music by local and under-represented composers as well as by internationally established figures in experimental music. Gregor is the recipient of the inaugural Hanns Eisler Haus Scholarship and Residency which entails a five-month stay in Eisler's birth apartment in Leipzig to compose music for the Musica Nova Series at the Gewandhaus. Gregor also writes about music for Bachtrack, The Cusp, and his own blog.