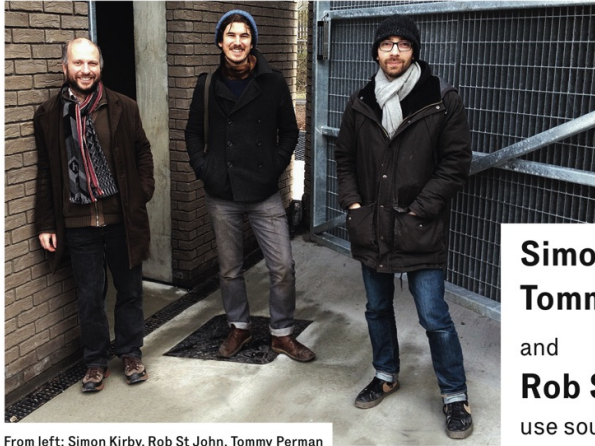


Tone



From left: Simon Kirby, Rob St John, Tommy Perman



Sing The Gloaming, Sanctuary Lab, Galloway, 2017

Simon Kirby
Tommy Perman

and

Rob St John

use sound and sculpture to trace the history of words as part of a wider movement enlightening science through art.

By **Julian Cowley**

Gloam

"A diagram in a scientific paper, a 24 hour installation in a forest, a shop window in Dundee, a series of videos shared on social media, a carefully packaged 10" record," Simon Kirby points out that *Sing The Gloaming*, his latest collaborative project with artists Tommy Perman and Rob St John, has existed in all these forms. Kirby runs a scientific research centre at the University of Edinburgh, studying the evolution of language, and cultural connections arising from human communication across time and space. With an academic colleague he has mapped the historical development of words relating to light, tracking our vocabulary of gleam, glimmer, gloom and glow back to a single word uttered 5000 years ago, near the Black Sea.

With Perman and St John he set out to make that diagram come alive, initially through an installation in southwestern Scotland. "At Sanctuary Lab in Galloway, we placed hexagonal sculptures through the forest floor in a way that mirrored the map," St John elucidates. "Each contained a different cassette tape loop of a sung 'gl-' word, so as you walked through the space new sonic relationships formed. Rain got in and the batteries began to drain, slowly warping and reshaping the piece." Perman recalls that "by the end all the loops had taken on a mossy timbre". Those containers were made from softwood; more resilient, weather-proof sculptures are planned for future outdoor incarnations.

In 2018, during Dundee's Design Festival, the project took on new life. *Singing Glass*, a light-responsive installation, transformed a shop window into a resonating speaker projecting the sound

of light-related words into the street. It offered passers-by a kind of synaesthetic experience, a means to grasp intuitively how meanings and verbal forms may sometimes intertwine. A vinyl record, issued by Blackford Hill, is the most recent version of this versatile piece. Singers Hanna Tuuliki, Aidan Moffat, Andrew Wasyluk, Su Shaw, Emily Scott, Kenny Anderson and Nerea Bello were invited to participate. "We posted a printed card asking each of them to vocalise a short set of 'gl-' words," St. John explains. The instruction was to take the previous singer's recording to a place dappled with light and shadow, to listen, take a photograph and then to improvise their own response, allocating one minute to each word.

"I began the chain of transmission," St John continues. "Simon organised a vocal coach to help me pronounce the proto-gl-word 'ghlei'. Recordings then began to appear in our inboxes: each relating to the last, sharing a loose melodic and rhythmic structure, but diverging in tone, timbre, pitch and space." Kirby, Perman and St John assembled this material, some of it processed through modular synthesizers, granular synthesis and convolution reverbs. "This transmission chain process is actually a cornerstone of my scientific research," Kirby notes. "We use these kinds of games in my lab to construct miniature experimental analogues of different aspects of cultural evolution. Bridging the traditional divide between science and the arts rests on realisation that we're all asking the same kinds of questions, but bringing different expertise to bear."

Work that emerges in spaces between individual specialisms has particular appeal for these

interdisciplinary collaborators. "I trained as a painter and have worked as a graphic designer and illustrator so some visual things fall to me," says Perman. "But we don't have clearly defined roles." He lives in Perth and Kinross. St John is in Lancashire. Kirby remains in Edinburgh where the three initially met, as members of the DIY music community. A decade later, in 2015, they undertook their first joint venture. *Concrete Antenna* imaginatively reconceived a tower at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop as a receiver tuned in to the surrounding region. "I thought a lot about how to tease out the knotty histories of a site through sound," says St John, who trained as a geographer. A stream of mixed archival and recent field recordings was regulated by live feeds of tide and weather data. "Prevailing environmental conditions shaped the content of the work while the local soundscape, unique to that particular moment, filtered in through an opening at the top of the tower."

The vinyl record of *Concrete Antenna* has a tide-in and tide-out side, and is accompanied by a printed log covering five years of tide times for Leith, where the tower was built.

"We want to relate sound to a strong sense of place and time," Kirby emphasises. "For all our online working and digital collaborations, there's something magical about site-specific installations that I long for. Our new record, produced remotely, is in many ways a dry run for creativity in the time of coronavirus. But the satisfaction of seeing your work in a physical space and watching how people interact with it is such a privilege. When will we get to do that again?" □ singthegloaming.space

Courtesy Tommy Perman