

National College of Art and Design

Sculpture and Expanded Practice, School of Fine Art

Approaching the Soundscape of Holy Wells

Rory Reilly

Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of Sculpture and Expanded Practice with Critical Cultures.



National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed: Rory Reilly

Programme / department: Sculpture and Expanded Practice

Date: 7/2/2022

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I'd like to thank my research supervisor Emma O'Mahony for her guidance and support throughout the writing of this research essay. I would also like to thank Ronan Foley from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, who took the time to have a very useful discussion with me about the subject matter of this thesis. Finally, my friend Jennifer Moore, who came with me on the visit to St. Brigid's Well in Clondalkin.

Table of Contents

1. List of illustrations
2. Introduction
3. Reflection: Pattern Day at St. Brigid's Well, Clondalkin
4. Holy wells within cultural and health geographies
5. Listening to holy wells
6. Artistic engagement with holy wells
7. Conclusion
8. Bibliography

List of illustrations

1. 1940 photograph of St. Brigid's Well in Clondalkin, County Dublin (NFC, 1940).
2. Offerings at St. Brigid's Well, Clondalkin, County Dublin. (Reilly, 2022).
3. St. Brigid's Well, Clondalkin, County Dublin (Reilly, 2022).
4. Rag tree at St. Brigid's Well, Clondalkin, County Dublin (Reilly, 2022).
5. St. Ciaran's Well (Ireland's Holy Wells County-By-County).
6. Lady's Well & Mass Rock (Holy Wells of Cork and Kerry, 2016).
7. St. Colmcille's Well, Kilsharvan, County Meath 1 (Reilly, 2021).
8. St. Colmcille's Well, Kilsharvan, County Meath 2 (Reilly, 2021).
9. Pauline Oliveros and the ♀ Ensemble performing *Teach Yourself to Fly* from *Sonic Meditations*, 1970, Rancho Santa Fe, CA, (Pauline Oliveros Papers, 1970).
10. *Wind Horse* (Oliveros, 1990).
11. Students use hydrophone to explore holy well. (Langan and Scriven, 2018).

Introduction



Fig. 1

The offerings left at wells seem to reflect every need of human existence: for health, for fertility, for jobs, for houses, for a good partner in life, for family harmony. The coming to the well, especially if that entails some hardship, the circling of the 'stations', the adding of stones to cairns, the prayers repeated like a mantra, all of these serve to focus the mind to a degree that allows our own healing powers to come into play, or at least to bring peace to mind and soul ... despite the lack of any official help or protection, they have always belonged to the people, the ordinary folk of the countryside who have no office, power or influence. The cult of the wells could not have endured so long unless it satisfied some deep felt need in our consciousnesses.

(Healy, 2001, pp. 116-117)

Across tides of change in religion, culture, landscape and technological advancement, holy wells have remained for many in Ireland as places of faith and health, and even a conduit between these two needs (Bord and Bord, 1989; Brenneman, 2005; Foley 2010, 2011, 2013, Healy 2001). These are sites of contested origins and identity, initially associated

with a pagan spirituality (Ray, 2011, 2014). In the 19th Century, the customs and special days of attendance at holy wells became adopted within the structures of Christianity, with many wells being renamed after different saints (Ó'Giolláin, 1992). Today they remain active sites among seekers of cures for various ailments (sore eyes, toothaches, warts), for the practice of faith and memorial, as well as places of interest for tourists and community groups (Foley, 2010). Common customs include dipping rags into the healing waters and tying them to a nearby 'rag tree', the rounding of the stations of the well while saying the rosary, and the patterns: a historic tradition where people come to gather at a holy well on the feast day of its associated saint (O'Brien, 2008).

In this essay I will discuss some recent research by geographers about holy wells in Ireland in relation to discourses on soundscapes and the materiality of sound. I then go on to discuss collaborative artistic research by Vicky Langan and Richard Scriven and the 'Sonic Meditations' of Pauline Oliveros in connection with these ideas. My research methodology takes the form of a number of primary and secondary sources including visits to specific holy wells, archival material and a range of published books, essays and journal articles on the subject. In particular I focus on a case study of St Brigid's Well in Clondalkin, County Dublin (Fig. 1), with a reflection and short audio documentation from a visit I made on a pattern day, and throughout the text go on to reference archival material from the National Folklore Collection about this well. Written very much in tandem with my own practice and perspective as an artist, this research essay is not intended to make firm conclusions about holy wells, but rather to connect and relate ideas from distinct fields to these places of watery spirituality for the purposes of artistic practice.

Reflection: Pattern Day at St Brigid's Well, Clondalkin



Fig. 2



Fig. 3 and 4

1/2/2022

Jenn picked me up in her car outside of her studio off Capel St. Driving to the well, we caught up and shared in our excitement to go there on the day of its patron saint. Driving down the M50, we turned up the speaker and played our favourite songs, singing and laughing, and missing many turns on the way. Needless to say, it took us far longer than it should have to get to the well.

Parking at a nearby Circle K, we got some coffee and pastries and walked down the path to the site, which was located next to a housing estate. We noticed that a few women standing by the well seemed to be sharing in a personal moment among themselves. Hoping to give them privacy, we sat down nearby and drank our coffee, reflecting on the changes of the New Year, and our relationships to St. Brigid's Day.

After a few minutes we came back to the well and blessed ourselves with the water. Taking in the atmosphere, I could hear the stir of the wind, the birds singing and the roar of the busy road on the other side of the wall. The well was maintained in wonderful condition and decorated with votive offerings: candles were lit beneath the statue and the rag tree was blooming with dishcloths, pieces of fabric, beads, medals and ribbons. I certainly felt a strong sensation of presence and emotional power at the well. I don't identify with or regularly practice religion, so I couldn't remember the last time that I prayed or set intentions to a religious figure. In a testament to the experience I had here, I certainly couldn't remember the last time that I had experienced this kind of emotion during prayer.

Many visitors passed us by during our short stay. Families dropped by to bless themselves and pray, and a few groups who came to bless themselves left behind offerings on the rag tree. A man told his friend "I'll be just 2 minutes, keep the car running" and jumped out of the passenger seat, to say a few quick prayers, before hopping back in and driving off. It was this more informal or vernacular contact with spirituality and history that really left a mark on us. Remarkably different to experiences I've had in churches or medical settings, our time at the well on St. Brigid's Day felt expansive and healing in a way that I couldn't have expected.

Short audio documentation of the soundscape at St. Brigid's on this day. (Reilly, 2022)

Holy wells within cultural and health geographies



Fig. 5

As described in my reflection on the pattern at St Brigid's Well, I experienced deep feelings of peace and connectedness, not just from the presence of the well and its environment, but from the surrounding atmosphere. With long standing reputations as cures and spiritual places, it's worth contextualising specifically how positive effects come to be experienced at holy wells. In this chapter, I will discuss experiential dynamics at holy wells, drawing from the perspectives of cultural and health geographers who discuss landscapes in affective terms, referring to not just their physical attributes, but the imbrication of culture, affect and spirituality within their material settings.

A useful model for analysis of the curative properties of holy wells is the 'therapeutic landscape'. Wilbert Gesler developed this concept as a way of integrating perspectives from cultural geographies, social sciences and the humanities into discourses around human health and medicine (Gesler, 1992). It has been applied by medical geographers to discuss the experiential qualities of places as they relate to health in the contexts of medical settings, blue and green spaces, indigenous peoples experiences of health and pilgrimage sites (Curtis et al., 2007; Finlay et al., 2015; Williams, 2010; Wilson, 2003). In defining the therapeutic landscape, Gesler refers to a model of cultural materialism described by Peter Jackson as "...a particular application of the Marxist method of historical materialism to the field of cultural studies" (Jackson, 1989) to analyse the layers of individual and cultural meanings present in experiences at both therapeutic landscapes and traditional medical settings. Gesler does not simply map ideas from cultural studies onto landscapes, but speaks to the feedback loop that occurs between the biological and the cultural:

In other words, interior experience of illness is adjusted through external, societal forms. When a person 'feels ill', he or she tries to explain their symptoms using signs that are culturally encoded

(Gesler, 1992, p. 739)

The cultural and the spiritual are materialised at holy wells through sensory experiences of the location, embodied rituals, communal gatherings and most spectacularly, the experience of curative effects. While the practices at holy wells are undeniably quite far removed from contemporary medical practices, the amount of cures they are said to yield are undeniable. An interview from 1979 with a woman named Kathleen Kelly held in the National Folklore Collection's audio archive describes the numerous people who have been cured at St. Brigid's Well in Clondalkin, most notably a man who was reportedly cured instantly of leukaemia by the water from the well. Kelly also says that the well was

restored by a couple named as Mr and Mrs Doyle from Phibsboro, who also ran patterns at the well for a very long time. (NFC, 1979).

For Gesler one of the useful qualities of defining therapeutic landscapes is in proposing alternative methodologies and places of care, outside of medical settings which may have negative associations (Gesler, 1992). The stories of St Brigid's Well in Clondalkin suggests a history of active communal engagement and ways of relating to health, emotional and physical, through embodied practices (rag trees, drinking well water) and rituals (prayers, pattern days and the rounding of stations) (NFC, 1979, 2012; NFCS vol. 795, 796).

Understanding how such miraculous cures come to be requires an engagement with this relationship between the physical landscape and the semiotic qualities of the location.

In 'Healing Waters', Ronan Foley describes the holy well as being representative of a therapeutic landscape, discussing St. Kieran's Well at Castlekeeran, County Meath (Fig. 5) and the role of faith in the experience of cures:

In visits to St. Kieran's Well, the rituals and performances encountered reflect centuries-old narratives of water, health and place rooted in a belief in the power of the well as a physical faith cure. In discussing how therapeutic watering-place identities were created within material settings, the importance of narrative, metaphor and discourse cannot be underestimated. In the same way that Boorstin referred to the notion of the 'pseudo-event' in tourist practice, that same metaphor can be used in relation to the 'pseudo-cure', where arguably 'inauthentic' practices become real through repetition (Boorstin, 1964). While this notion is more fully explored in other settings around contested health narratives in place, the methodological importance of myths, symbols and even superstitions (in Irish, *pisreog*) were essential in the production of the hydrotherapeutic landscape.

(Foley, 2010)

In a later essay, "Performing health in place: the holy well as a therapeutic assemblage", Foley proposes that we think of wells as a "therapeutic assemblage", a definition of therapeutic landscape that "emphasises connections, not always necessarily productive, between inner meaning and outer/societal context and the more experiential and relational dimensions required of contemporary work in this area" (Foley, 2010). Referring to the

work of Deleuze and Guatarri, the assemblage is constituted of “material”, “metaphorical” and “inhabited” dimensions, describing how at holy wells, “therapeutic benefits are negotiable, contingent and framed by affective and performative embodiment in place” (Foley, 2010). Demonstrating this, a story documented in Colin and Janet Bord’s *Sacred Waters* describes an attempt at a well cure from the eighteenth century at Glastonbury in England, where there is a related history and culture of holy wells:

I was myself a witness of the powerful workings of imagination in the populace, when the waters of Glastonbury were at the height of their reputation. The virtues of the spring there were supposed to be supernatural and to have been discovered by a dream to one Matthew Chancellor. The people did not only expect to be cured of such distempers as were in their nature incurable, but even to recover their lost eyes, and their mutilated limbs. The following story, which scarce exceeds what I observed upon the spot, was told to me by a gentleman of character. ‘An old woman in the workhouse at Yeovil, who had long been a cripple, and made use of crutches, was strongly inclined to drink of the Glastonbury waters, which she was assured would cure her of her lameness. The master of the workhouse procured her several bottles of water; which had such an effect, that she soon laid aside one crutch, and not long after the other. This was extolled as aa miraculous cure; but the man protested to his friends that he had imposed upon her and fetched the water from an ordinary spring.’ I need not inform the reader, that when the force of imagination had spent itself, she relapsed into her former infirmity.

(Bord and Bord, 1986, p.48)

From this story we can presume that the water of holy wells likely holds few magical qualities within its chemical makeup; the healing effects are produced through an emotional connection to the well, and what it signifies. That is not to say that the experience of cures from holy wells is a placebo effect, but rather a tangible therapeutic outcome produced from an assemblage of physical matter, affect and spirituality.

What binds the landscape to the cultural and the sacred at holy wells is this belief, or its promise: possibility. The possibility of a cure, or the appearance of a saint or remembrance of a lost loved one. Another interview about St. Brigid’s holy well in Clondalkin is held in the National Folklore Collection’s audio archive. In the audio recorded on site at the well, a local man named Peter Fleming discusses the experience of various people he knows who have been cured by the well. Fleming asserts that the power of the well is connected with

belief, saying “You have to believe, not read”. Reflecting on the experiences of those he knows at the well, Fleming says “...a woman comes to me and says, ‘I can feel the presence here. It’s very peaceful here.’” (NFC, 2012). Further reports from the National Folklore Collection’s ‘School’s Collection’ detail numerous people who have been cured of blindness and sore eyes at St. Brigid’s Well, and reported apparitions of St. Brigid at the well by local people (NFCS vol. 795, 796).

At St. Brigid’s the cure for sore eyes is found by visiting the well three times, on each time dipping a piece of cloth in the water of the well and rubbing your eyes with it three times before tying it to the nearby hawthorn tree (NFCS, vol. 795). Referring to Ronan Foley’s therapeutic assemblage (Foley, 2011), at St. Brigid’s Well, an embodied and ritualistic practice at once unites matters of emotional and physical wellbeing, cultural tradition and faith. Returning to Peter Fleming’s statement about believing before reading (NFC, 2012), the feelings which can emerge through such practices, and the way that they enact cures on the body and mind are perhaps best understood outside of discursive forms of knowledge. In this next chapter, I will propose a sonic engagement with holy wells.

Listening to holy wells



Fig. 6

When considering how to engage with holy wells through the senses, the eyes come to mind immediately, given the associations with sore eyes and blindness. Yet the contrast between the often nondescript visual settings (Rackard, O'Callaghan and Bourke, 2001) and the associated presence of the unseen (Brennenman, 2005, MacLeod, 2006, O'Brien, 2008) suggests that there is much more to holy wells than what our eyes might tell.

Richard Scriven has discussed the embodied experience of touch within a continuum of material, metaphorical and inhabited qualities at holy wells:

Haptic practices provide a context to express feelings, seek assistance for events outside of human control, and to connect with saintly, spiritual, and natural forces. By carving intentions into the stones through the form of crosses, or by leaving tokens, pilgrims emplace their beliefs and concerns at the site, and by taking away well water they mobilise the site and its meanings. Significantly, this highlights how human senses are not just channels between the self and the world, but are central to how we make sense of the

world. Meaning is forged in experience. In the context of the holy well, spiritual encounters arise through embodied performances at the sites.

(Scriven, 2019, p. 286)

Through inscriptions and leaving of offerings, by touching the mass stones and drinking the well water, the experience at holy wells is more than an observation of environment. There are unseeable and even indescribable affective forces, produced from many centuries of history and worship, which are absorbed and responded to by the body at holy wells. Pulling together research from music theory, sound art and acoustic ecology, I reflect on how the relationships between physical landscape, culture and spirituality described in the previous chapter are made evident through what we hear at wells.

Typically located outdoors within natural environments, there are some commonalities to how or what we might hear when visiting a holy well. As expressed in my documentation of the pattern at St. Brigid's, some sounds that might be named include birdsong, cars in the distance, the wind shaking the leaves, running water or the sounds of the body: footsteps on grass or the pace of one's breath. Rather than taxonomising all of the different sounds which might be heard, it's worth reflecting for a moment on the atmosphere that this creates.

Why are the sound of natural environments so linked with feelings of peace within our contemporary audio culture? Recordings of natural environments are ubiquitous in commodified markets around health and wellbeing, as well as genres such as new age or 'chill-out' music. White noise machines used for sleep typically feature sounds of rainforests, ocean waves or crickets, and on YouTube one can find ASMR videos with millions of views, all with titles such as 'Relaxing River Sounds - Peaceful Forest River - 3 Hours Long - HD 1080p - Nature Video' (TheSilentWatcher, 2014). Walking into another therapeutic watering place, the spa, it is likely that you will hear music with gentle chord

progressions and recordings of natural environments playing over the hum of treatments taking place across different rooms. In these settings, natural sounds are decontextualised from their source and function, as a kind of sonic-image that symbolises health and relaxation.

There are certainly connections to be made here between the sounds of nature heard at wells and the positive experiences that are found there. Suzanne J. Crawford O'Brien's study of holy wells and mass stones in Ireland (O'Brien, 2008) describes a pattern celebration at Lady's Well in Bantry, County Cork (Fig. 6). In describing the experience, O'Brien notes many sensory qualities of the location - the smells, the feeling of the air, the decoration, the surrounding natural environment and particularly the sounds heard at the pattern. Throughout the excerpt, there are specific qualities of atmosphere and presence named, a feeling of being watched over and a description of the place as feeling special:

This place feels special. The air almost shimmers here. The sound is different - and I quickly remember I've been told the hollow has special acoustics. We're warm from the walk, and many of us are eye-ing the well, thinking how nice the cool water would taste, and wondering if it is appropriate to go for a drink. The smell of the ocean and livestock gives one a sense of being truly out of doors. The ground is soft, squishy, forgiving. The space itself feels protective, en-circling, and the air is warm, carrying the sound aloft, but also keeping it securely within the space. The well is at the center of the hollow, with the mass stone just behind it. Local caretakers have covered the mass stone and the rock-face behind it with bunches of hydrangeas, and above, looking down over the well and the hollow below, is a statue of the Virgin Mary, freshly painted. One can't help but feel watched over.

(O'Brien, 2008, p. 2)

Yet many holy wells are not located in picturesque settings with sweet natural soundscapes. As depicted in "FishStoneWater" many wells are dried up, have fallen into disrepair or are located in areas with a high volume of noise pollution. Yet as Angela Bourke notes in the introduction to the book, this does not make these places any less important to those who find meaning at them (Rackard, O'Callaghan and Bourke, 2001). Thinking back to my experience at the pattern in St. Brigid's, I remember the sound of

water running from the well, the sounds of birds and wind, but I also remember the traffic being extremely loud and there was a lot of surrounding noise that very much situated the well outside of the pastoral serenity which O'Brien describes (O'Brien, 2008).



Fig. 7 and 8

On a recent visit to St. Colmcilles Well in Kilsharvan, County Meath, I initially didn't notice it and drove by. On my way back I noticed that behind a wall, lay the well with a statue of St. Colmcille. The structure of the well was relatively well maintained, but it had dried up and become overgrown. (Fig. 7 and 8). Located near a bypass and a farm, the sounds I heard were a curious mix of cars flying by and the hum of machinery with the wind and the birds. At both St. Brigid's Well and St. Colmcille's Well, after listening deeply, the sounds that I heard were often typical of the sonic environments of their respective locations, but combined with the expectations I brought to the place, they took on a powerful emotional quality.

Soundscapes often reveal these complexities. Soundscape studies are a form of research which evolved from the work of R. Murray Schafer (Schafer, 1977), and have been applied within urban planning and the social sciences to understand various sonic environments and their relationship to human health (Aletta and Kang, 2018; Boyd, 2018; Uimonen, 2008). There has not been much research on the soundscapes of holy wells in particular, but studies of soundscapes in similar settings, and the application of soundscapes within medical settings propose some ideas about listening which bear relevance to this research essay.

Comparing the experience of natural environments with simulated versions of natural environments, a study of the role of soundscape in nature-based rehabilitation techniques suggested that not just the sounds of nature themselves, but the sounds of *being in* nature helped awaken memories and induce restorative effects in patients:

Sounds of nature were generally given rich and colourful descriptions that incorporated the patients' own experiences; the nature sounds were prone to evoke memories and were often described together with other sensory stimuli. In many cases, descriptions of nature sounds indicated that they (especially together with other sensory input) could induce soft fascination and result in possible mental restoration. This finding thus suggests that the interaction between different sensory inputs could be an important aspect to consider. In a previous comparative study of restorative effects between nature and a simulated (visual) natural environment it was found that the group exposed to real nature experienced increased energy and altered states of consciousness compared with the group exposed to virtual nature. One difference between the groups that materialised was the relative sensory connection. In addition to natural sounds, sounds of movement emerged as positive in the study. When patients moved in the garden, the sound of their own footsteps on different materials confirmed the movement and generated a positive effect.

(Cerwén, Pedersen and Pálsdóttir, 2016, p. 9)

We can see from this quote how it is not exactly the sounds of natural environments themselves which necessarily create therapeutic outcomes, but how sound narrates the embodied experience of being in a natural setting. A study exploring positive hospital soundscape interventions found that recordings of natural environmental sounds had a pronounced effect on the experience of patients in the hospital. It was also noted that

patients located near windows who were able to hear outdoor sounds reported positive effects due to the “temporal variation” of these natural sounds masking the sounds of the hospital (Mackrill, Jennings and Cain, 2014).

Outside of the therapeutic qualities to physiological and emotional health that the sonic environment of holy wells can bring, the soundscapes of these settings may have connections to the spiritual experiences found at holy wells. An evaluation of the soundscapes of a Christian cathedral and a Buddhist temple in urban settings in South Korea revealed that sounds of nature, particularly pleasant masking sounds such as running water and birdsong were conducive to an increased experience of tranquility during religious worship (Jeon, Hwang and Hong, 2014). Considering these findings in the context of holy wells, I find it relevant to mention Ronan Foley’s description of the holy well as a “somewhere-between- special-and-everyday” place (Foley, 2011), where quiet contemplation and attendance to the body can be found in the most unexpected places.

Throughout the previous chapter, I identified qualities at holy wells which bring therapeutic effects to visitors, and discussed how affect and inhabited spirituality work between landscape and the body. Considering the often unconscious or before-knowledge quality of affect, we might turn our attention to an intentional and directed listening to holy wells as a way of sensing these relationships. Salomé Voegelin, in ‘Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound’, argues that sound is an active process of “things thinging”, a materialisation of things coming together in place (Voegelin, 2014). In the introduction to this book, Voegelin argues that listening is a way of observing the working processes of our world, outside of the bureaucracy of vision:

Listening we will not automatically get to a better world, or a better philosophy. sound does not hold a superior ethical position or reveal a promised land. but it will show us the world in its invisibility: in the unseen movements beneath its visual organization that allow us to see its mechanism, its dynamic and structure, and the investment of its agency, which

might well be dark and forbidding. A sonic sensibility reveals the invisible mobility below the surface of a visual world and challenges its certain position, not to show a better place but to reveal what this world is made of, to question its singular actuality and to hear other possibilities that are probable too, but which, for reasons of ideology, power and coincidence do not take equal part in the production of knowledge, reality, value, and truth.

(Voegelin, 2014, p. 3)

For Voegelin, listening is a way that we can attune ourselves to these very processes unfolding in time and place. Celeste Ray describes holy wells as having contested identities, changing ownership and meaning over time (Ray, 2011, 2014). The soundscape of holy wells make these histories evident. Trying not to being too prescriptive of the experiences of others, for those who come with even the smallest amount of knowledge about these places, a sense of history and the particularities of ones relationship to spirituality are inevitability suffused within the environmental sounds at holy wells. Furthermore the traditions of holy wells emphasise repetition: repeated visits, rounds of stations, pattern days. Through establishing a personal connection to the environment of a well, the soundscape becomes imbued with memories.

These qualities may not be consciously present. Writing on the inaudible, Voegelin states that what we don't hear is often "intrinsically knowable", and rather than being in contradiction with what we might consider the actual world, "the possible-thing-of-sound makes apparent the plurality of the object as things thinging. It brings to attention their processes and materialities and makes them graspable as sensorial things that do not obey description but trigger their own name" (Voegelin, 2014). For Voegelin, what we hear contains a kind of "sonic possibilism", whereby when we listen we are not just hearing what is, we are also hearing what *could be* (Voegelin, 2014). In the case of holy wells, where visits are very much made with intention for health, faith or life's problems, what we might categorise as simply the sound of humans in environment could also be understood as the sound of those hopes and expectations meeting the place and associations of the well. We often understand the cures at holy wells to be miracles, due to a lack of correspondence

with contemporary medical practices, yet as discussed in the previous chapter, there are many benefits produced through the working of affect on the body, to the result of emotional and physiological health that can be experienced at wells. As articulated in this quote from Gallagher et. al, through sound the actions of environmental, affective and spiritual dimensions are made knowable, even outside of a conscious action of listening:

Sound is critical to affective atmospheres for two reasons. First, it moves through space in distinctive ways. Sound is highly promiscuous (LaBelle, 2010: xvii); while it travels through materials differentially, in air it has a tendency to envelop other bodies. Because of this fluid, diffusive and immersive tendency, sound is integral to the formation of atmospheres in spaces. Second, everything participates in the sounding of worlds, including both biotic and abiotic bodies – an exhale, the teeming of insects, the movement of fabric, a chemical reaction, the oscillation of leaves and branches..., an echo off concrete, a riot, a boat idling..., ice thawing and so forth. Because everything engages sound, sound acts to link and collectivize bodies and environments, creating different kinds of atmospheres. These sounds may be audible or inaudible to the human ear, or on the threshold of audibility. The vibrational force of sound means that it acts upon entities regardless of whether those entities are consciously listening to it or not.

(Gallagher, Kanngieser and Prior, 2016, p. 626)

Recognising the complex identities of holy wells, there is undoubtedly something healing about these places. Not to forget their principle element: running water, these are settings which symbolise vitality and the stream of life. Sound, as an ever-flowing, active process of the world co-mingling, is where the semiotic becomes tangible.

Artistic engagement with these sites

In the first chapter I discussed a continuum of physical landscape, embodiment, affect and spirituality in expressions of faith and health at holy wells. Next I discussed the how this is heard through the soundscape at holy wells. In this chapter I will discuss two works, a piece of music, and a project of collaborative artistic research, which open up routes for a response to holy wells through collaborative artistic and musical practice.

Pauline Oliveros: Sonic Meditations



Fig. 9

In trying to hear the layers of meanings at wells, I look to the *Sonic Meditations* by the composer Pauline Oliveros (Oliveros, 1974). Oliveros introduces these 25 meditations as exercises focused on the imagination, remembering, production-of and listening-to of

natural sounds. They are to be performed as a group and are specifically designed to have healing effects by re-attuning participants to their environment.

Considering these meditations as a designed set of practices and a conceptual framework which illustrate the healing power of listening and communal expression, there are some striking resemblances to the practices and experiences associated with holy wells:

“Healing can occur in relation to the above activities when 1) individuals feel the common bond with others through a shared experience 2) when one's inner experience is made manifest and accepted by others 3) when one is aware of and in tune with one's surroundings 4) when one's memories, or values, are integrated with the present and understood by others.

In process a kind of music occurs naturally. Its beauty is not through intention, but is intrinsically the effectiveness of its healing power. This may be felt by the group, and the music relates to the people who make it through participation and sharing, as a stream or river whose waters offer refreshment and cleansing to those who find it.”

(Oliveros, 1974, p. 3)

Oliveros designed the meditations around the amplification of specific qualities of the environment they were carried out in and with intention placed on non-verbal exchanges between members of the group. These formal qualities relate to the experiential dynamics present at holy wells and during the activities of patterns, where the therapeutic outcomes are linked to environmental qualities such as the flowing water of the well, and touching the mass stones. Furthermore as places where people gather communally with conscious attention to the relationship between their own inner worlds and their external environments, we can see how the activities of the *Sonic Meditations*, and the traditions around holy wells strike similar chords.

I don't make these equivalences between holy wells and the work of Oliveros to try and prove one or the others validity or effectiveness as therapeutic places or exercises. Rather, it is to propose the Sonic Meditations or the ideas that spring from them as a method of approaching holy wells through an artistic or musical practice. Oliveros reflected on these

meditations with an understanding of listening as both a receptive process as well as an action:

“My Sonic Meditations are ‘sonic’ in the sense that sound and hearing, both active and receptive, are the foci of attention and stimuli of awareness. The enhancement and development of aural sensation is one of their goals....The ear is the primary receptor or instrument; sound, both inner and outer, real and imaginary, is the stimulus of Sonic Meditations”

(Oliveros, 1984, p. 141)

Looking to the text score of her 1990 piece *Wind Horse* (Fig. 4) (Oliveros, 1990), we can see how Oliveros’s work, in its recognition of the various bodily, environmental, affective and spiritual qualities present in the sonic moment, reflects the ways in which health

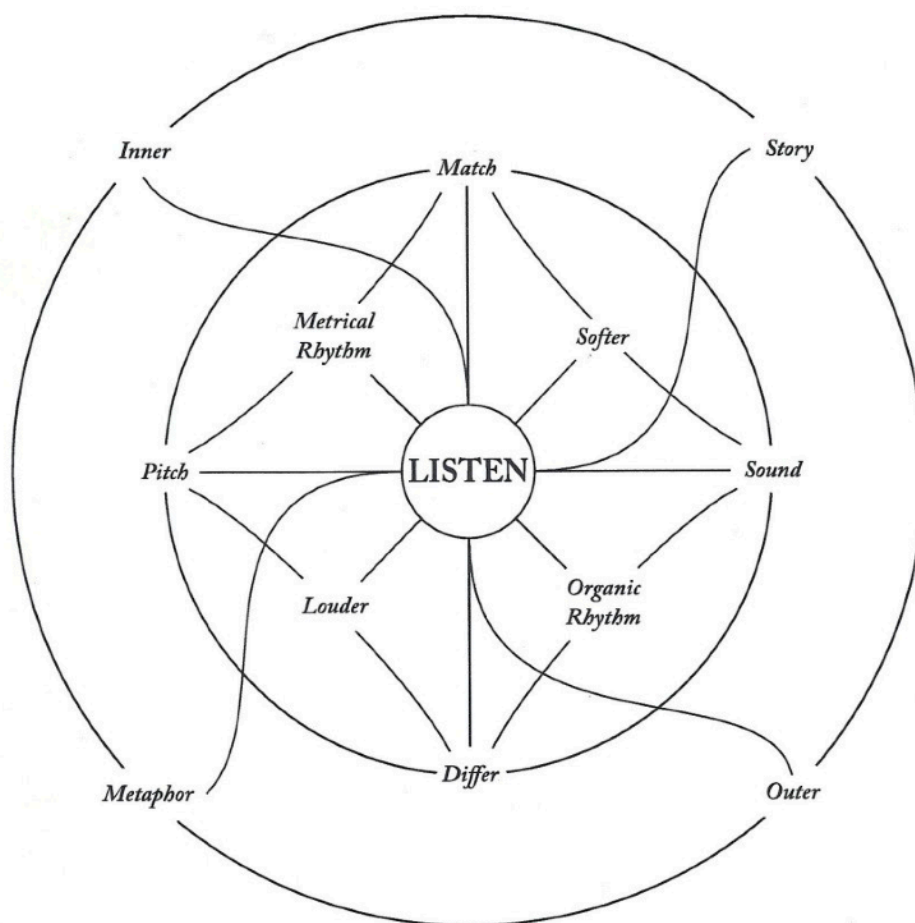


Fig. 10

geographers have approached therapeutic landscapes (Foley 2010, 2011; Scriven, 2019). In the expressed commitment to communal experience and healing, accessed through embodiment and performance, as well as the attention to the layers of meaning made present through listening to natural soundscapes, it would seem that these Sonic Meditations could be performed to much potential in the context of holy wells.

Vicky Langan and Richard Scriven: (Re)sounding holy wells



Fig. 11

"We're having fun and checking out the sounds which are around us and in water; and, we're taking photos of the natural environment. We heard multiple sounds that we probably won't hear again."

(Langan and Scriven, 2018, p. 4)

The above quote is a description by one of the participant students of their experience in *(Re)Sounding Holy Wells*, a collaborative research project by Vicky Langan and Dr. Richard Scriven (Langan and Scriven, 2018). Langan is an artist and Scriven is a lecturer

at University College Cork, whose writing I have referenced previously in this essay. The project involved a series of five workshops with a group of 10-12 year old primary school students from rural Cork. Leading up to the workshops students were encouraged to find out as much information as they could about the wells from friends, neighbours and family members. During the workshops they used a series of audio recorders including a hydrophone to listen to the local St. Fanahan's well and its surrounding environment, in the lead up to the feast day of its patron saint. Following the workshops, a podcast was produced from the audio which was recorded by the students.

Reflecting on the approach the children took to recording sounds of the wells, Scriven and Langan describe some of "ludic" engagements that the students made with the well and surrounding area:

The students quickly turned to more ludic pursuits as the devices allowed them to freshly encounter the area and each other through the medium. While being conscious of the well's sacred character, we had prompted them to make their own sounds, especially by interacting with the site. On the tape, they can be heard whispering and shouting in the microphones, and making a range of amusing and loud noises, as well as trying to hear birds and wildlife, and play with leaves and dirt. At the well, the drop of the hydrophone was popular, as was classmates animating the water while one of the students listened. These transgressive elements permitted the children to engage with the space through a form of playful exploration that presented new experiences of the space.

(Langan and Scriven, 2019, p. 4)

The positive experiences at holy wells are produced from the sediments of history and culture coming together in place. To keep this experience and tradition alive, we would benefit from new engagements with these sacred places. The research process and the distribution of the collected audio took on a life beyond inputs and outputs of an artistic project. By encouraging students to research the wells through word-of-mouth accounts from people around them, a multi-generational engagement with the well was initiated. Langan and Scriven also report very positive feedback among the local community, the students and the school in regards to the audio which resulted from the project (Langan

and Scriven, 2019). This project by Langan and Scriven illustrates the effects that a sonic engagement with holy wells can have in connecting with histories and meanings of the well as they relate to both individuals and communities.

Conclusion

Throughout my research on this subject, I've continually been surprised by the diversity of landscapes holy wells are situated in, and the different forms that individual or communal relationships to wells can take. I would again like to stipulate that the broadness of this subject makes it quite difficult to make any sweeping judgements about the soundscapes of these places, or the experiences that may be found of these soundscapes by individuals.

What I attempted to bring to light in my research however, is the unique way that environment, culture, affect, spirituality and personal meaning come together at holy wells. Furthermore I've explored the way that a sonic engagement with these settings makes these connections audible. Grounding my discussion of their respective works in these ideas, I reflected on the *Sonic Meditations* of Pauline Oliveros and the collaborative project led by Vicky Langan and Richard Scriven. This discussion revealed some approaches to listening, performing and the recording and dissemination of audio which may be of interest to those considering working with sound in relation to holy wells.

Throughout this research essay my intention has been to unite ideas from distinct fields for the purposes of artistic practice, and for the interest of those who also find themselves drawn to the healing waters and curious environments of holy wells. Tying together these ideas has revealed the specificity of identity belong to each holy well, and the role of repeated visits in the experience of these places.. The next steps for myself, and for anybody interested in working in this area would be extended field research with repeated visits to chosen sites.

Bibliography

- Bord, J. and Bord, C. (1986). *Sacred Waters: Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland*. London: Paladin Grafton Books.
- Boyd, C. (2018). Health Geographies of Art, Music, and Sound: The Re-Making of Self in Place. In: V. Crooks, G. Andrews and J. Pearce, *The Routledge Handbook of Health Geography*. London: Routledge.
- Brenneman, W. L. (2005). 'The Circle and the Cross: Reflections on the Holy Wells of Ireland', *Natural Resources Journal*, 45(4).
- Curtis, S., Gesler, W., Fabian, K., Francis, S. and Priebe, S. (2007). Therapeutic Landscapes in Hospital Design: A Qualitative Assessment by Staff and Service Users of the Design of a New Mental Health Inpatient Unit. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 25(4), pp.591-610.
- Cerwén, G., Pedersen, E. and Pálsdóttir, A. (2016). 'The Role of Soundscape in Nature-Based Rehabilitation: A Patient Perspective', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 13(12)
- Finlay, J., Franke, T., McKay, H. and Sims-Gould, J. (2015). Therapeutic landscapes and wellbeing in later life: Impacts of blue and green spaces for older adults. *Health & Place*, 34, pp.97-106.
- Foley, R. (2010), *Healing Waters: Therapeutic Landscapes in Historic and Contemporary Ireland*, London: Routledge
- Foley, R. (2011), 'Performing health in place: The holy well as a therapeutic assemblage', *Health & Place*, 17(2), pp. 470-479
- Foley, R. (2013), 'Small health pilgrimages: Place and practice at the holy well', *Culture and Religion*, 14(1), pp. 44-62
- Gallagher, M., Kanngieser, A. and Prior, J. (2016). Listening geographies: landscape, affect and geotechnologies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(5), pp.618-637.
- Gesler, W. (1992), 'Therapeutic landscapes: Medical issues in light of the new cultural geography', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 34, no. 7, pp. 735-746
- Healy, E (2001), *In Search of Ireland's Holy Wells*, Dublin: Wolfhound Press.
- Holy Wells of Cork and Kerry. (2016). *Lady's Well & Mass Rock* [image] Available at: <<https://holywellscorkandkerry.com/2016/02/19/ladys-well-sheeps-head/>>
- Ireland's Holy Wells County-By-County. *St Ciaran's Well*. [image] Available at: <<https://ihwcbc.omeka.net/items/show/243>>
- Jackson P. (1989). *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography*. London: Unwin Hyman, pp. 33
- Jeon, J., Hwang, I. and Hong, J. (2014). Soundscape evaluation in a Catholic cathedral and Buddhist temple precincts through social surveys and soundwalks. *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 135(4), pp.1863-1874.
- Kang, J. and Aletta, F. (2018). The Impact and Outreach of Soundscape Research. *Environments*, 5(5), p.58.
- Langan, V. and Scriven, R. (2018). *(Re)sounding holy wells*. Cork: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Langan, V. and Scriven, R. (2018). *Primary school students explore St Fanahan's well, Mitchelstown, with artist Vicky Langan using hydrophones to access the underwater soundscape present new and impactful experiences of the space*. [image] Available at: <<https://www.ucc.ie/en/cacsss/research/researchimpact/resoundingholywells/>>
- Langan, V. and Scriven, R. (2019). Audio and ludic engagements with spiritual heritage at an Irish holy well. *Cultural Geographies*, 27(3), pp.485-490.
- Mackrill, J., Jennings, P. and Cain, R. (2014). Exploring positive hospital ward soundscape interventions. *Applied Ergonomics*, 45(6), pp.1454-1460.

MacLeod, S. P. (2006). A Confluence of Wisdom: The Symbolism of Wells, Whirlpools, Waterfalls and Rivers in Early Celtic Sources. *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 26(27), 337–355.

NFC. (1940). [image] Collection: The Photographic Collection, F024.06.00018. Dublin: National Folklore Collection. [image] Available at: <<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbeg/16611>>

NFC. (1979). *Kelly, Kathleen Mrs.* [Sound recording]. Reference no: ED00085. Dublin: National Folklore Collection.

NFC (2012). *Fleming, Peter.* [Sound recording]. Reference no: ED00085. Dublin: National Folklore Collection.

NFCS. 795. p. 115. Collector: Nolan, K. Teacher: Kevin, M.

NFCS. 795. p. 204. Collector: Nolan, P. Teacher: Kevin, M.

NFCS. 796. p. 10. Mrs Coats, Clondalkin, County Dublin. Collector: O'Connor, G. Teacher: Ó'Riain, D.

Ó'Giolláin, D. (1992). *No Word of a Lie*, "Changing Patterns over the Century". RTE. [Sound recording]. Reference no: T2190/1. Dublin: National Folklore Collection.

Oliveros, P. (1974). *Sonic Meditations*. [Musical score]. Baltimore: Smith Publications.

Oliveros, P. (1984). *Software for people*. New York: Station Hill Press.

Oliveros, P. (1990). *Wind Horse*. [image]. Available at: <<http://deeplistening.org/site/sites/default/files/files/Wind%20Horse.pdf>>

Pauline Oliveros Papers. (1970). *Pauline Oliveros and the ♀ Ensemble performing Teach Yourself to Fly from Sonic Meditations, 1970, Rancho Santa Fe, CA*. [image] MSS 102. San Diego: Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California. Available at: <<https://blogthehum.com/2016/09/13/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditations-1974-the-complete-text-and-scores/>>

Rackard, A., O'Callaghan, L. and Bourke, A. (2001). *Fishstonewater*. Cork: Atrium.

O'Brien, Suzanne J. Crawford. (2008) "Talking Place: Ritual and Reciprocity at Holy Wells and Mass Stones in the Republic of Ireland." *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 22(1), pp. 1–20.

Ray, C. (2011). The sacred and the body politic at Ireland's holy wells. *International Social Science Journal*

Ray, C. (2014). *The origins of Ireland's holy wells*. Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology.

Reilly, R. (2021) *St Colmcille's Well, Kilsharvan, County Meath 1*. [image] 28th of November.

Reilly, R. (2021) *St Colmcille's Well, Kilsharvan, County Meath 2*. [image] 28th of November.

Reilly, R. (2022). *Pattern Day at St Brigid's Well, Clondalkin* [Sound recording] Available at: <<https://soundcloud.com/user-319618409-635606719/pattern-day-at-st-brigids-holy-well-clondalkin>>

Reilly, R. (2022) *Offerings at St Brigid's Well, Clondalkin, County Dublin*. [image] 1st of February.

Reilly, R. (2022) *St Brigid's Well, Clondalkin, County Dublin*. [image] 1st of February.

Reilly, R. (2022) *Rag tree at St Brigid's Well, Clondalkin, County Dublin*. [image] 1st of February.

TheSilentWatcher. (2014). *Relaxing River Sounds - Peaceful Forest River - 3 Hours Long - HD 1080p - Nature Video*. May 26. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvjMgVS6kng>

Schafer, R., 1977. *The Tuning of The World*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited.

Uimonen, H. (2008). Pure Geographer. Observations on J.G.Granö and Soundscape Studies. *The Journal for Acoustic Ecology*, 8(1).

Voegelin, S. (2014). *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound*, New York: Bloomsbury

Wilson, K. (2003). Therapeutic landscapes and First Nations peoples: an exploration of culture, health and place. *Health & Place*, 9(2), pp.83-93.

Williams, A. (2010). Spiritual therapeutic landscapes and healing: A case study of St. Anne de Beaupre, Quebec, Canada. *Social Science & Medicine*, 70(10), pp.1633-1640.