

# Arresting the Echo: Using the Tenets of Print Media to Work with the Voice in the Performance of Mourning

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## ABSTRACT

In this reflection on my last year of practice, I will describe how the contextual framework of print media directly characterised my approach to working with the voice, allowing me to take on the work of embodying loss. To do this, I extended print media theories on the relationships between original and reproduction, and matrix and impression, to apply to any recording device. Namely, I considered the print/recorded voice as an echo of the previous body, the press/recorder as an apparatus with the ability to broadcast and create empathy, and the shared practice of breaking down and building into layers as a working metaphor for individual and community agency.

I was motivated to research this topic after observing the ways many people have become isolated from the rituals that help them navigate their lives. Restrictions on coming together have meant that communities, families, and individuals are not able to perform and acknowledge change effectively. To me, this large-scale stagnation represents a general disassociation from our bodies and disregard for the role our bodies play in exercising empathy and care in troubling times. My antidote to this disembodiment has been to consider the voice as a material that both broadcasts the individual body and can overcome spatial restrictions by being amplified and recorded. In the resulting work, *Arresting the Echo*, I translated this framework to three performance works that use my voice to create space to perform mourning and empowerment together. By applying this framework, I found that the dogma of contemporary print practice prepared me to ask myself and my audience to work with echoes and stay with loss.

## INTRODUCTION

A print is the echo of a loss: the imprint of an absent body, the memory of a touch, the pressure of being pushed together and then lifted apart. In studying

print media for my undergraduate degree, the humming of loss faded into a constant white noise as I was introduced to the well-trodden notions of the multiple, the ghost print, and other concerns that are kept critical by the historic and contemporary practice of making prints. However, in my last year of study, amid the pandemic, I was coming to terms with the unaddressed loss of my grandmother across a closed state border and printed paper simply was not loud or mobile enough. I picked up what I had learnt from time standing at presses and began to transpose it across other recorded media.

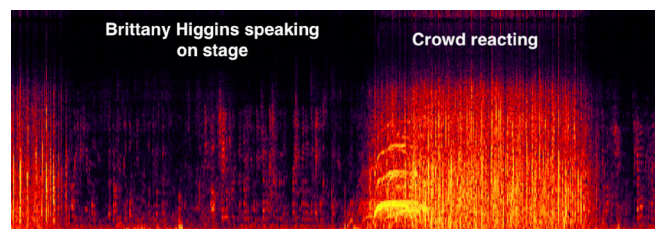


Figure 1

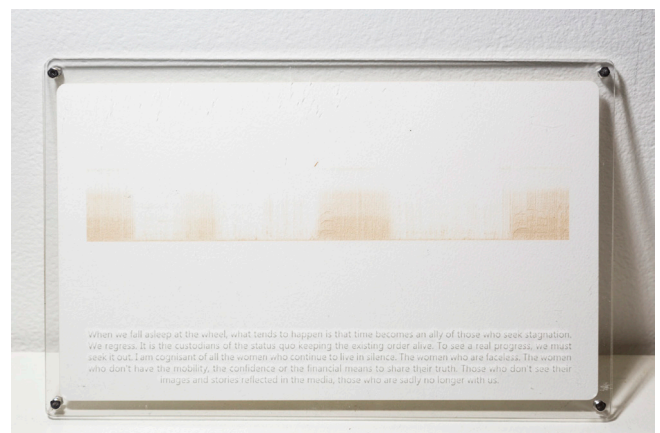


Figure 2

### Title Figures and Information

Figure 1: Annotated spectrogram from the Women's March 4 Justice, 2021.

Figure 2: Saskia Morris, *I speak to you today out of necessity II*, laseretched archival paper, 280mm x 165 mm, 2021. Photo: Rory Gillen 2021.

My grandmother had a rare form of motor neurone disease. She lost the feeling in her legs first, and the numbness rapidly crept up her entire body. The loss of her voice was inevitable and signalled that her lungs were failing to respond. Months after she passed, with memorials postponed many times, I began to work with the voice as a way of staying with the trouble of her loss. I wrapped myself in the familiar shawl of working with recordings and found that listening and responding were ways of arresting the moment of mourning. Every recording I made implied an absent recorder, both human and machine. Each recording implied loss.

In this paper, I actively draw out the connections between my grounding in printing practice and my use of the recorded voice to create the performance suite *Arresting the Echo*. I use my own work and the works of both voice and print artists to focus on what I see as three tenets of print thinking: a composition of individuals/layers, the press as an empathy apparatus, and the print as an echo.

### ARRESTING THE ECHO PERFORMANCES

*Arresting the Echo* is a multifaceted installation comprising three filmed performances displayed alongside the costumes and apparatuses that the performances feature. In each performance, I recite or respond to an excerpt of my grandmother's speech. In the first performance, I stand on the site of the Women's March 4 Justice at Australia's Parliament House and attempt to scream the words through the noise of the crowd by using a talkbox. In the second performance, I record and replay this excerpt through a crocheted breastplate of speaker wire in an exhausted quarry located in Mount Mugga Mugga Nature Reserve (Canberra, Australia). In the final performance, I sit outside the Royal Australian Mint, listening and silently responding to hearing my grandmother's voice for the first time since she passed.<sup>1</sup>

### A COMPOSITION OF INDIVIDUALS/LAYERS

When I stand on the sloping greens of Federation Mall, facing the flying flag above Australia's parliament, and yell, in a loud but self-conscious way, 'Shame', I know that no one is listening to me. Instead, I know that if anyone were to listen they would hear a sea of voices. When I print a pass of angled dots, I know that the passes to follow will combine to reveal an image.

A printmaker composes by seeing the individual in the crowd. Knowing the power of layer upon layer, they build up an image made of collected individuals. Knowing the potential impact of one poster, they make an edition. The printed image is an object with history, archaeologically constructed by detaching ourselves from the world created in a mass.

Mourning my grandmother's great ability to talk, I began my investigation into the recorded voice on 19 March 2021 at the



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

### Footnotes

1. The performances may be watched at <https://www.saskiamorris.com/arresting-the-echo-performances>.

Figure 3: Bushra Mir, *Awaaz*, 2019, Installation in *Can you hear my voice*, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne. Photograph: Lucy Foster  
 Figure 4: Saskia Morris, *Arresting the Echo - Empathy Apparatus One: A System for Embodying the Echo* (video still), 2021  
 Figure 5: Peter Drew, *Aussie Posters*, 2021

Women’s March 4 Justice. The lack of government response to the alleged rape of a political staffer in Parliament House and historic allegations of rape against the attorney general of the time typified a disregard for sexual assault in Australia’s parliament and had called us together in rage. I feared the moment would be ignored by the archives. I pressed record on my phone. In the studio, I began repeatedly manifesting the recording into different forms, copying the sound and replaying it, acknowledging the original may be lost.

I began with paper. In *I Speak to You Today Out of Necessity* (2021), I stretched the crowd response of the key speaker, activist, and survivor, Brittany Higgins, across eleven panels of laser-etched paper. Travelling through the layers of a spectrogram, I observed how clear the visual difference was between one amplified voice and the response of the crowd. In visualising them with a burn, I imagined the paper as the walls of Parliament House and the volume of the voices as the best hope of reaching the other side. But the image was ambiguous. Even with the words captioned, the mass of responses neutralised the sense of individual agency in the crowd. I wish I had mic’d up each individual and overlaid their voices until there was no paper left, no fuel left to burn. In this case, the image dismissed the layers of the crowd as loudness, not mass. It reduced the noise to a hubbub.

This was print thinking. Susan Tallman addressed layering similarly in discussing Kiki Smith in 1996. In *The Contemporary Print*, Tallman discussed repetition in Smith’s *All Souls*, a construction of 36 sheets of translucent paper depicting many splotchy screen-printed babies overlaid and ordered across the attached sheets. Tallman writes that

‘[w]hile there is always a temptation to read insistent repetition as a deliberate invocation of automation, Smith’s prints hark back to an older, more mystical tradition in which each act of repetition is a new statement of respect and creation.’ (1996, pp. 210–211)

Each layer in this work is an individual child, brought together in awe of the vastness of the human population and the weirdness of being unique within that. Here, individual agency is not just a layer to be archaeologically revealed. Instead, it shows print’s capacity to mutually reference the individual and the mass simultaneously.

The disintegration of a unified voice is a theme teased out in Bushra Mir’s work, *Awaaz* (2019). This video work samples Vishal Bhardwaj’s film *Haider* (2014), an adaptation of *Hamlet* set against the Kashmir conflict in mid-1990s Srinagar. Mir captures the protagonist in an anarchic jest, performing a protest to a gathered crowd on the street with a broken noose around his neck. He holds the noose’s frayed end to his mouth, and asks, ‘Hello? Mic testing, one, two, three. Hello?’ Mir remixes this and duplicates the clip across a large screen, layering the voice so that it at first echoes itself and then blooms into a towering audio wall of feedback. As Shaad D’Souza wrote in a review for *Frieze*, ‘*Haider*’s request to form an alliance with the viewer has been literally overcome by repetition’ (2021). Through the layering of



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



the visual and audio information, each repetition is a new statement of not being heard. The more voices saying it, the less intelligible the words are. However, the visibility and audibility of these layers retain the focus on individual agency and what it means to be an individual in a conflict or a voice in a crowd.

I nurtured this methodology of honouring an individual voice across *Arresting the Echo*. In the first performance, I misused a talk box, a vocal effects instrument traditionally used in funk and hip-hop production. The talk box is an instrument that sends sound into a player's mouth via a tube that acts as an artificial larynx, allowing the player to manipulate the incoming noise by shaping their mouth. Inspired by the idea of manipulating an original, I sent the recording taken at the Women's March 4 Justice through the talk box and out of my mouth. While the underlying claps and hollers gave my voice a crackly and demonic quality, I could almost form words in the densest area of crowd response. When the crowd hushed to listen to the speaker, I could not articulate anything.

When I presented a film of the performance, viewers were reminded of a caught feeling in the throat and how their voice changes when they are anxious to make a point. This empathetic reaction helped me see that the words I spoke did not need to be understood. Instead, by matching the cries from the crowd with my attempt to form words, I aimed to embody the presence of the individual, even if they may fail to be heard.

## THE PRESS AS AN EMPATHY APPARATUS

With little chance for my family to come together, I longed to stretch my arms down the country to my relatives and mourn together. I developed several strategies to compensate for the lack of ritual through my practice. Guy Cools, the author of *Performing Mourning: Laments in Contemporary Art*, had been deprived of the experience of mourning his father's sudden loss when the adults in his life decided the funeral was not an appropriate place for a child. Within the experience of both his life and his studies of contemporary art practices, Cools rationalises mourning as related to but distinct from grief. He writes, '[g]rief is the interiorized state. (...) Mourning is the necessary process of exteriorization. Grief is private, while mourning is public' (2021, p. 10). Cools believes that if the work and process of mourning are not duly performed, it impacts our ability to absorb and realise the loss. He argues that the work contemporary artists do in expressing, exposing, and considering mourning in the public realm allows others to better access their own mourning. To Cools, the emphasis is not on a lone ritual but on the ability of artists to publicly share that appeal for empathy.

Jeremy Rifkin similarly believes that communication innovations like the invention of the printing press and the telephone have expanded our ability to thrive as a society because they increase our ability to share information and empathise. He views public mourning as crucial to



Figure 9

Figure 9: Saskia Morris, the continuously circling record, *Arresting the Echo – Empathy Apparatus Three: A System for Responding to the Echo* (video still), 2021

this, stating '[e]mpathy is grounded in the acknowledgement of death and the celebration of life and rooting for each other to flourish and be' (Rifkin, 2010). Accordingly, I utilised recording technologies and voice replication tools as I developed my performances, including speakers, a vinyl record, a dictation machine, and a talk box. I began to call the systems I created with them Empathy Apparatuses.

History is littered with stories of printing presses as the innocuous engine fuelling changes in social empathy. As Sheila Shulman is quoted as saying in 'A Darn Good Idea: Feminist Printers and the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain', '[w]e were convinced that if we were to be heard, if our words were to be published, we would have to control the process of publishing. And for us at the time that meant learning to print' (Baines, 2020, pp. 81–82). Today, that historic association of print media with social change is an effective aesthetic strategy of its own. For example, one of Australia's most recognisable artworks of the last few years is Peter Drew's Aussie series of screen-printed and hand-coloured posters that use archival mugshots of Australian-born people subjected to the White Australia Policy. Only fully eliminated in the 1970s, The White Australia Policy limited non-British immigration and prohibited Australian-born people who were classed as other than Australian, because of their perceived race, from returning home if they left the country. Posted on city walls nationally, Drew's posters focused on the human individuals affected by decades of racist policy and successfully exposed that history.

However, the act of broadcasting can only go so far in creating the possibility of identifying with or responding to the message. Fundamentally, the same technology's ability to bring global communities closer together can create greater destruction and silencing. The Manus Recording Project Collective used voice recordings to undermine one such silencing. In 2018, the collective enabled six men detained while seeking asylum on Manus Island by the Australian government to record their activities, surroundings, and thoughts. For the fourteen weeks how are you today was on show as part of Eavesdropping at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, one of the men would send a recording 'onshore' to be played in the gallery for the day. In a second iteration of the project that can still be listened to online, where are you today, subscribers received a text message with a link to a recording every day for four weeks. The unedited recordings are mundane and heartbreaking direct impressions of the men's time; while some feature spoken reflections from the men, others are simply the noises of cooking or music being played. James Parker and Joel Stern observed that '[t]en minutes spent listening reflected ten minutes spent recording. This sharing of time was powerful for the way it also made legible the twenty-three hours and fifty minutes of every day of incarceration that went unshared' (2020, p. 34). This mode of one-to-one reproduction and the resulting opportunity to listen is as much about resistance as the state's silencing and removal of people offshore and out of mind is about power.

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In each of these works, the technology used does not intend to force a feeling or a response. Instead, the works aim to use broadcasting apparatuses to create space for an audience to sit with another's experience. In *Arresting the Echo*, each Empathy Apparatus is characterised by a similar limitation. Each performance is a preconceived action where the sole expectation is for me to recite or listen. I fed the same words through the apparatuses. I uncovered a recorded interview my brother had conducted with my grandmother for a school project in 2016, several years before her diagnosis. I did not listen to the recording. Instead, I had the recordings transcribed. While the project was cocooned in contemporary concerns about lost voices, land, and lives, the fundamental task of the three performances was to practise a methodology of removal and presence, sitting with uncertainty. By repeatedly returning to my transcribed matrix and speaking, recording, repeating, and finally listening to these recordings throughout the performances, I aimed to relocate the space for ritual and hence create a tender environment inspired by print reproduction.

## THE PRINT AS AN ECHO

Positioned against a history of feminist performers, I began *Arresting the Echo* by creating the conditions for empathy and defiantly filling space with loud voices. In the first work, I reused the screams of an angry protest. In the second performance, I yelled, reciting the words into a recorder, and replayed them at full volume through a speaker system in a disused quarry. However, in the final work, I used silence. I had the original recording of the excerpt I had been working with pressed onto a vinyl record. I sat on the grass, making space to listen and react to my grandmother's voice for the first time since it left her. In the filmed piece of this performance, the playing of my grandmother's voice through the record can be heard but my responses are muted. The last sound heard is the needle of the record caught in its groove.

How do you accept loss without denying its pain? Clare Humphries expanded on Walter Benjamin's limited view of aura after a loss. She introduces her response as attached to mourning, stating that the 'project germinated as I handled personal objects passed down from my deceased family and was struck by their potency' (2018, p. 155). Humphries views the aura Benjamin identified as not centred on originality. Instead, she thinks that 'Benjamin's key contribution is to draw our attention to the moment of transition between two technologies', identifying the lingering allure of technologies that are dying or being made redundant (2018, p. 157). Under this definition, the aura is a quality traded down declining technologies. It is 'associated with a desire for something that is on the verge of loss or appears unrecoverable' like 'vinyl records, letterpress printing, and the Polaroid photograph' (Humphries, 2018, p. 158). By operating on the paradox of absence and presence, temporal (or in the pandemic case, physical) distance, any recording medium represents a tactile crossing of the void between alive and dead.

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By revisiting these mediums we can at once reference the liveliness of the echo they capture and acknowledge its anachronisms. Director Atom Egoyan drew upon a similar aura when he made a call to Montrealers who owned reel-to-reel recorders to share their stories. The resulting two-channel installation, *Hors d'usage* (2002), is a collection of stories about lost voices, absent operators, and recordees. In one testimony, a woman sits with her mother's recorder in front of her and recalls memories of it from childhood while reenacting the ritual of loading the tape reel as she remembered her mother did. These shared memories expose the aura that Humphries identifies; the reel-to-reel recorders hold the same 'semiotic structure of reproductive representation [that] engages an interchange between presence and absence' (Humphries, 2018, p. 159). These machines are matrices; they capture impressions in the knowledge of mortality.

In her writing and practice, Deidre Brollo investigates remembering the past by viewing it as at the very centre of printmaking. She writes, '[w]ords such as 'imprint' and 'impression', [are] terms reminiscent to the fundamental language of printmaking, creat[ing] a sense of the past remaining visible in traces left being, of experience literally leaving its mark upon us' (2018, p. 196). To Brollo, this synergy between print media and our conceptualisation of memory captures the anxiety of forgetting, the fear that without a physical trace, 'no memory is possible' (2018, p. 197). At first, this construction of memory suggests that the impression's goal is to create a true copy of the moment with no plasticity. This is impossible. Instead, the imprinted object, whether it be a photograph, a mark made, or a recorded voice, enacts the anxiety of the possibility of forgetting and draws 'attention to absence' rather than attempting to capture the moment (Brollo, 2018, p. 203). For instance, Peter Drew sees his Aussie posters series as 'gentle revenge'; the images that were taken by immigration officials to drive these Australians into oblivion are allowing those individuals to 'live on through the same images that were used to exclude them' (2021, pt. 00:01:08). This is not only a metaphor that can be extended to that which is recorded but also to the process itself. Just as each print is an impression of its absent matrix, each voice recording speaks of the absent recorder or their distance from the point of listening. Consequently, print media and recording technologies pay attention to erasure in a way that is not defiant but lucid.

Each of the Arresting the Echo performances is framed by what is absent: the crowd at the Women's March 4 Justice, the land in the quarry, my grandmother. If silence means absence or death, a noise or a mark over the absence acknowledges both the loss and the life. A recorded mark or noise preserves both. In accepting the potential of oblivion, recording mediums stand with and against forgetting. In creative and generative attempts, they both preserve the past and highlight the unavoidable impact we have on our own memories, revealing the artist's hand. There is no farce, but acceptance: an attempt to stay with the discomfort of loss, not erase its potential. In a

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profoundly material way, both a print and a recorded voice echo a life lived and also lost.

## CONCLUSION: A LOCKED GROOVE

I did not approach this project with a methodology of print in mind. Instead, these methodologies made themselves evident as an underlying influence. The soft paradoxes that print presents as both a new occurrence and the echo of an absence prepared me to expand this thought to other recording technologies. By using a grounding in print thinking to consider how to represent an individual and mass simultaneously, how to work with the idea of broadcasting empathy, and how to focus on catching and holding the loss and staying with the trouble, my work aims to reject closure and conclusive responses that address how to mourn or how to use your voice. Instead, it aims to create space for silence and absence. As I have reflected on my past year of practice, the single image that captures Arresting the Echo for me is the continuously circling record still moving at the end of the final performance. Emitting a comforting crackling sound, the needle is caught in the silent loop at the end of the record, arresting the last echo of the recording.

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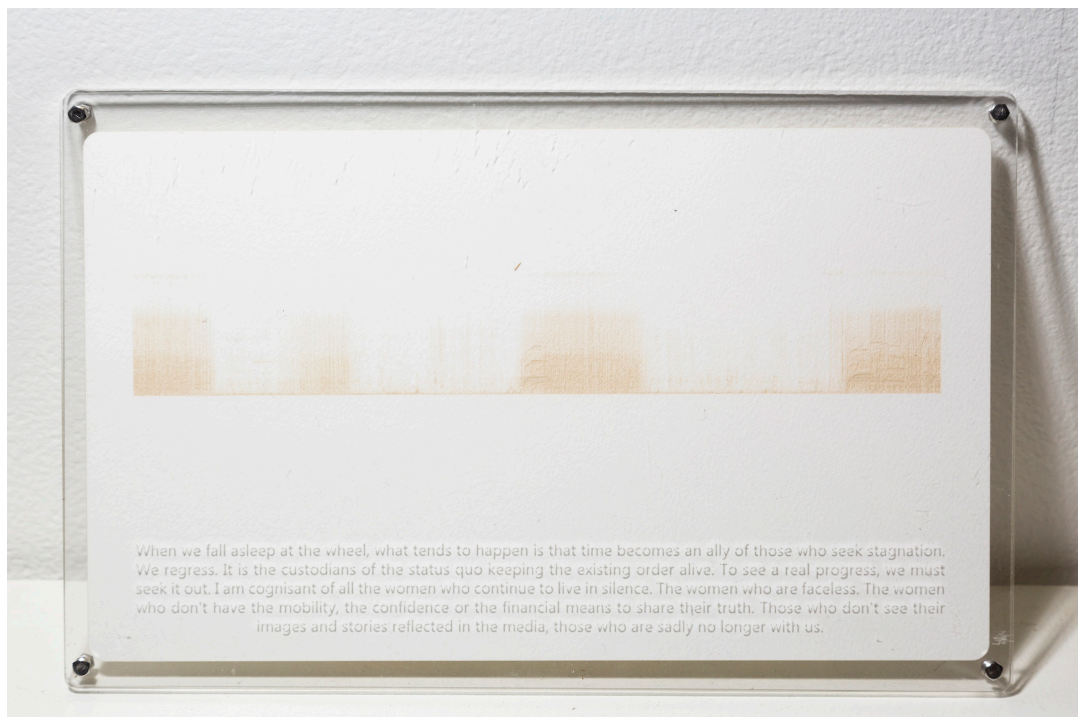
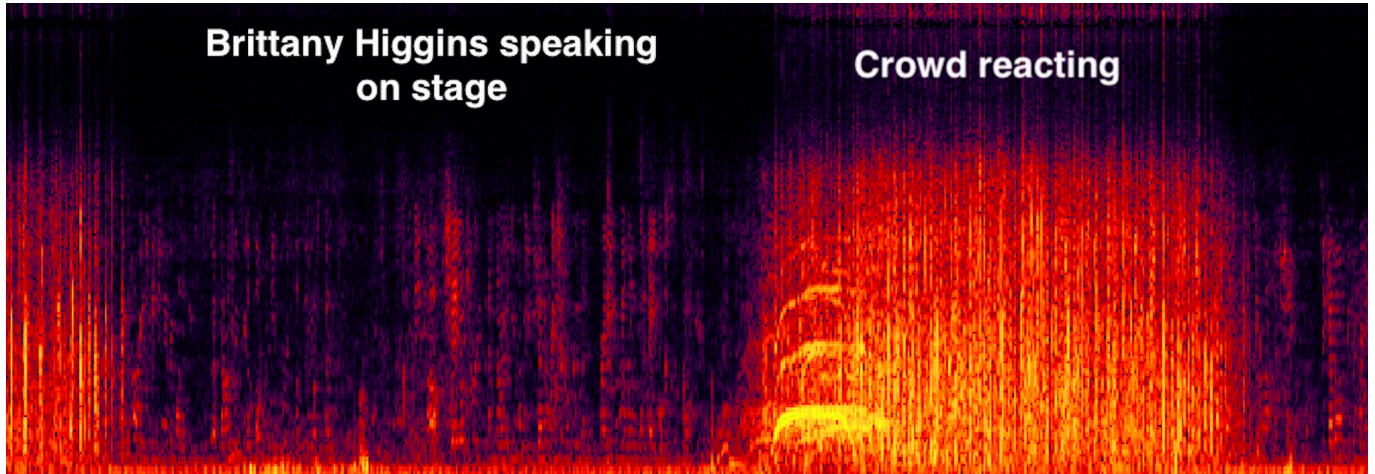
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Saskia Morris (she/her) is an early career artist and coordinator of the Australian National University (ANU) MakerSpace, Ngunnawal and Ngambri country. Morris's work aims to present tender investigations of collective experience that position empathy as the backbone of empowerment. She uses her grounding in print media to conceptualise and hack machinery that reproduces language (written, spoken or otherwise) to make new interventions that she interacts and experiments with. Morris's work has earned her multiple accolades, including the Gray Smith and Joan Scott Prize, an ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences Honours Scholarship, and a University Medal. She graduated from the ANU School of Art and Design in 2021. In her role as MakerSpace coordinator, Morris facilitates many interdisciplinary practitioners to incorporate digital fabrication technologies into their artistic practices.

## IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1: Annotated spectrogram from the Women's March 4 Justice, 2021.

Figure 2: Saskia Morris, I speak to you today out of necessity II, laseretched archival paper, 280mm x 165 mm, 2021. Photo: Rory Gillen 2021.





Figure 3: Bushra Mir, *Awaaz*, 2019, Installation in *Can you hear my voice*, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne. Photograph: Lucy Foster

Figure 4: Saskia Morris, *Arresting the Echo - Empathy Apparatus One: A System for Embodying the Echo* (video still), 2021



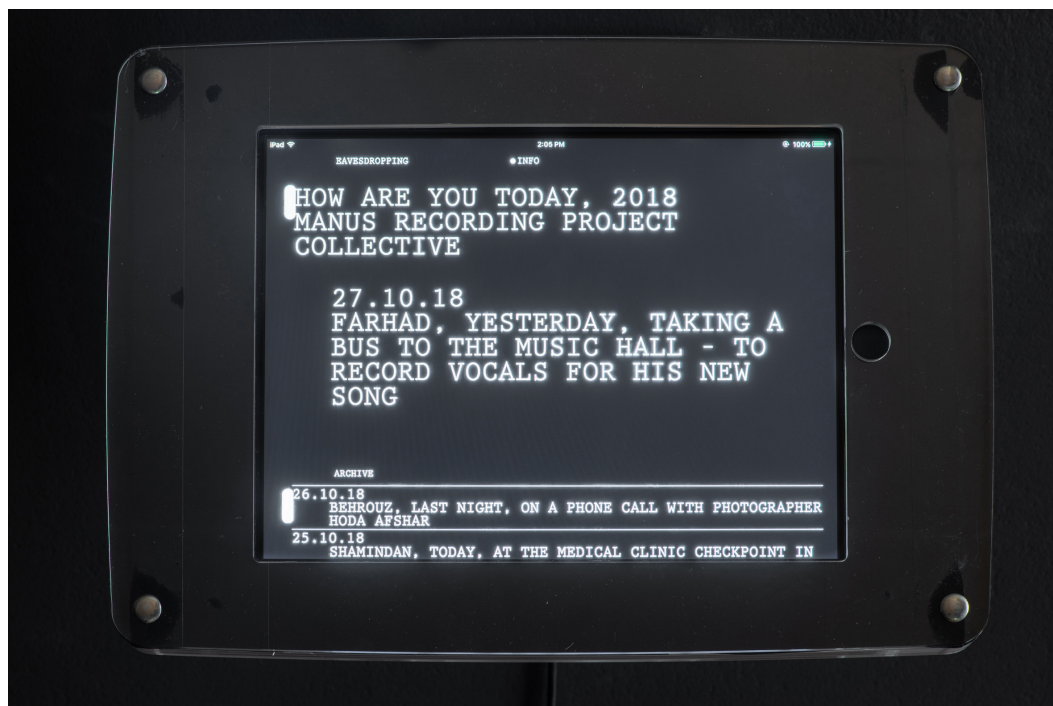


Figure 5: Peter Drew, Aussie Posters, 2021

Figure 6: Manus Recording Project Collective, how are you today, 2018, Installation in Eavesdropping, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Melbourne. Photograph: Christian Capurro





Figure 7: Saskia Morris, Arresting the Echo – Empathy Apparatus Two: A System for Amplifying the Echo (video still), 2021

Figure 8: Saskia Morris, Arresting the Echo – Empathy Apparatus Three: A System for Responding to the Echo (video still) 2021



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Figure 9: Saskia Morris, the continuously circling record, Arresting the Echo – Empathy Apparatus Three: A System for Responding to the Echo (video still), 2021