

An interview with Russell Haswell and Hugo Esquinca

By Robin Mackay

Wrinkles in time. Every new bout of isolation folds us inward. Dark enclaves in which we feel out hidden recesses, monadic interiors with only LCD windows, intensive close-quartered eternities conducive to revisiting memories of comfort, reappraising lifestyles, cultural habits, wardrobes, pets, jobs, relationships... The clock stops dead then jolts ahead, and on the other side of the fold someone exits who doesn't resemble the one that entered. Tucked away by national decree, you still participate in a soundtrack of noise and contingency. Death is abroad and you can't even get on a plane. Somewhere between boredom and terror, ambient anxiety clicks into the curve as one nation after another unlocks their next run on the common global rollercoaster. It's analogue synthesis 101: a repeating curve is just a circle in disguise, swept by a line like the second hand of a clock. Bouncing Back? Something obscure has happened to time, and no one's quite sure whether they've had too much real or desperately need more. But a crisis is an opportunity. Allow the climate to move through you at all scales, to alter you, to unlock ferocity and fragility. Refuse to perform in the real-time reality show and instead immerse yourself in abjection so as to manifest a fragmented immediacy, the way Russell Haswell and Hugo Esquinca made their two iterations of Cadáver Exquisito: disparately together, with maximum porosity but minimal overlap, in bits and pieces joined by that gap that separates us in time from ourselves, making us discontinuous but exquisite corpses.

Robin Mackay: The two versions of *Cadáver Exquisito* emerged out of the weird situation that we all experienced during the COVID lockdowns: a lack of living contact and a search for new modes of communication to work around it. Did you both suffer a lot from not being able to be out there doing performances?

Russell Haswell: Yeah, absolutely. What happened in the beginning of this project was that after the first lockdown came into effect, there were no performances, no travel, and both my life and Hugo's life were disrupted by that and by personal things as well. And there was an opportunity for us to do a virtual residency with the Goethe Institute. We didn't have to go anywhere; we could stay at home and have daily chats as if we were meeting in some residency programme.

Watching the way that festivals and music artists were dealing with lockdown, there were a lot of people DJing on top of mountains being filmed by a drone, playing to no audience; there were festivals doing live streams of the gigs they'd organised with local artists in the countries where the festival took place. That was a starting point for us: the idea that we didn't want to stream anything, we didn't want to do a live gig. The idea of applying the exquisite corpse method in this scenario gave us the ability to create something different via an internet exchange.

Hugo Esquinca: Without resorting to some sort of online improvisation using real-time streaming. Trying to withdraw from the idea that collaboration can always be reduced to meaning some sort of direct improv, and instead engaging with other possible ramifications that a constant exchange might have, without it resulting directly in audio files or a sound piece. That then led to other dimensions taking over

what the sound work was, what that exquisite corpse was, how it was being formed.

RH: We were going through a daily routine, a virtual daily exchange. But because we were locked up there was also the reality of watching stuff. In the first lockdown it was a case of catching up with movies or TV shows that you hadn't seen, listening to things you hadn't listened to before, and using YouTube. We found that we had this in common: we were both watching whatever we could find on YouTube. I think I started out typing into YouTube 'nineties documentaries Channel 4', watching crime documentaries that I'd seen twenty, thirty years ago. And that got me to PINAC, the Photography Is Not A Crime movement that came to the forefront in the first lockdown. The British YouTubers Marti Blagborough, Live Free and Auditing Britain live feed led us both into things like watching the Ruptly's live feed coverage of the Julian Assange case outside the High Court, the lockdown protests in Hyde Park, the protests in Paris - we could watch all of these things in real time. Every Saturday afternoon you could put Ruptly on YouTube and watch the entire Paris protest for six hours, right on the front line with people getting their heads smashed in, beaten with batons. And we were both avidly consuming this stuff because it was on all the time, basically.

Then at the end of the second one we were getting into things like ASMR, pimple popping, *Euro Coin Pusher*, extreme ear wax removal, and cooking, butchery, Anthony Bourdain, Asia Argento, St John's restaurant, anti-NFT, the Scottish islands...

HE: The Gates of Hell dumpster in Guatemala...

RH: ...it just went on and on and on and on.

RM: **Sounds like a whole warren of shared rabbit holes!**

RH: After we did the first *Cadáver Exquisito* there was a break, but then we were given the opportunity to do this piece for Sonic Acts, and we decided to do a second one which would be different because it was for presentation in the Stedelijk on a multi-channel sound system, whereas the first piece was basically just an audio file, it was presented on radio during the second lockdown.

So, this second piece came about in the same way, it was a continuation, in that we were doing the same thing: each of us would make five-minute sections of audio and share only the last thirty seconds with the other, who would start working from there. This time we were dealing with multi-channel sound, so we also took that into consideration. But other than that, it had the same influences, and we had the same anxieties - basically a lot of it was fuelled by anxieties that have been created by COVID.

RM: **So it wasn't like you were completely separated and were just silently passing the audio files between the two of you? You were hanging out in mutual isolation, with common moments, moods, a shared climate?**

HE: There was that daily exchange, but when we were having a conversation, sometimes we would have the live feed of the demonstrations in Paris running on another screen for six hours at a time - just watching that while we were talking.

There was never a point where we were talking particularly about synthesis processes or some kind of fetish around which gear we were using. It was just that everything around the piece was permeating the slices of audio we were exchanging.

At the same time as we were watching these current events in the most explicit and direct way, I went back through my archive of newspapers and documents of Mexican *nota roja*, which is an extremely alarmist kind of yellow journalism and photography, producing daily documents of physical violence. And I think that became a clue as to how to utilise the archive to document direct action.

In that sense, what we were observing, either with PINAC or with the live broadcasting, was informing what we were doing. Not to say that it became a direct reference - it was just an overflowing of information, it couldn't be reduced to the piece, and the piece is not really like an extension of it, but that dynamic was clearly there for both of us.

RM: Did any actual sound material from those sources make it into the piece?

RH: I think Hugo snuck some bits of it in at some point.

HE: Some bits and pieces of someone doing some live ranting maybe got processed, but because we were not sharing a full file, we were only ever sharing the last thirty seconds of the file we were working on - it became this kind of really fragmented immediacy where I never knew fully what Russ was doing and he never knew what I was doing, until the very end, until we both compiled the files and played them one after the other. By that point there were bits and pieces I had even forgotten myself.

For the piece we prepared for the Stedelijk, we began with some spatial considerations, but it just became this mesh at the end where I couldn't remember what I had done two weeks before for the first channel... It ended up at a point where I couldn't tell which part was Russell's and which part was mine any more. So at points I remember going: 'oh I'm going to sample that immediately', and I would send him a file within an hour and he would send me a file back within twenty minutes. And other times it would be like a whole week and we would just send each other a file at the end of the weekend.

RM: You've both been involved in a number of more direct collaborations before, so what was the experience of doing it like this?

RH: We were in a bubble together. It was different, obviously there's something about actually being in the same room with somebody. But in the end, we realised that we didn't really have a problem with it. It was really straightforward. And at the same time, it was maybe a way to deal with loneliness. There was the anxiety of the entire situation, not knowing how long this thing's going on for, there was the anxiety of the future, the uncertainty, the reality of Brexit, which was also a major consideration at the same time for people who rely on travelling abroad for their income; there was trying to do hardship fund applications... all this kind of stuff at the same time.

RM: You both tend to favour the production of disturbance and uncertainty in your work, putting audiences into a situation where they don't quite

know what's going to happen next. Does it change your practice to be inescapably embedded in a situation of contingency? You weren't tempted to make something soothing?

RH: It was a bit like being trapped in your own pigsty, and you've got to wriggle around in your own shit for a while. Like I mentioned, I started to watch films I hadn't seen before or that I hadn't seen for years or search out things that normally I wouldn't have bothered to look at, just because I had more time on my hands. We got into the recent movies of Mickey Rourke... You go into these depraved areas of research on, you know, these people that have completely mutated and re-evaluated their entire lives, and maybe even identifying with some of that. Getting into this sort of stuff and enjoying this kind of... well, almost depravity, in a way.

HE: The dynamic that we were in, with that level of uncertainty, became quite evident and in fact we ended up mutually inflicting that on one another, because I would do something and Russ would never be fully aware of what I did, and vice versa. But at the same time the references were to do with a sense of documentary depravity, the act of documenting an abject situation. For me it was re-watching films like *The Vampires of Poverty* (Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina, 1977) documenting the most brutal situations of abject poverty in Colombia, making it quite evident and blunt but also keeping it unclear whether or not it was a documentary.

What we were giving to each other was always concealing part of itself, and that started to have an effect on how we were working, because in the *cadáver* you would try to corrupt any sense of how a piece started and what you are sending back. The second *cadáver* involves a spatial situation in which there is a matrix in how the sounds are distributed, so we could no longer do that in the same way. But that level of uncertainty was something we were exposing each other to as well.

RH: Also, in the second *cadáver* there was the additional element that we were given a brief from Sonic Acts, the theme was *pollution*. Obviously, we discussed that and talked about the different forms of pollution, plastic bags tangled around dolphins or whatever, all the clichés. But in the end, we got onto a different tangent about what pollution is in the arts or in music: it would be Coldplay or Banksy or, you know, Pan-Pot or Jesse Nelson – that's the pollution in society. And that's not even to mention the physical by-products, the fact that they might be making physical records or CDs, or the fact that there's a book about Banksy. I mean, that's worse than Alan Partridge's *Bouncing Back* having to be pulped...

RM: As an aside, the Alan Partridge audiobooks were my go-to lockdown comforter..

HE: *Nomad!*

RH: That was part of our lockdown process as well, listening to it when you're going to sleep. I've listened to *Nomad* hundreds of times..

RM: I thought it was just me.

HE: It's so soothing, after all our exchanges and after watching six hours of Ruptly live burning cars and police with batons beating people. Then you go, "Let's just get some comedy on".

RH: Comedy is definitely part of this exchange. There had to be some kind of light-hearted solution to the harsh reality that we'd been witnessing, whether it was UK auditors being arrested and manhandled outside a police station in High Wycombe, or the Sarah Everard vigil being... not dealt with in the right way, let's say, by the Met. We were watching these things every single day and so a little bit of comedy at the end of the day was a breath of fresh air after all the shit that we got exposed to – well, that we exposed ourselves to.

HE: Voluntarily.

RM: So is the piece a kind of bearing witness to this short period of history and all those upheavals and public events that were a part of it?

HE: I would say yes, but without trying to propose or indoctrinate anyone with any kind of solution or any kind of post-pandemic analysis. As Russ mentioned, it was just based on that climate of dread and anguish.

While we were preparing part two, I got the chance to go to Mexico and revisit that collection of El Metro, La Prensa or El Gráfico – newspapers that dealt in this extreme journalism, with archiving crimes; mostly physical violence being published every day. I realised that the level of anxiety there was escalating in that way. And I was also sharing those – as I was there while we were watching Ruptly I would also say, "Look, I have this front page with this guy who was found dead somewhere...".

So I think it becomes an attestation, but without trying to provide a solution, without any moralising aspect about how sound can evidentiatese these last years. We're not trying to overextend it or be didactic about the pandemic in the work, but I think it definitely bears witness to the process and the situation. Even the exchange itself, I guess, that's what makes it a kind of evidence of the circumstances.

RH: And it's not over yet.

RM: The form also bears witness to a transformation in the nature of human intimacy, the way in which the sense of what it means for humans to be close and to interact has been mediated through different devices and social distancing measures.

HE: Definitely, intimacy and the sense of sharing and, as mentioned before, the despair and solitude. It's not as if we found a solution to that, but the process really helped us at least to preserve a sense of sanity, even though some of the conversations might have been tainted with a bit of insanity as well.

RM: The model of the exquisite corpse is something I've found useful as an editor, taking work from one person and connecting it with other work without telling them what they are being attached to, creating a contamination between a number of contributors. My role there would be to act as a relay, and the distance produces a different type of collaboration. You don't have to enter into discussion. Perhaps discussion and deliberation are not always good for a collaboration. It can be better to just say, "Here, take this, do something with it, I will accept whatever you do with it and take it back".

RH: Exactly, and that's certainly how we approached this. That was partly why I suggested it. We knew we didn't want to do some kind of online streaming to each other, trying to collaborate in real time... We immediately knew that that's not what we wanted to do after one discussion.

And during the virtual residency our daily conversation wasn't "What are you going to do with the piece today?", it was actually about contaminating each other with all this stuff we were consuming: "Have you seen this? Have you heard this?" And it was all new stuff, it was all real-time, it was what was going on today anywhere in the world, this constant exchange, this exposure to materials that might be sublimated into the pieces, but we didn't discuss "Oh yeah, my next five-minute audio is going to be a harpsichord".

RM: So you created a microculture between you, a social scene that became the environment for the work, but isn't connected to consciously thinking about it, it just produces the space within which it happens.

RH: Yes, it's the place where the action can take place. It was a bit like being stuck on a bouncy castle or in a spaceship with somebody. Like *Silent Running* – you're stuck in the dome, but the robots are dead and everyone else has died and there are only two of us left, but we've got an internet connection so we can see what's going on back on Earth.

RM: The desert island scenario is a key to the way that a lot of people experienced lockdown: there was anxiety and isolation, and there was a kind of regression into yourself, into your past or into what was comforting or basic. But somewhere there's also the potential to be reborn, to assess your life, to change something about yourself.

RH: Everyone had the chance to restart as each subsequent lockdown was lifted. You hadn't seen anyone for six weeks or whatever, apart from... you know, my best friend during lockdown 2 was the security guard at the supermarket down the road, he was the only guy that I saw nearly every day. You couldn't go to the pub, there was just no social interaction unless you bumped into somebody that lived in the same building...

HE: But this climate that we were sharing, which provided the appropriate conditions to start working and allowed us not to mention anything about the piece itself, which processes we were engaging in, or how quickly we were doing it, it also allowed us to share moments when the climate would grow a little bit further. The guy at the supermarket or the people I would meet down at the Kneipe, which was the only place I could have some human interaction, those people would be included in our exchanges. "You know who I met today? That guy I told you about who's completely loopy", or that extreme right-wing guy who was telling me to fuck off but I still deliberately stayed with him all night and tried to ask him why he wanted a Mexican to leave the country or why he would consider I was taking someone's job when I didn't even have a job... So those people would then be included in our conversation and would become a reference: "Oh, what about Hans? What about that other guy?" It was quite colloquial as well, in the sense that even though we were sharing all these moments mediated by either YouTube or El Metro or La Prensa or other references, just going to the shop or to the Kneipe, getting into a conversation with some old guy and spending the whole night there... All that would be somehow included in our everyday exchanges. It would also be just going to the shop and coming back and saying "What are you going to be up to next?"

and then even that sort of everyday chat would somehow prepare what the next exchange would be.

RM: So there is a multi-scale noise happening, from the global down to the personal scale, punctuated by moments of release and then being locked down again.

RH: There was definitely a sort of euphoria that we both experienced when elements of the lockdown were lifted, because we could go out and meet other people and then come home and report back to each other. Both of us had moved, so we were actually living in neighbourhoods that were unfamiliar, so we would go to local bars and tell each other "Oh, I went into this bar last night and it was like this", "Jesus, I met some screws from the prison last night" or "I met this mad guy called _____", and I think that helped us when we were coming to finish both the first and the second *cadavers*, because both started during lockdowns and both were finished after the lockdown was eased. So there were two stages in each. I'm not sure if it's evident in the final pieces of the first or the second one, but we were definitely in a different state when we finished than when we started.

RM: Russell, you've always had an interest in documentary and the concept of real-time - you made a piece called *Recorded As it Actually Happened*. You've also used a technique you call 'artificial worldising', where you take real-time recordings and re-record them in another space to make a new, displaced authenticity. It seems like the *cadavers* extended that interrogation into the lockdown situation by way of a *refusal* to be real-time.

During the lockdown Mark Fell and Rian Treanor made a piece of software that uses the most minimal data exchange possible to allow people to interact and control a musical instrument together in real time. In some ways a completely opposite approach to what you've described, but both of them are ways to take the situation as it is and force it to make a noise. In the end they were saying that it forced a decision on their part, because everyone's pulling in different directions and it's either a mess and you have to be okay with that, or you end up reasserting a power dynamic, trying to anticipate and control what the participants are doing.

RH: We didn't have a power dynamic, it was completely mutual: we submitted to one another's stream of consciousness because in fact we were working in real time together. It's just that we didn't generate the audio - the end result - together in real time, our real-time interaction just influenced them. But all of the recordings I made for both pieces were made in real time. I improvised, working in my usual way, and then those improvisations were captured and forwarded to Hugo. Also, we both had limited bandwidth so it would have been a real drama to send massive files back and forth to each other. That was also part of why the exquisite corpse idea came about, because we knew we could send just the last little part of each file very easily, just by email. Part of it was not to be constantly working online, not to try to make something that was open for other people to use. We wanted to make something absolutely concrete and finished.

HE: Instead of trying to produce something that would allow us to interact with each other, it was rather about this level of exposure. You compose something from whatever you're given, and you try to take it as

far away as you can from where you start, knowing that the other person might be doing the same. It's completely based on the fact that you will accept whatever the other is doing without questioning it at any point.

In both pieces we never reviewed what we had done, we only listened when it was compiled. There was never a preview and there was never an opportunity to comment, to say, "Maybe we should do this part again or maybe we should leave that out". It was just whatever it was.

I was also working in real time with what I was being sent, but we were never interested in engaging with the idea of it happening for both of us simultaneously. That simultaneity was something that was taken over by the Ruptly live feeds and our commenting live on that, rather than engaging with the practical aspects of synthesis.

RM: Because when does something stop being real-time? When you stop it and look back over it...

RH: Yeah, and in fact there are different layers of real time going on in this piece.

HE: There's also some kind of fetish about utilising real time within a stream, and that's always related to the problem of latency: how latency can play a part in producing what's happening in different places apparently at the same time. The alternative is that you leave that completely aside and you just try to operate within what's happening wherever you are. And that's why I was really interested in what we were doing being fragmentary, never having a full idea of what it was until the very end. That moment where you compile something without having any preview and play it back... I guess that's the level of direct exposure that accompanies something like 'real time'.

RM: As with the exquisite corpse, when you unfold the drawing at the end and see the monster in its entirety for the first time.

RH: That's exactly what happened. Hugo was able to send his finished parts to me, and I was able to open them in Wave Editor without listening to them, put them in order with my elements in between, save it and send it back to him before I'd even listened to it. So that we could both hear it at the same time.

RM: And what was that experience like?

RH: We went offline and listened to it and then an hour later said to each other "Yeah, it's great, it's worked, we've finished, it's done".

HE: The initial plan with the second *cadáver* was that we would listen to the full piece only when it was being played back on the multi-channel system, without even making any kind of stereo or binaural mix. So even the binaural mix is still part of the exquisite corpse because it's not the full piece. It's still just a glimpse of the full picture.

RH: Because the second one is kind of a multi-axis exquisite corpse, it has this multi-dimensional, multi-axis time domain.

RM: An exquisite hypercorpse?

RH: Yeah, but also, we wanted to make something that was finished, complete and was somehow really part of *now*. So, in a way, that desire to try and work in real time - trying to improvise and trying to react to what's going on in the room when you're giving a concert - it was a bit like we transferred that into trying to consume in real time. But then to discharge at the end of the session, it was more like an accumulative discharge that occurred at the end of each day when we were doing the exchange.

HE: And that climate you mentioned before, which was also a conceptual situation that allowed the piece to happen, was also constantly bastardised, because those references were somehow too abject or too foreign to become a part of what we were doing. But some of them became an element you really focus on. To take an example, I was looking at the Gates of Hell dumpster in Guatemala around the time that we were finishing, and that was the point where I couldn't really differentiate what I was doing from the other axes, so it became completely obtuse or unclear how we got there. And simultaneously I was watching this thing saying, "Here, the process is that through the years all this trash has completely corroded the ground, and now it's kind of a geological force itself". So that's the point at which, you know, those situations become part of the work.

RM: The question of what we mean by real time goes hand in hand with asking what the things are that we've supposedly been missing in the past couple of years. We're doing this interview online, I can see your faces, we're interacting in real time, but after months of Zoom, is that necessarily more human or more beneficial than if we were exchanging via email? What is it that we fetishize about real-time engagement?

In the context of what are known as 'noise' practices, people often talk about living a spontaneous moment of extreme absorption in noise, but you could also talk about noise producing a distance, where you have to stand back and wonder what it is that you're dealing with. Does the rethinking of the real-time have something to do with the practice of sound that isn't immediately interpretable as music?

RH: For me it's always been a desire to experience the unexperienced. You're able to produce things where you don't know what you've produced. If I'm the performer, it's taking me on a journey as much as it's taking the audience member on that journey, and I don't want to repeat myself, I don't want to do the same thing thirty seconds later, let alone a year later. I mean, it's a kind of perversion in a way...

HE: There's this sense that our activity was somehow mitigated by the fact that we needed to interact within these platforms and then, instead of glorifying the platform or trying to make it into a communal device that somehow provided us with the solution to be together, it's actually using its inefficiency to produce something else. I'm totally uncertain of what he will produce, but I know that at the end there will be this mess, this situation that I wasn't in control of because I wasn't dictating how it should be composed or not, or how it should be arranged, or how noisy or how silent it should be. So even the whole idea of 'noise' as overabundance or excessive amplification somehow disappeared from what we wanted to do or expose the other to.

RH: It was more about those rabbit holes of research we went down; it was a bit like going caving. Once I nearly didn't get out of a cave, and you

realise that you're going to be stuck there, it's a bit like *The Descent*. Me and Hugo were stuck in this thing together that we'd chosen to do. We were stuck there together, and we were exposing and entertaining and humiliating and laughing at each other all the time.

Maybe part of it was a justification to us that we were on a residency and you were supposed to do something, and so it was actually to research the results of what was going on. But in the first lockdown I ended up stopping watching the news, whereas before the first lockdown and into its first few days I was watching the news constantly, all day every day. Once the lockdown came, that was when I gave up on the news, and that was when I started to watch YouTube.

RM: You exited real time, because there was nothing to be gained from real time?

RH: Yeah, but what happened was that, by going to those places, we discovered a real time that was more real-time than the news, because it was what the news doesn't broadcast. To see six hours of rioting is quite an extreme contrast to a five-second clip on the TV news. Even if you watch news channels on YouTube you get thirty-second clips; we were watching the full streams, often for hours. You'll watch streams where nothing happens for an hour.

HE: The people outside the Alexei Navalny flat, for example... we watched three hours of people just waiting outside trying to photograph Navalny, all with their tripods and their cameras. So, the exposure to that as well, that's the real-time we were dealing with. But in terms of the piece, it was completely fragmented. I think assuming that fragmented immediacy in the end, that those fragments would become something, was the way we were dealing with it. And similarly, whatever kind of anxiety and anguish came from our both moving to a new house at the same time, dealing with bureaucratic bullshit in real time, letting each other know "I need to fill in this tax form, I need to prove that I'm a valid fucking resident here" and those things, were really happening at that time as well.

RM: And through this device, by not excluding any of this, you were able to allow this thing to become something separate from you that has its own force and its own weight.

RH: And autonomy: it was like an uncontrollable beast.