**Performance Portals at COP 26**

*Laura Bissell*

*Dr Laura Bissell is an Athenaeum Research Fellow and Lecturer in Contemporary Performance Practice at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Laura co-edited and authored: Performance in a Pandemic with Dr Lucy Weir (Routledge, 2021), Making Routes: Journeys in Performance 2010-2020 (Triarchy, 2021) with Dr David Overend, and Bubbles: Reflections on Becoming Mother, (Luath, 2021). She is External Examiner for the MA in Contemporary Performance Practice at the University of Salford and has previously been External Examiner for European Theatre Arts (Rose Bruford College). Laura’s research interests span contemporary performance practices; including technology, ecology, interdisciplinarity, feminist performance, and performance and journeys.*

**Performance Portals**

The *Climate Portals* festival took place in Glasgow in the lead up to and during the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in November 2021.[[1]](#footnote-1) For two months, a gold shipping container outside the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow connected to other portals in Iraq, Rwanda, Mexico City, Palestine, and Uganda for tiny, intimate, performance encounters. These small acts, conversations, and moments of connection with a wider global community via technology, were the antithesis of what was happening live in Glasgow, a mass gathering of global leaders and the large-scale, performative actions on the streets and stages of the city. This short critical reflection explores *Hope Street Walk* (*HSW*)an audio walk presented at the *Climate Portals* festival, created by Laura Bissell and David Overend in collaboration with sound artist Matthew Whiteside and in dialogue with Mexican curator Ciela Herce. Participants in Glasgow and Mexico City were invited to listen to the sounds and sights of both cities through headphones while walking the streets of their respective locations then to meet in the portal to share their experiences.

Arundhati Roy (2020) argues that historically pandemics have forced humans to break from the past and imagine a new future. She states that the COVID-19 pandemic is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.[[2]](#footnote-2) This reflection acknowledges some key ideas connecting portals and the pandemic: the idea of the pandemic itself as a portal,[[3]](#footnote-3) the gold shipping containers with interactive technology as portals between locations allowing for spatial and temporal connection over distance and different time zones; and the concept that performance is a portal, a medium that embraces ‘the political potential of disruption, transition, and affirmative world-building.’[[4]](#footnote-4) The pandemic portal has provided opportunity for contesting a return to ‘normal’ and its inequalities; performance can provide a space for this reimagining of potential futures.[[5]](#footnote-5) This short reflection will discuss the spatial-temporal connection between Glasgow and Mexico City portals in *HSW*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Between 2014 and 2020 Shared\_Studios built a network of immersive portals across more than 25 countries across the world in educational institutions, museums, parks, and corporations ‘connecting 500,000+ people across distance and difference.’[[7]](#footnote-7) The COVID-19 pandemic caused the portal connections to pause, as lockdown restrictions across the globe were implemented to try to stop the spread of the virus. Pauses imply stationary, suspended time, as Jenny Odell argues ‘a pause in time is often the only thing that can precipitate change on a certain scale.’[[8]](#footnote-8) The *anthropause[[9]](#footnote-9)* indicates a temporal rupture in the fast-paced global movement of goods and people, but as Searle et al. suggest, who and what has the ability to pause is not equal, arguing that a portal allows for a *reconfiguration* of space and time.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Within the portal, the interactions rely on video technology, the slight lag of the connection as well as the negotiation of time zones (and the pauses for translation between languages to occur), has the effect of drawing out/drawing attention to time. As well as disrupting notions of time, portals also complicate ideas of space. Shared\_Studios slogan that the portals ‘make distance irrelevant’ seems counterintuitive - the space between people is exactly what the experience highlights - the unfamiliar context, cultural differences, a variety of lived experiences and felt impacts of climate change.[[11]](#footnote-11) Distance is negotiated, overcome even, and space can be virtually ‘shared’, but it does not become irrelevant.

On the evening before the last day of the COP26, on 11 November 2021, a collaboration between Glasgow and Mexico City took place as part of the Climate Portals festival. *HSW* invited participants in Glasgow to undertake an audio walk starting at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and following a route down Hope Street to the railway arches under Glasgow’s Central Station. In Mexico City, participants listened to the Chapultepec Park audio walk, then heard Hope Street on their return, before entering the gold shipping container to have a conversation with Scottish participants facilitated by the portal curators.

In the lead up to the Climate Portals festival, the impact of the pandemic was still being felt. Mexico City was once again in lockdown, disrupting scheduled meetings and planning for the event. The aims of the audio walks were to communicate a sense of the specific city streets of the host location while also acknowledging that these sites themselves are microcosms of wider issues facing humanity. As one of Scotland’s most polluted streets, Hope Street becomes a symbol for human impact, abandonment, climate change and precarity.

Some synergies in the sounds and sights of Glasgow and Mexico City emerge through the spoken texts. In the latter there are parlours selling junk food, Mexican souvenirs, ice cream, ‘you can get your face painted like a lion,’[[12]](#footnote-12) and watch the ladies knitting near the park. In Glasgow, the restaurants and food outlets tell the stories of ‘migration, globalisation, fast food and convenience food and lunchbreaks and unrecyclable coffee cups that will end up in landfill.’[[13]](#footnote-13) The lanes are described as ‘the spaces in between, the city’s crevices, its wrinkles’ compared to the major thoroughfare leading up to the gates of Chapultepec Park. Mexico City’s biggest park is ‘huge, even bigger than Central Park’ and ‘it has been raining a lot, it is green, which makes it even more beautiful’.[[14]](#footnote-14) ‘Glasgow’ derives from the Gaelic ‘Dear Green Place’, however, there is little green in the grid-like streets of the city, but life still finds a way:

The buddleia, the butterfly bush, growing out of windows and along ledges, silhouetted on the skyline/The pigeons nestled in loft spaces, biding their time/The grasses poking through pavements, seeking the sunlight/The seabirds hovering high above the urban landscape shriek of hope.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The spoken texts of each location point to monuments on the routes. In Mexico City at the end of Paseo de la Reforma, a major thoroughfare leading from the central square (Zócalo) to Chapultepec Park stand six marble columns created by architect Enrique Aragón and sculptor Ernesto Tamariz. The monument's official name is *Altar a la Patria* (Altar to the Homeland), but it is better known as the *Monumento a los Niños Héroes* (Monument to the Boy Heroes) with the dedication ‘To the Defenders of the Fatherland 1846-1847’ on it, in reference to those who fought against the United States invasion.

In Glasgow as the participants approach Central Station, there is a statue, a sculpture called Citizen Firefighter by Kenny Hunter, a figure made of bronze, wearing firefighting gear, and breathing apparatus. Less than three months after it was unveiled, Citizen Firefighter became a focal point for the people of Glasgow after the events of September 11 in New York with many leaving tributes and flowers to the firefighters who had died. Monuments and memorials feature in public spaces all over the world, but are frequently recontextualised, creating layers of meaning, palimpsests of stories and resonances.

The Mexico City audio guide points to two large lion statues built in 1921 while the Glasgow recording refers to one of the largest derelict buildings on Hope Street, the Lion Chambers. ‘Glasgow’s Forgotten Skyscraper’ is ‘derelict, no longer used, no longer functioning, eroding and abandoned, unviable and unfixable, but still standing.’[[16]](#footnote-16) These specific features of each place emphasise the similarities of both public spaces, the monuments, the sellers of goods and foods, and finally the portals, while also highlighting the elements unique to each city.

It is daytime in Mexico City, the sun is out, and it is hot. In Glasgow, darkness fell hours ago, the streets are slick with rainwater and the yellow streetlights illuminate the pavements. When the participants finally meet in the portal, one Glasgow attendee speaks Spanish to the participant in Mexico but is stopped and told by the curator to ‘speak English please’. The audio walks have aimed to connect people through the shared performative act of walking in the city while listening to audio recordings, but the moment of live connection is perhaps stilted, almost scripted, participants discouraged to move beyond their own language. If performance is to be a portal that can offer moments of connection and shared understanding, that can ‘imagine a new future’ as Roy suggests, perhaps we need to move beyond what differences exist (between language/histories/culture) and explore new and reciprocal ways of being together.[[17]](#footnote-17) Odell says that a pause is needed to remember ‘in the deepest sense, *what*, *when* and *where* we are.’[[18]](#footnote-18) How can portals encourage us to imagine not only these things, but also *who we want to be*, as individuals and local/global communities? How can small, intimate spatial-temporal connections help us to more fully understand and empathise with others, to move beyond our own experience? Perhaps this is what the current palimpsest of crises is demanding and what portals as gateways to the lives of others can offer.

1. Funded by the British Council, *Climate Portals* was a collaboration between the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Shared\_Studios, HarrisonParrott and Scottish Ballet as part of the cultural programme in the build-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), which was hosted in Glasgow from 31 October to 12 November. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Roy, Arundhati. 2020. *Financial Times*, 3rd April. ‘The pandemic is a portal’  <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> accessed 10/09/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Searle, Adam, Jonathon Turnbull, Jamie Lorimer. 2021. ‘After the anthropause: Lockdown lessons for more‐than‐human geographies’ [*Geographical Journal*](https://www.researchgate.net/journal/Geographical-Journal-1475-4959) 187(1). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348374765_After_the_anthropause_Lockdown_lessons_for_more-than-human_geographies> accessed 12/05/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bissell, Laura, et al, ‘Pandemic Performance Portals’, forthcoming, RiDE, Confronting the Climate Crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bissell, Laura, David Overend, Matthew Whiteside, and Ciela Herce, 2021. *Hope Street Walk*, <https://soundcloud.com/holly-worton-484243974/hope-street-walk-glasgow/s-6Di5oyznIM7?si=d215534c4a1a489390b8e4cfb990f74c> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Shared\_Studios website: <https://www.sharedstudios.com/story> accessed 5/10/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Odell, Jenny. 2019. *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. New York: Melville House, p10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rutz, Christian et al. 2020. ‘COVID-19 lockdown allows researchers to quantify the effects of human activity on wildlife’ *Nature Ecology & Evolution* volume 4, p1156–1159. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41559-020-1237-z> accessed 20/08/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Searle, Adam, Jonathon Turnbull, Jamie Lorimer. 2021. ‘After the anthropause: Lockdown lessons for more‐than‐human geographies’ [*Geographical Journal*](https://www.researchgate.net/journal/Geographical-Journal-1475-4959) 187(1). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Shared\_Studios website: <https://www.sharedstudios.com/story> accessed 5/10/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bissell, Laura, David Overend, Matthew Whiteside, and Ciela Herce, 2021. *Hope Street Walk*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Roy, Arundhati. 2020. Financial Times, 3rd April. ‘The pandemic is a portal’  <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> accessed 10/09/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Odell, Jenny. 2019. *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. New York: Melville House, p22. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)