Your Ears Later Will Know to Listen

'An art gallery is a nice thing to do when you're hungover,' I heard a couple whisper on the way in to Nottingham Contemporary, 'it's nice and quiet.' I'm standing on the threshold of the entrance, listening to where artist and writer Dylan Robinson's spoken word instruction piece *wó:thel sq'eq'ó telhlímelh, sthí:ystxwes te syó:ys* (*Listening Work)* is installed, hearing it subtly drift in and out of the Sunday afternoon city-centre soundscape. Earlier that day, Robinson gave a public workshop where he shared his practice of 'listening positionality'– a notion that is also central to the wider group exhibition project 'Your Ears Later Will Know to Listen', co-curated by Nottingham Contemporary and Andrea Zarza Canova, which broadly concerns colonial history, sound, recording and memory, of 'listening back' and 'listening again'. In the workshop, across two gently hosted chapters, we first listed all that comprises our positionalities – privileges, marginalities and, notably, powers or strengths (a cut away from the binary). Secondly, we practised listening by listing all that could be heard, with neither priority nor hierarchy. Crucially, learning to layer these two concepts together: listening to one's own listening, as it were.

Listening as something more than auditory is at the heart of Robinson's project, a point that is also inscribed in the wider exhibition design. While the couple I overheard may not have known they were about to enter a plurally *sounding* exhibition, their assumption was still correct: the exhibition was objectively no louder than any other group show that includes time-based media. In fact, the quiet gallery etiquette our hungover pals were seeking is precisely what is required here; the works are arranged in relatively sparse syncopation, each largely having their own time and space, described by the curators as 'listening scenarios'. Although I appreciate the ethics of this decision, which nevertheless still allows the works to constellate in dialogue, at points I longed for the sounds to touch each other more.

Along these lines, and playing generously with scale, were several works that expanded across whole rooms. If our Sunday couple missed Robinson's sound piece at the threshold, they would nevertheless have been greeted by the picture-window of artist Hong-Kai Wang's *Southern Clairaudience – Some Sound Documents for a Future Act*, 2016–, an iterative work that stems from Wang's research into the 'Sugarcane Song' created and sung during the 1925 Erlin Sugarcane Workers' uprising in Japanese-colonised Taiwan, a song for which only the lyrics have remained. Working in contexts from contemporary Dongshi sugarcane workers to KUNCI Study Forum & Collective and the Kadist Foundation, Wang has invited groups to collectively reimagine, write and record a new melody for these lyrics ('Oh what a hard life / we grow what we cannot taste' is one poignant line), the most joyous of which sounds like a DIY four-track indie pop song of infectious solidarity. Wang's is one of several installations connecting song to labour and to landscape, a practice that stems from extensive research.

Yee I-Lann's *Oh my dalling*, 2022, works with Bajau weaver communities from Omadal Island, between Borneo and the Philippines, to produce a video installation that playfully links the song 'Oh, My Darling Clementine' (popularised during US Philippine colonisation) with a contemporary weavers' song. Similarly community oriented, Zahra Malkhani's luminous *Sada Sada*, 2025, is a powerful wall of black HiFi speakers spanning the quality/price gamut with three video monitors strapped in portrait orientation to the back of the assemblage: the work is an iteration of a larger archive documenting the artist's extensive fieldwork with Balochi fishing communities who are resisting marine development in Pakistan.

Other pieces are more singular and immersive. A particular highlight is Sky Hopinka's deeply intimate single-channel video work *Jáaji Approx.*, 2015, which meshes together tape recordings made by the artist's father recounting learned Ho-Chunk Nation songs with footage of landscapes they both had travelled.

The most prominent work, however, is the series of works by Satch Hoyt that fill Gallery One, which, in effect, became the emblem for the whole exhibition. Hoyt's extraordinary paintings are more lurid, more thrilling and less polite in the real than in their nevertheless seductive graphic rendering for this show's promotional marketing. His *Afro-Sonic Mapping* project functions as an 'unfixed graphic score' that maps the 'mnemonic network of sound' – a soundscape that was, in effect, 'the sole companion of enslaved African peoples forced to the Caribbean and the Americas'. Here, his paintings are installed alongside a new 16-channel composition that comprises recordings of Hoyt himself playing antique African instruments from the British Museum. The paintings' iridescence somehow provides a loose shorthand for the proliferative energy that pervades the exhibition as a whole; rather than reconstruct the 'problem' of the colonial (sound) archive, here we are plunged into just a dozen or so of the numerous ways that work interrogates these histories on its own terms and in resistance.

It is hard to imagine 'Your Ears Will Later Know to Listen' taking place elsewhere in the UK, not least because it is a long-term research project formed from a 'collaborative doctoral award' by co-curator Andrea Zarza Canova at Nottingham University that further draws on her own extensive practice as a curator in the British Library Sound Archive; she was co-director of the Manna record label and the first sound archivist of the Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening Institute. Zooming out further, it seems that exhibitions of sound are currently flourishing in the UK, with high-profile examples including the Barbican's current summer show 'Feel the sound'. What is encouraging is not so much this prominence, but almost the opposite: that the presentation of works on and/or with sound are no longer mere novelties for their medium; instead, there is a more nuanced and complex frame of reference emerging, one where sound offers an expanded format for current, urgent enquiries – 'Your Ears Will Later Know to Listen' is a prime example.

I'm reaching here to describe what I sense is a paradigm shift from the previous, often awkward relationship between the art world and 'the arts of sounds' to a more expanded field of possibility; perhaps, to put it more simply, there is a shift from the focus on *sound* to *listening* itself. In more abstract terms this might represent a heightened focus on receiving critically over and above producing.

The *listening curator* might engender an audience in the truest sense, a coming together to listen. While this may not initiate a wholly new infrastructure, it may offer alternative means for relating to works, sounding and otherwise, and to each other.

'Your Ears Later Will Know to Listen'
is at Nottingham Contemporary to 7 September.

Irene Revell is a researcher, curator and educator based in London.

Books

How to Set Up an Art School

Established in Southend in 2016 and run as an artist-led co-operative, The Other MA (TOMA) is viewed by its founders not only as an alternative art school but also as a continual – though precarious – artwork. It is fitting, therefore, that *How to Set Up an Art School*, a new publication documenting the school as it nears its tenth anniversary, is both an art object and an invitation to others to take up the mantle of non-mainstream art education. Produced at a pivotal time as TOMA's founder – artist Emma Edmondson – steps back, the publication offers critical reflection as well as practical advice.

The book is characterised by a feeling of openness and transparency. Its designer, former student Lu Williams, references textbooks by underlining and circling key words and leaving space at the end (styled alternately like graph paper and a ruled notebook) for the reader to make notes. The completeness with which the project is documented gives a sense of generosity: the book gathers materials that might act as guides or templates, reproducing in full documents such as notes, budgets, a year plan, a template for crit notes, access and inclusion documents, a student card and TOMA's payment policy/rate card.

If this level of detail makes TOMA sound like a slick, professional operation, the book owes as much to punk and DIY traditions as bureaucratic institutions: an irreverently styled sausage on a stick, designed by the artist Bruce McLean (who also funded the book, Interview *AM*66), which is presented to students in place of a traditional graduation certificate, gives a particularly good sense of TOMA's ethos.

Whereas other recent publications have overly academicised alternative art schools (Reviews *AM*481), *How to Set Up an Art School* keeps theory to a minimum. Rather than aping academic language, TOMA's organisers conceptualise what they're doing in their own, vividly descriptive way. Edmondson has previously compared TOMA, and the way in which it collaborates with other small arts organisations within its local ecosystem, with lichen, which entails a symbiotic relationship between fungus and algae (Reports *AM*443). TOMA's policies, meanwhile, are inspired by cornstarch, a substance which, when mixed with water, can be both solid and fluid, immovable and responsive. Another powerful recurring metaphor is the itch: itching involves asking difficult questions, going against the norm, questioning systems and policies and rebelling against conventional art school models.

Activism runs through the book. The starting point is the 2008 financial crisis and the backdrop of austerity, against which Edmondson's own journey through the higher education system to becoming a practising artist took place. The ConDem coalition government's 2010 reforms to higher education, which included the trebling of tuition fees in 2012, was clearly a pivotal point for Edmondson. The political context remains key: since then, the availability of education and employment in the arts has only worsened. TOMA responds to this by providing opportunities for those who may otherwise be unable to access art education and the book is strong on the practicalities of making a living as an artist: lessons include writing funding applications, drafting proposals and filing tax returns.

While Edmondson's experiences remain central, *How to Set Up an Art School* brings together representatives of other alternative education projects for debate and discussion. Most importantly, space is also made for student voices, and this includes documenting artworks created as part of the programme. *Slippery when worn*, 2024, by Fern Worsley, is a wearable artwork that directly incorporates notes from TOMA sessions. Like TOMA itself, which continues to evolve with the needs and interests of each cohort, the garment is designed to be flexible. Also included is a series of works commissioned from students as aids to evaluation. *All mixed up together like bees in a hive*, 2024, an A4 worksheet by Neeral Bhatt, comprises a series of interlocking hexagons that invite the user to forge connections and relationships between words such as 'grow', 'experiment', 'collaborate', dream' and 'support'.

How to Set Up an Art School directly addresses anyone who might be wondering where to begin when organising an alternative to mainstream art education. The book prompts the reader to approach the challenge from two opposing viewpoints, asking 'What is the worst reason you could have for setting up an art school?' and, conversely, 'What is the best reason you could have for setting up an art school?'. The book suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all model; instead, it provides tools to support and interrogate the motivations and practices of those trying to find different ways of operating outside the (now crumbling) expansionist, profit-driven university system.

How to Set Up an Art School, The Other MA (TOMA), 2025, 244pp, pay what you can (£0–£45), 978 1 068216 80 0.

Natalie Bradbury is a writer and researcher based in Greater Manchester.