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Angelica Mesiti: In the Round

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About the author(s)

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Cover image:

Angelica Mesiti: In the Round

by Maria Walsh • 19.11.2021

In the Round, the first major solo exhibition in the United Kingdom of the Australian-born, Paris-based artist Angelica Mesiti, prompts the question: can art be too beautiful? Her work, which incorporates poetry, musical scores and performance, as well as references that straddle time periods beyond or outside of the human, manifests as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is undoubtedly sublime: the cinematography is lush, the camera's choreographic movement is soothingly hypnotic and the use of music is deeply affecting. But what do such sublime aesthetics mean in relation to subject-matter that obliquely addresses migration, institutional power, democracy and planetary life cycles? Do they render political issues moot or do they activate them in another way?

The first installation one encounters in the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, is *Over the Air and Underground* **FIG.1**. Originally commissioned for the Busan Biennale 2020, it consists of five large free-standing, portrait-format screens arranged in a spiral, and ten sound channels, which transmit a vibrational thrum. Ten human voices hum an 'A' note for the length of a single breath – the frequency of which approximates the electrical signals, measured at 220 hertz, but inaudible to humans, through which trees and plants are said to communicate.¹ The work's imitation of the natural world extends to the surrounding space: coloured transparent plastic covers the windows, suffusing the gallery in a magenta hue. This colour replicates the glow of the ultraviolet light under which the film's subjects – plants – were shot in the studio, and also alludes to the ultraviolet spectrum of bee vision.² In this interplay between virtual and real it is as though the audience also become specimens, as one follows the rotating camerawork and distributed edit of these vegetal portraits across the five screens. Shown at human-scale, the plants become enchantingly mysterious, their toxic colouration evoking of kind of a post-apocalyptic planetary survival. Footage of mycelium, grown by Mesiti in petri dishes in her studio, cascades from some of the flora and fungi – a non-human communication network probing the dream-like atmosphere. While science contributes new ways of measuring vegetal agency, perhaps beauty acts as a subtle, non-activist, call to arms, lending reverence to the ecological processes upon which we depend and too often destroy?



Fig. 1 *Over the Air and Underground*, by Angelica Mesiti. 2020. Five-channel video, ten channels of mono audio, duration 9 minutes. (Photograph Sally Jubb; exh. Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh).

At the end of the nine-minute video loop all five screens display a digitised image of a meteoric event, the circular shapes and galactic hues of which are repeated throughout the exhibition. In the adjacent Side Gallery, the walls are painted a deep green, forming a backdrop to two vitrines that display items selected by Mesiti from the University of Edinburgh's collections **FIG.2**. These objects all possess or refer to circular forms, from fossils to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century manuscripts that depict how conceptions of Earth's radial core changed over time. A specimen from 1849 of raindrop impressions preserved in dried mud from Nova Scotia speaks to cosmic wonderment as well as the sheer audacity of geological expeditions in the nineteenth century **FIG.3**. One of Mesiti's three commissions by the Talbot Rice Gallery, *Hum (black galaxy)* (2021), is displayed on a nearby wall **FIG.4**. The polished granite disc, etched with loosely drawn intersecting circles, seems purely, and unnecessarily, decorative in comparison to the 'natural' phenomena selected from the collections.

Upstairs in the White Gallery the four screens that comprise *Citizens Band* (2012) **FIG.5** are displayed in the round. Beginning one after another, each screen shows the footage of a musical performance carried out by a person who has migrated and who holds a unique musical heritage. Loïs Geraldine Zongo, born in Cameroon, performs a form of aquatic percussion, *akutuk*, in a Parisian public pool; Mohammed Lamourie sings traditional Algerian *Raï* songs in the Paris metro, accompanied by his Casio keyboard; Asim Goreschi from Sudan, a champion whistler, whistles a melody in his taxi in Brisbane; and Bukhchuluun Ganburged plays the Mongolian *morin khuur* (horse head fiddle) while throat-singing on a Sydney street corner. Their music transports them, and the

viewer, to an elsewhere of ancestral and cultural memory that is both joyous and painful.

In the exhibition guide the accompanying text describes how whistling developed as an alternative form of expression during the Sudanese harvest, when music and revelry were forbidden to ensure a long and productive working day. However, even without this information, Goreshi's tender performance channels resistance. In the final sequence of *Citizens Band*, all four musical forms resound together over footage of coloured city lights that blur into soft amoebic planetary discs. This polyphony is both dissonant and harmonic, proposing togetherness in difference rather than the assimilation often imposed on migrants. Initially the film's aestheticisation of migratory experience and the dissolution of its harsh realities into a global beat might seem problematic. However, in Kaja Silverman's analysis of Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston* (1989), she argues that the cinematographic lighting up of marginalised bodies – in Julien's case, the Black, homosexual characters – positions them in the space of desire in contrast to media stereotypes.³ Something of this occurs here: Lamourie, a visually impaired musician, although ignored by Parisian commuters, glows before the attention of gallery-goers who may, so the utopian aspect of Silverman's argument implies, carry this revelation with them when they leave the gallery.

The Swarming Song in the gallery's Round Room **FIG.6**, is the most successful of Mesiti's three new commissions. Four audio speakers emit a chorus of female voices in a continuous loop. Recorded at Reid Concert Hall, Edinburgh, in July 2021, the work was made in response to a seventeenth-century score in the city's university collection, composed by the English music theorist and beekeeper Charles Butler, which is exhibited in one of the display cases in the adjoining space. Butler's *Melissomelos, or, Bee's Madrigal* (1634) is a musical translation of the 'piping' sound that queen bees make to call out to the drones. The work resonates with the mimicry of creaturely life in *Over the Air and Underground* and Mesiti's translation of Butler's score – a dolce soprano 'piping' voice – bleeds into the nearby Neo-classical Georgian Gallery, which houses the film installation *ASSEMBLY* **FIG.7**.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Angelica Mesiti: In the Round* at Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, 2021. (Photograph Sally Jubb).

The Georgian Gallery, situated above the University's Law School and former senate room, is a fitting site for *ASSEMBLY*, which was originally created for the Australian Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. The film is set in two government buildings: the Italian Senate in Rome and the Old Parliament House in Canberra. By contrast to their Vitruvian-inspired semi-circular seating arrangements, Mesiti's three screens are positioned completely in the round, forming a circle around a central red carpet. Chairs fill the spaces between them as though welcoming viewers to participate in this spatial allegory of democratic form. A lone stenographer in the Italian senate punches out David Malouf's poem 'To Be Written in Another Tongue' (1975) on the Michela, a nineteenth-century stenographic machine modelled on a piano keyboard. This footage is followed by various sequences showing lone classical musicians playing in empty rooms and corridors.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Angelica Mesiti: In the Round* at Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, 2021. (Photograph Sally Jubb).

The accompanying score by the Russian-born, Australian composer Max Lyandvert is an arrangement based on the Michela's transposition of Malouf's poem. The Michela was patented by Antonio Michela Zucco in 1876 and has been used since 1880 in the Italian Senate to record parliamentary debate. Zucco was inspired by the idea of musical notation as a universal language; his dream was that the machine would become a means of translation across different languages. Mesiti rescues this utopian ideal, but without further reading it is hard to grasp the intermedial migration of translations, which culminate in a further iteration by the Australian Aboriginal dancer Deborah Brown in Canberra's Old Parliament House. In a series of static poses, she enacts the hand gestures used by such protest groups as the Occupy movement, seemingly directed at nobody, until eventually the film segues to a band of Lebanese wedding drummers who invade the building's empty foyer **FIG.8**. The drummers' exuberance rescues the film from its overly classical and solitary proportions. As does the ensuing footage of a diverse group of young women making illuminated toy gliders – similar to those often sold by street hawkers – that they subsequently throw into the sky. Assembling as a choir **FIG.9**, the young women perform the final translation of the score, their sonic tonalities not unlike those in *The Swarming Song* that can be heard in the silence of *ASSEMBLY*'s final moments: close-ups of a painting depicting a classical Roman male assembly. Sound bleed can be disruptive, but here it is complementary – from both within and without, the sonorous voices of young women have taken over the *agora*.⁴

Mesiti's installations propose how people might assemble, not in the sense of identity or representational politics, but at the level of affect and deep listening.⁵ In Mesiti's works, beauty operates at a

subliminal level to connect what biopolitical governance keeps dangerously apart: the connections between citizens and environments that might be essential to the future of human life on the planet.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Angelica Mesiti: In the Round* at Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, 2021. (Photograph Sally Jubb).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Angelica Mesiti: In the Round* at Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, 2021, showing *Citizens Band*, by Angelica Mesiti. 2012. Four-channel HD video installation, duration 21 minutes 25 seconds. (Photograph Sally Jubb).



Fig. 6 *Swarming Song*, by Angelica Mesiti. 2021. Four-channel sound installation, duration 1 minute 20 seconds on a continuous loop. (Photograph Sally Jubb; exh. Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh).



Fig. 7 *ASSEMBLY*, by Angelica Mesiti. 2019. Four-channel HD video installation, duration 21 minutes 25 seconds. (Photograph Sally Jubb; exh. Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh).



Fig. 8 *ASSEMBLY*, by Angelica Mesiti. 2019. Four-channel HD video installation, duration 21 minutes 25 seconds. (Photograph Sally Jubb; exh. Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh).



Fig. 9 *ASSEMBLY*, by Angelica Mesiti. 2019. Four-channel HD video installation, duration 21 minutes 25 seconds. (Photograph Sally Jubb; exh. Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh).

Exhibition details

Angelica Mesiti: In the Round

Talbot Rice Gallery, University of
Edinburgh

1st October 2021–19th February 2022

Footnotes

- 1** Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015) is one of Mesiti's references. For a short introduction to his ideas, see R. Grant: 'Do trees talk to each other?', *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2018, available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>, accessed 18th November 2021.
- 2** The plants, selected by how their pollen reacts to ultraviolet light, are: Chrysanthemum, Gladiolus, Hydrangea digitalis, Artichoke, Succulent, Bourrache (Borage), Scabiosa, Poppy bulb, Chèvrefeuille (Honeysuckle), Hibiscus, Buddleia, Nigella, Hoya and mushrooms.
- 3** See K. Silverman: *The Threshold of the Visible World*, London and New York 1996.
- 4** A Greek term for the meeting place of assembly in Athenian life to discuss civic life which historically excluded women and enslaved people.

- 5** Meisiti was inspired by 'deep listening', a method developed by American composer Pauline Oliveros that is based on principles of improvisation, ritual and meditation to enable both trained and untrained performers to practice the art of responding to environmental conditions in solo and ensemble situations.

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