Screening Room no.1 part B: —*the softest mud that sees*
A conversation between artist Esther Gatón and residency 11:11 facilitators Alex Bell and Giulia Shah

Giulia: Hi Esther again. Two weeks ago was so nice. We chatted about so many things. I'm really excited to talk to you more tonight about the second film that has just gone up on 11:11's screening room *—the softest mud that sees.*

Alex: So excited to carry on this conversation. So many things came up last time we spoke, it was really, really inspiring and amazing to talk to you.

Esther: Yeah. Hi again Giulia and Alex, it is really lovely to be talking again. I've been thinking a lot about the questions that I thought were amazing. So I'm really grateful to be able to speak again. And yeah, hopefully bring some relevant topics to the audience. So where should we start? Maybe with the writing.

Giulia: So Alex, you already touched on Rita's text, amazing text that was written to accompany *Machine White Sun* and I was interested in learning a little bit more about what role writing plays in your practice, both your own writing and others, and your ideas surrounding exhibition texts.

Esther: Rita's text was really brilliant. The way that text was written—she came to my studio, she was also studying at Goldsmiths— and we watched *Machine White Sun* together. She was one of the first people to see it. We were having a conversation after this and she felt like writing, it was really natural. I usually work with curators or writers like this, I won't ask them to write about a specific thing. I mostly talk with them, not necessarily only about the work but talk with them in general and just trust them in a way that they are going to pay attention to the work and see what the work brings them. So I feel that the relationship—in my case—in between this language and writing is sort of erotic in a way. They don't try to justify each other, it's more like they collide. When I write myself I am a very slow writer

but I do it constantly. When I began writing I was just writing to put things out of my chest and then I found out how writing is extremely useful. I feel it's like the biggest medium, the medium that has more possibilities than any other in the sense that you can put any word next to any other word and that's gonna make some sort of sense. So it's really huge. And it kind of allows me to expand my imagination. Also I realised that I use it to understand what words mean to me or what else they can mean. I play a lot with etymology—or similar worlds or stuff like that—so that I'm able to expand meaning. I'm not sure if this is relevant, but I have noticed, for instance, that I've only been writing in English for a year now. And I hope this helps someone but because I feel like English and Spanish have very different functions because English has more adjectives or more words, and it's a language that is very accurate, and it's very self-contained—like every sentence makes sense. And there's a lot of use of ellipses and things like that. Where in Spanish it is really about subordinating sentences. So when you build a paragraph it is more complex, like the sense happens inside and outside of its sentence, if this makes sense. So, in short for me writing in English kind of forces me to be more clear and think very differently. Also, because I'm not native, so I really cannot play with double senses. I need to communicate right.

Giulia: I can really relate to that being a different native language speaker, and we were talking a bit about this previously when we spoke—you were talking about jumping in between languages. I feel this jumping in between languages also allows me to have almost like a different persona in between those languages. Like my body, I feel like my body is different depending on the language that I'm thinking or speaking in. Do you also feel that by using a language that isn't your native or mother tongue in relation to thinking about your work you have more of a distance to it?

Esther: Yeah, I agree. 100%. It's with work, but with everything, because I feel like I don't have deep memories attached to that language so things don't hurt that much. So you're able to use language more freely.

Alex:I brought this up briefly last week about being really interested in your use of sound in your films. And, and how that kind of ties in with this idea of suspense as well and immersion I guess.

Esther: I really appreciate that you asked about it, because I was using it quite intuitively, and now that I've been thinking about it, I've realised that sound is an extremely creepy thing to use. I feel that because vision allows us to have a sense of perspective, or orientation. You know, like, when we are nervous, we open our eyes, or turn on the light, right. They're ways to calm down. While with Sound you don't see things happening. And it feels that even if you hear the sound, you don't necessarily know where it's happening. It can be outside of your house or inside. We have a lot less control over it and also it's very abstract. Sound can be very easily misunderstood, like the same sound can be very scary or very cute. And it also has so much power over us—it can freak you out, it can be very annoying, it can turn us on. And so I was thinking about all of this and I realised that in the videos the sound is extremely present. It is very present, because there are also many silent moments so that makes sound a very clear choice whenever it appears. I feel like I use so much sound because most of the filming has been done in cities and cities are extremely noisy and they have all these mixes of different noises happening all the time. It felt like a way to really give a real vibe of the scene. And sometimes I played it very loud. I think it gives the texture, if that makes sense, of the image. It is really tactile. And in the videos, I'm not extremely loyal but I use these combinations between the image and the sound.

Giulia: I think it's really important how you talk about sound being something scary because of the quality of it not being visible or the part of like not knowing, not knowing what something is or where something comes from and having to follow the sound to find out what it exactly is that replicates that sound. Relating that to what we spoke briefly about last week as suspense and the suspense that you're talking about that is created through sound and visual images, but also how you create suspense in your more sculptural work. [...] This idea that the texture of

sound and maybe also the texture of objects can create a sort of suspense like feeling, could you talk about that?

Esther: Yeah, I thought this was a really good question honestly. I was thinking about suspense, which is something that I recognised in my work, but I was not thinking about making suspense while I was making it. And so I've been thinking that somehow it really feels that suspense has to do with anticipation, with hanging onto something before knowing. There's this very famous Alfred Hitchcock definition of suspense where he talks about how you know that there's something going to happen but the character doesn't. So in suspense there's so much anxiety and I feel that this is why sound brings so much suspense because it's so abstract. You do not know [...] It's just like anticipating something but not telling you what that is. I realised that in order to produce suspense you need time, you need to make someone feel that the present is not enough that you want to get to the event right now so you need to put that pressure. And I was thinking how that happens in the sculptures and I guess you can make that happen with encounters. Like with the different times that you have with the sculpture. So I'm always thinking about how one finds the sculptures. I'm thinking that this changes a lot with the size and also with the texture again of the sculpture. For instance with very very small sculptures like jewels, they can contain a lot of suspense because what they do is that they require a lot of time. When you look at them the rest of the world dissolves or something, they function a bit like these very tacky glass balls that have like cities inside. You know, like christmas things. So I feel that if things are very small you kind of have a chance to expand the time that they occur in. When things are very big they also allow you to trap the spectator. To make them forget that they are like looking at a sculpture and kind of invade them. Also I was thinking you could think of a sculpture or objects as things that may make you do something unexpected. Like opening a box is a very suspenseful moment. I was thinking that maybe with some of my sculptures that have tricky surfaces, like things that look wet or look different than what they are.—I've had some conversations with people saying that they were feeling they were going to move or attack or something. Connected with this, because I feel like I've been talking about single sculptures, but I feel

that when you have an installation you can use sculptures as traffic signs so you can organise time throughout a “tour” around the space.

Giulia: The idea of suspense and time is like completely interlinked right. It's all about this unravelling expectation.

Esther: yeah it's a really interesting way to understand work because it's really different from shock. I feel that many artworks play with a shock but the suspense is...weirder. I was thinking just now—like maybe the fact that my videos have suspense is because of the way that I was filming them I was experiencing suspense myself because they're sort of documentaries so I didn't know what was going to happen. I was just there watching.

Giulia: Let's delve a little bit deeper into the second video that is up on the screening room —*the softest mud that sees*. Could you tell us a little bit about the title —*the softest mud that sees* and also *Machine White Sun*, I love the titles but I'm curious to know a little bit more about them.

Esther: So both titles happened after the videos were made—which is not always the case in my case. With *Machine White Sun* the main scenarios are filmed in London, even though that's not very revealed. The end of the film is in Valladolid, the city where I come from in the north of Spain, which is where all the floods happened. When I moved to London, I realised that the sun that was in London was the same sun that happens in Valladolid—the same white. Which for Spain is kind of rare because the sky tends to be more bluish but this area in Spain is very high from the sea level. So it's really personal. I was sort of obsessed with this white sun. The sun is also such a symbol, right. It's so huge that it flows onto everything. It was a bit epic, to be honest. And then the machine—a lot of that video is looking at functioning and it’s looking at things that move. The fluids are almost part of the mechanics of what's going on. So it just came together. These things were around my mind. I guess that —*the softest mud that sees* is more abstract, I really knew that the word sees had to be there

because it seemed that something was looking. It was really an act of piercing through different scenarios. Almost all of them are scenarios where special effects or illusions have happened to reality. When the special effects are being filmed it happens in a very kind way. It's really like yes, these guys having fun working on a fake bloody shower. This is really what it felt like, like a really fun workshop. Yeah, I kind of felt that something was seeing everything but that thing was not human, even though it was me. I gave the name mud just because as a material it also doesn't have a fixed shape, it is sort mundane and dirty. I liked the idea that that mud was soft, which is something a bit redundant to talk about the mud that is soft.

Giulia: I might be taking it a bit far now, but you talking about mud, and these prop studios and special effects. I'm thinking a lot about like, sci-fi-ish or scary-ish movies in especially the 80s and people being able to turn liquid—you know, these liquid puddles that can go under things, I think it's in The Terminator. I'm not sure if it's in The Terminator 2. So they are these liquid bodies. They're always like muddy and gooey and they can turn into shapes so they're […] yeah, mud that sees.

Esther: Yeah, I'm a big fan of those movies. And I really look into props a lot.

Giulia: Were there any movies that you remember that you had watched in the same time that you were working on these two video pieces that might have unawarely influenced the works?

Esther: During lockdown I watched the whole of Twin Peaks. That was fun. That was intense. I'm also a big fan of P.T. Anderson. But I was also watching a lot of action films, I watched Die Hard for instance and thought it was fantastic. I hadn't watched that film. Do you know Sandman, this comic? So what I found extremely interesting—because I feel that this also helps me in my movie making, this is why I bring it up. It's amazing because with comics you're allowed to talk about very abstract concepts like this one, which is about desire, dream, time night, and they are all characters. It's sort of like in classic culture, like the Greek gods or

something. They personify all these elements. What's very interesting about the comic is that they change from one universe into another and that's sort of represented through very fluid or different shapes of the characters and the writing. So when I was filming, I was trying to be comfortable with not thinking in one single universe.

Alex: I guess the comic strip is also kind of in between writing and filming, and thinking about the use of imagining and turning that from the kind of limitless possibilities that writing gives you and creating that in a visual way because I see the comic strip or the graphic novel like a filmstrip yeah.

Esther: For my practice the things that I read they logically connect but not in a conscious way. I don't get into a project and then I'm like oh I'm gonna do this because it's what I read. I kind of keep navigating stuff that I find. So with Sandman which I used to read when I was younger but I came back to it for some reason and it was funny because I was reading it and I also read The Odyssey—when I was a teenager—but there are some similarities. For instance in The Odyssey it’s really beautiful how a woman falls in love with a river just because it's the most beautiful river in the world so she goes there all the time and Poseidon disguises into the river and rapes her and so they're like these transubstantiational relationships. It has no limits. Anything can happen but at the same time it's truly mundane like the gods and the goddesses are just like celebrities they're not like better people they are just stronger and have more powers. It's sort of interesting reading about a world that could be hours because the dynamics are very similar. But these fantastical things happen and suddenly someone can traverse worlds like a goddess or a human like Penelope has like so much power over her dream—actually there is an Anne Carson essay that is beautiful that I think is titled “Every Exit is an Entrance” and it's about people who dream, different types of dreamers, and it uses The Odyssey and also different books by Virginia Woolf (I think To The Lighthouse and The Waves) and analyses them by how the characters dream and this is extremely interesting.

Alex: I wanted to ask you a little bit about the importance of light because you were saying words like piercing and talking about the sun being this white colour and so it's really quite expressive language and I was wondering about the importance of that and also light as the mechanism for photographing anything or filming anything and how that kind of sits within the films

Esther: I've been very interested in how light has so much power on us as biological beings. How it burns us and also gives us energy. It has so much effect on our circadian rhythm. So I am fascinated by how in the end we're so dependent on light and that's also why the sun has been identified as a type of god in so many cultures. It's interesting also to think that the sun will die, it will end and it's also like not even one of the biggest stars. It was interesting for me to find out the sun is not even gonna explode like the biggest stars do, it is just gonna like become black and disappear. It's gonna be sort of pathetic. I feel that I am very fascinated by that fact and light is also what I use, like the medium in film. I remember a friend who's a filmmaker in LA and she talked about how LA is perfect because you always have the same light for filming—that's one of the reasons why there's such a huge film industry. In my case, I love the change of light and how that transforms the day dramatically. I think it's not not by chance that every time we meet, we've been talking about how the weather is, right?

So one of the reasons I began to do film is because I was already doing the photos for my sculptures. And I realised that these types of pictures I would take were not just pictures of the object, but pictures of the object in a space and I would play a lot with the light. To the extent that in the end, the pictures of my works, were basically pictures of the shadows and of the reflections of my work. I didn't care so much about the objects itself, but what they were doing to the environment. I realised that I was already working on the screen more than on the object and so I guess that light is one of the elements that brought me to film in some ways.

Alex: A lot of these topics around sci fi and futures of how humans can live on different planets and what you actually need to exist [...] A lot of

contemporary science fiction is based around the climate crisis and also dealing with a lot of these issues and using elements and materials of the natural world to think through these possibilities and different future realities.

Giulia: We talked a bit about film and about writing, but is sci fi something that you're interested in as well?

Esther: Yeah, absolutely. Yes. I find it fascinating. I like very classic writers like Huxley. But I read any sort of thing. I jump from that to essays, to poetry. I'm not an expert in anything.

Alex: You sound like you read a lot? So I'm wondering if you find most of your inspiration from the written word or text?

Esther: I like reading. I read from books. I feel it's really powerful, in the sense that everything else disappears when you're reading. And that also happens with film or with movie making. They feel so autonomous, which is like the opposite that was happening with sculpture. You just plunge it into the environment, and there's nothing you can do. I mean, I try to, to do a bit of everything. Walking is very important, I used to swim and it was very important, and talking. I feel that I'm gonna say the cheesiest thing, but really anything can be very inspiring. For instance, I realised how my breakfast was very influential in a lot of my sculptures, like all the textures that I was doing, or my eggs. I think it also has to do with this first thing that you do in the morning, that your mind is just fascinated by everything. I guess the light also comes from that, because there's this amazing state when you're like waking up, but not completely. I really try to extend that as much as I can. For a while I was swimming before going to the washroom or anything. Swimming is very meditative. So I was sort of still in dreams until I would like, meet people and I'd freak out basically.

Giulia: That's so good. I like this extension of the state between waking and sleeping for as long as possible. Swimming was doing that for you, but do you have any other strategies—like my strategies are you know,

pressing the snooze button about 100 times—do you have any strategies for like bringing yourself into that sort of state?

Esther: Yeah, I mean, this probably sounds very responsible, but I try to not read news or respond to messages or anything like at the beginning of the day. I really stay out of the world as much as I can—also for pleasure. I dream a lot. I feel that this is more real than the day and it's quite scary because I'll get annoyed about something that hasn't happened.
So I began doing this or I guess I never stopped doing this because I guess it's something that you just do all your life. It just feels good. I feel that it's important to find whatever functions for every person and for me these states allow me to be more receptive. I see an egg and I'm fascinated by yellow, that's why I say that my breakfast informs my sculpture. I'm also someone who speaks at night and laughs. It's very funny because I don't remember anything. I am aware that there is an Esther that happens when I'm sleeping and she interacts with the world because my partner will speak to her and all that but I don't know her. So it feels that you get out of yourself and it's very ghostly. I really like it although sometimes I'm like "oh my god what will I say".

Giulia: All of this really feeds into some lovely words that you wrote to us earlier about humour, laughter and spirit. I think we spoke a bit about humour within your work last week. Alex specifically had some questions about that and you had a conversation around this but it also makes me think about how you talk about the mundane and trivial, everyday—things are really beautiful and important but they also generate laughter and what that is to you, could you expand a bit on your ideas around laughter and humour.

Esther: I'm super glad that you talk about it. It's something that I actually have written about. I started writing about it while my father was dying. For some reason I wanted to write about laughter and not only because laughter is a catalyst to deal with things that hurt us but also because I was becoming aware of how much black humour was around not only in that situation but in sad situations in general. I felt that laughter was not only

something that brings us together—it really like brings almost anyone together. You can laugh with someone that is your “enemy” but it stops being that when you laugh with them—but also it's like what we use to feel those things that we can't understand. I kind of like the idea of humour being related to mystery in some ways. There is this word that I used when I was writing about laughter which is “desternillarse” which sort of means something like the abandonment of hysterical laughter so it means the “ternillas” are lost. The ternillas is the cartilage mortar that joins the joints with the skull. So it kind of means that when you laugh too much the head can be torn apart—it's very dark. And then I found one of my favourite anecdotes on the english expression “laughing one’s head off” and it has to do with a historical episode of public decapitation that happened in 1747 and it was like the day that someone called Lord Lovat who was someone very unpopular and very mean was going to be executed. Everyone was very happy about it so thousands and thousands of people went to watch the execution but just before the executor was bringing his ax down to his neck a scaffold that was full of spectators collapsed and killed twenty of them. So Lord Lovat watched this and he started laughing. So he started laughing apparently just before being decapitated so when he was decapitated his head was still laughing while it was like rolling around. I don't know if that's possible

(all laugh)

Giulia: I hope we get to carry on more conversations and we will definitely be following your practice and everything that you are getting up to in the future.

Esther: Yeah thanks guys. It was really lovely. I feel very honoured to have been the first one in the Screening Room. I'm really looking forward to seeing the next works and hopefully see you soon.

Giulia: —*the softest mud that sees* will be on our screening room for the next two weeks, till the end of april.

Alex: It's been an absolute pleasure Esther thanks so much for your time

Esther: Thank you thank you to everyone