Screening Room no.5: *Ear Plan*
A conversation between artist Susan Atwill and residency 11:11 facilitators Alex Bell and Giulia Shah

Giulia Shah
Hi, Susan. We're really happy to have your film Ear Plan in the May Screening Room with us at 11:11. We've got so much to talk about. I ran into your work at the New Contemporaries show at South London Gallery and was really excited when I saw it, also had a lot of questions. So it's really nice to meet you and also meet you through your work and chat about your film Ear Plan today.

Susan
Thank you so much for having me.

Giulia Shah
Maybe we can just start off really simply. And if you could maybe briefly introduce yourself and your practice.

Susan
Yeah, um, Hello, I'm Susan Atwill. And I'm a sound hunter, and artist. And I work predominantly with my heritage, which is based in the North East of England. So a lot of the work that I undertake has links and roots in that area where I grew up.

Giulia Shah
I came across your work at South London Gallery just a few months ago, and I didn't have any prior knowledge of your practice, but I did immediately sense there was some sort of sculptural material element. So I was interested to know more about how you work with moving image and sound, and I also later discovered that you do have a more sculpture-based practice, and would love to know more about how these things intertwine.

Susan

So I started, really, working with clay and sculptural materials when I did Art Foundation, so this was a long time ago, about 20 years ago. And I was always drawn to those materials, because of the way that my hands worked with them, it was kind of like, this way of thinking through materials that would quiet my brain down when I'm sort of moving or using these materials, that kind of... you had like a conversation with them. There was a way of touching clay that sort of allowed you to sort of speak to it, and then it would speak back to you in these various forms. So I was always transfixed by materials and how with plaster, especially, there's this chemical change that happens. It goes from liquid to solid. Same with clay, it starts with liquid, then you fire it at extreme temperatures, and then it turns solid. But I don't know, I always struggled with where I fitted in with things because I didn't consider myself to be like a crafts person. But I was really interested in that total focus with using material and that kind of almost perfection that you could achieve, which was sort of unachievable, as well.

So I worked with these materials for years and years. I ended up teaching school kids for a long time, and got to know this language of materials, and try to teach them this language as well. And I thought that was my practice. I thought that that was it. I'm not actually going to be an artist who makes bowls to then sell or I'm not a craft person. I'm not a fine artist, because it felt like the materials that I used were really sort of... not low tech, that sounds quite dismissive of them, but they weren't this kind of grand material. I was sort of happily teaching and that's what I thought I was. I was a teacher, practitioner and explored ideas through materials. Which was great fun for a long time. I enjoyed it. But then there was this sort of turning point where I realised that I didn't want to just work with these materials. I felt like everything was becoming laboured with them. So I felt like I was really stuck in what I was making. I was kind of making the same sort of stuff and that troubled me because I didn't think that I was growing. I didn't think that I was being challenged.

And I was thinking about sound as a material when I saw the BBC Radiophonic Workshop talk at the British Library. So I went along to this

talk with a couple of the students actually. I watched this thing and how they spoke about sound, how they spoke about Daphne Oram and Delia Derbyshire and just this whole other material opened up, which I thought 'well there's definitely more to say', I'll try and learn about sound. And then ended up applying to the Royal College of Art because they did sound design and I wanted to learn about sound as a material. Also, because I was getting fed up of carrying clay, I'd broken my arm and it's really heavy. Wherever you go you've just got to constantly have to heave this weight around with you. And I was just like, I can't be doing that anymore. So yeah, it just started there at the Royal College and I began to work with sound as a material.

Giulia Shah
That's really interesting. I mean, sound is a material, right?!

Giulia Shah
I think I remember you also saying that the film Ear Plan wasn't intended as a work, but it was more an accumulation of research during lockdowns. Could you maybe say a little bit about how the film came together and how it did become the actual artwork?

Susan
The interesting thing about moving-image is that it became the glue for this way of working. I was making these objects as I was thinking of what sounded is, what language is, and I was making these objects alongside. I was always into photography, and documenting things via photography, and I guess the glue of moving-image managed to stick everything together. So it was like this collage of sound, objects, and then the narrative as well. I'd never considered film or moving-image, because I think I was always intimidated by all the organisation, like people would have, from what I knew from like watching Kubrick and stuff like that, that he had these so detailed plans of shots, and, you know, all the drawings, the little thumbnails, and I don't work like that. I really don't, it's definitely more disorganised, in that sense, how I work. So I always thought 'oh, you know, moving-image film, my mind doesn't work in that kind of technical way' but

then it became apparent how useful moving-image is to tell the story and to use the sound as well as the objects.

But also out of extreme anger as well! I was having to show this project as part of an assessment, and I was getting really angry that I wasn't getting the points across of this six month research project. I had to try to, over zoom, sell this project and it was the easiest way to do it. And I made it with iMovie, which everyone on my course was like 'what are you doing?'. But it works. And it's just that thing of, I wasn't aiming to do it, it was what happened in the periphery. I think actually that's sometimes the best thing, because you're not loading everything, you're just making it and not really thinking too much about it, but it comes out.

Giulia Shah
So if I'm understanding correctly; the film was initially made as a research presentation for your tutors and peers. And then became the actual work.

Susan
I tried to present it in December, and it didn't work, it just flopped. Whatever I was trying to do just didn't work and it all kind of collapsed in front of me on screen. And because it was during the lockdown and we were in this weird space where everyone in the class is on your screen, but you're in your bedroom. And, you know, like your project that you've been working on really hard just doesn't work, nothing linked, and I could just see everyone's faces like 'Oooh'. My tutors were like "don't worry, it's fine", and I think from that it was just the rage of "right I need to nail this" that fired me up to really pull it all together.

Alex
It's really interesting this way you describe using film though, and the way you talk about producing a film and maybe that your way of working isn't like this linear, kind of drawing things out, mapping everything out. Because it seems like there's so many different stories or ways of telling a story, that kind of thread through this film. It's kind of like a diary and a personal history in one sense. And then it's also this kind of research, showing your

body of work and threading this together with also kind of political research and archival material. And it does seem to be a very well constructed story. There's something you said about being an anthropologist as well, so I am interested in your approach to being an anthropologist and the subject matter in the work.

Susan
Oh, yeah. Archaeologist... I wrote a dissertation as an archaeologist.

Giulia
Did you actually study archaeology?

Susan
No, no. I always wanted to. I think it was always as a kid, I was like, "oh, that'd be so cool", probably because of Indiana Jones and this idea of just going travelling and there's adventure and you're digging stuff. But never managed to sort of get there, I think, academically. A-c-a-d-e-m-i-c-a-l-l-y (laughter). You know, it wasn't to be, but then I ended up writing a dissertation where I became an archaeologist, I was the archaeologist, and I really studied archaeology papers. I put so much work into learning the language that they would use to write these papers. And I was really interested in how they displayed evidence that they'd find, and I thought about my own work, how that was evidence for me. And it's weird reading it, because it is sort of my voice, but it's not my voice. It's kind of like my voice if I was an archaeologist.

In the dissertation, I completed a lot of diagrams; a lot of the way that archaeologists mapped sites and the scales that they use, the sort of the very thin lines that they used to draw, I was always fascinated with how that could be a site of physical presence. But also your experience of that site is something completely different. And I think, yeah, how you experience things, I guess, sort of links to why there's so many threads in the film. Like, which part of it is me, which part of it is what my Granda had said, you know, how many grandfather's do I have? Like, there's this kind of experience of a certain thing, certain place or time. And so in the in the

dissertation, a lot of the research came from looking at the geological formations of Durham, the kind of coalfields, but also dripping in my own ideas of 'well actually there's this material called sound-shale that was embedded between the limestone and the marine shale of the eras hundreds and millions of years ago'. And then throughout the dissertation there's references to the area where I found the fossilised sound, which are the little sculptures, and then there's maps and stuff like that. And towards the end it gets more ludicrous as well, as the writing goes on; it sort of loses all plausibility and I really like that kind of edge of things. What makes something plausible, and what doesn't? Do you watch Bob Mortimer on Would I Lie To You? Bob Mortimer is one of my favourite comedians. Well, Vic and Bob, they're from the North East as well. But he's got a way of, like, "is he lying? is he telling the truth?". And I've always liked that, the edges of things. Interestingly, it sort of lined up with this idea of the edge of the river, it's where I found the fossilised sound. And it's just like that possibility…

Giulia Shah
I think that's something that you really sense throughout the whole film. There are moments where I'm super engrossed, and feel like I'm watching a documentary about the archeology of this land and the mines and the history of it, and then a second later, I'm like "No, this is all made up" or I'm not really sure. And it doesn't really matter, either. But it is this sort of push and pull between what you believe and what you don't and what as a human you believe and you don't. And I think this already starts from the very beginning of the film. It's when you speak about the archeology of the Pitmatic dialect. I think I have quoted this: "The miners dislodged sounds by the gesture of digging, they inhaled and released sounds and the dialect was born". First of all, that's really beautiful. I'm really interested in these ideas of language origin myths. So I'm wondering, with this story, is this something that is a myth that exists or is a story that is told? Or is it something that you made up. Where does this come from?

Susan
So I will say that the Pitmatic dialect did originate from underground, it's a real dialect, and it was spoken by the miners of the North East coalfields.

Interestingly, it's different to the dialect of Geordie or to Mackem, and it originated as soon as they started to mine in the middle of the 1700s, onwards to the 1800s and 1900s. The language that was spoken by miners was for them and that's how they communicated above and below ground. So I always had that awareness because my Granda Billy, he worked at Monkwearmouth which is in Sunderland, he spoke a dialect different to my Granda Atwill, who worked further down the coast in Dawdon, and they had different words for things. So when I was growing up, I heard both Granda's speaking but sounding completely different even though they were only 11 miles away from each other, and it was always strange being aware of how they sounded different. When I was researching about Pitmatic, I found there is an idea that the gestures that they were making are sort of onomatopoetic and there are a lot of words that link to the gesture, movement or the tools that they're using, so like real bodily sound. I wish I'd recorded both of them when I was younger, sadly they've both died, but you know just to hear a record of them.

Susan
I was reading Vibrant Matter by Jane Bennett, and she talked about how atoms around minerals and geological things have this sort of vibration or ability to communicate. And I thought that would be brilliant - what if sound is stuck in rocks, and actually we just need to unleash it and then you could hear fossilised sound? I think there was an episode of The Mighty Boosh where they were melting ice in the tundra, and as they put ice in the pot to melt and the steam escaped, it was someone's voice that had been trapped in the ice.

Susan
I always really enjoyed that thought - that things could be trapped - these sounds, the vibrations, could be underneath our feet all this time. All these minerals and gems, and all the knowledge that they have, we just can't hear it. But that the mine has dislodged it somehow - I was really happy to play around with the idea of inventing this possibility. So in my dissertation, I've got the diagrams of the strata exactly where the sound was trapped.

Susan
Also, there is a story by Ballard called the Sonovac, which is about a guy who hoovers up noise in a city.

Giulia Shah
I don't know that story by Ballard. That sounds amazing.

Susan
(It's about) the invention - there's a vacuum out there that hoover's up the sides of walls, the textures of buildings, and that's the sound pollution that can be sucked.

Alex
You also introduced these instruments at one point (in the film made from parrot coal). I'm really interested in the parrot coal... you were talking about the parrot coal (in the film) and I'm going to quote yourself back to you: "That unique ability for communication enables the material to be resonant when hollow, creating ideal conditions to form musical instruments." And there are these diagrams that you're panning over in the film that are just beautiful. And (i'm saying to myself about these musical instruments) "yeah, why not? Why could they not be real?" Like stranger things have happened. Everything else is made out of other materials.

Susan
Yeah, exactly. I think the most joyous thing was thinking about these instruments (starting from) there's this coal that we know dislodges these traps sounds from millennia (ago), and thinking about the plants that were trapped under there like Clubmoss and the ferns that had made up that bank of coal - it was all ferns and rainforests basically - and I had this wonderful week where I was (asking myself) 'what instruments can I make?' and really thoroughly enjoyed splicing things together. For example the rocks are from what my Granda gave to me. He would collect bits of coal that were... well not coal, they sort of had quartz in and stuff... they were these magical rocks that he'd present and I'd be like "whoa, that's incredible" about this really shiny, beautiful piece of coal. So I had these

objects which I had carried all of my life since I was seven.... The idea that they are actually huge, giant instruments - I was so convinced that that was what I was going to make as a piece, thinking this is going to be my work. Now I'm going to make giant instruments. And I mean, it can still happen. But what about the possibilities of how that would be played? Would it be activated by movement? Or your voice? What would it sound like?

Susan
I think that's what I enjoy, it's the 'what would happen if' instead of the 'oh no, that that's not possible'. I hate that way of thinking. So (the collages are) almost like, if musical instruments were made out of this (material), this is what they'd sound like, or this is what they'd look like. And it was this opening up of possibility of what could happen.

Susan
And the best thing is that the actual sound of the instruments... I have a very close friend still in the North East and we went to school together and we'd always, always have such a laugh, even now. She's called Gaynor. She'll send me voice notes and it's just her laughing at something. So this collection of my best friends laugh that I have from over the years. We used to record each other on tapes, on a tape recorder, and we'd pretend we had radio shows. Anyway we had this great childhood of us just basically being silly. And I was like "I've invented these instruments", so I sent her the pictures and I said "what do they sound like?" She just made this noise and sent it to me as a voice note. So it's just her layered - my best friend is this magical instrument that's singing as part of it, which I really loved. And I think definitely there is scope in them being... they'd be amazing as an exhibit, as a piece, that you can walk around and experience. Definitely.

Alex
A lot of what you're saying makes me think about this relationship between archaeology and digging for coal, digging into this underground. You're digging back in time, essentially.

Susan

Definitely, yeah, digging through to my past as well... Do you know the myths of Eurydice and Orpheus, and things like Plato's Cave and Gilgamesh... this idea of the vertical time. If you're mining through the past, you know, what do you end up with? You go through all these layers of things like fear, resonance, grief even, claustrophobia. And I was trying to think of how my Granda's felt that was their job for their entire life, in this darkness, and in a way it's a metaphor for my understanding of who I am.

Susan
I think what I see as well in the work is the broader possibilities for how I'm relating materials to my history, my archaeology, my family's archaeology as well. So yeah, I'm aware that there's a psychological angle of that... like the whole idea of descent, the idea that you're going to try and get to know yourself only by digging through the layers.

Alex
But you're also talking about the possibilities of imaginaries, or imaginations. What I'm seeing as science fiction is just taking a reality that could be possible now but (setting it) in the future, or in the past, (or vice versa). You're changing time from this kind of vertical linear way of understanding time. You're also creating (these) spaces within the film and within your work and research... (for example) you were talking about The Eye Plan (by John Rain) and the mapping out of an area, or creating a map or grid or system of any kind, from an imaginary perspective is a really beautiful way - also while coming to the end of the film as well - of how you are talking about creating spaces of imagination. And you say "it's not an exercise in nostalgia", it's a kind of way of digging through the layers of your own personal archaeology. "It's not an exercise in nostalgia, you're trying to understand a place that doesn't exist." So you're trying to build a world as well, or structure or framework, to also understand your work and where you situate yourself in so many different levels. Also, the narratives that run through the film.

Alex

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the map. And also how you're relating that to your own work that you showed in the film, and especially that end part.

Susan
So the Ear Plan... I draw a lot if I'm travelling, especially on a train, or I'll listen. I just listen to what's happening and then I'll make these drawings or maps or records of sounds that I'm processing, so it's a way of orienting myself in a space. And I've used drawing as a way of making sense of my surroundings, but I'm listening, rather than looking. So it's like... this is what I'm listening to as a document in front of me.

Susan
I created Ear Plan as an audio piece first. And what I was trying to do in that audio piece - it was about nine minutes long and you can hear it at the end of this film, it starts and then you can hear Arthur Scargill's voice - it is a surround sound piece, there's 9 or 10 speakers, and I was trying to create the space that I remember where I grew up. So in that audio piece, there was the sounds of the mining equipment, there was sounds of the River Wear, which is where I used to dig as a kid and all these sounds that I was trying to remember from growing up in that particular spot. I had the football fans as well from the Sunderland Football Club. It became this really potent piece and then added Arthur Scargill in as well. And it existed as its own audio piece, which I should have mentioned earlier, actually, it was never set out as a moving-image piece, it was an audio piece to begin with.

Susan
So I had this piece of work and it was really loud, really potent. And I was trying to describe how I made it, which is how the film came into being. The idea I think of the map... so there was this guy in the North East, in I think 1760, and he'd hand drawn Sunderland from above, from an imaginary perspective. It's called Rain's Eye Plan. So he hand drew everything in this map, and it's a really beautiful map. Everything's sort of slightly wonky. It's not the right perspective at all. And you can see people building ships who

are kind of giant, and then, you know, all these buildings that are slightly skew-whiff as well. I'll send you some pictures of it. It's a wonderful piece of work. And so I was looking at this map, as you know, this is where I was born, this is where I grew up. And then I was thinking of myself making my own map, which was Ear Plan, also from an imaginary perspective. I think I was very aware that I didn't want it to sort of come across it as being about nostalgia. Like I know I'm thinking about my grandparents and where I did grow up, but it was really important, a really brilliant space. Like I look back on it and I'm so happy that's where I grew up, and with those people and with that community. But I was really aware of it. I didn't want it to be like a cheesy thing. I didn't want it to look back and it all be rose tinted, because it wasn't, it was really difficult. And, you know, my grandparents had a really difficult time coming from poverty and I didn't want it to be something that was a bit glib, or a bit like "oh, wasn't it wonderful back when the war was on"... you know, that kind of thing. So yeah, it was kind of an exercise of orienting myself in my past, and what we choose to remember, and what we kind of try and fill in.

Giulia Shah
I think you really succeeded in that. I think that thing of talking about how the work is really personal but you manage to use a language that is maybe more collective. Maybe it's using the film, you know that it's a medium that is widely understood and there's narrative already just in the use of that material or medium. I think that when I'm watching the film I can feel that it's personal but immediately I relate it to my own relationship to certain things that come up; whether it's dialect or language or histories of mining. I think you can very easily find your own narrative in it. And at the same time, it's also informative and interesting, like with the archival footage of the protests.

Giulia Shah
There was one thing I was really interested in, but maybe it's not so interesting for everyone, but this is maybe how I relate to the film because I'm really interested in these ideas of dialect through my Italian side of my family. Anyway, there is a clip in the film of the Adriano Celentano song,

which I'm not even going to try and say the title of the song, I can't. And when I saw it, I was like 'I remember this' but I don't remember what it is. I knew it was him and I was trying to understand what he was singing, and then I remembered that he's not singing anything, and it's gibberish.

Giulia Shah
At the time... I mean I wasn't born yet obviously but he's very famous and the song's very famous... it came out at the time where American music became really, really popular in Italy. And he made a song that sounded English - I don't know if this is true or not - but I've read a lot about that he did that on purpose to prove a point that if you sing in something that sounds remotely like English it will become popular. And I even listen to Italian songs now that are from later, like from the 80s or the early 90s, where they'll sing in Italian and suddenly there'll be like an English sentence in it, and it will be sensical English but it doesn't really make sense to what the rest of the song is about. So I was just wondering why... like I got pulled out of your history (when the clip came on) and it became more collective - but maybe that's because I could relate more to this.

Susan
Yeah, it's a brilliant song. You know what, I think I stumbled across it on YouTube when, you know sometimes when YouTube is on and it just plays stuff, so this video popped up of him. And it's the funkiest video, I just love the beat and I love the dancing of it. So I was immediately taken by this and then when he started talking, I was like "what is he saying, this isn't Italian, and oh my God that sounds a bit English" and I was so transfixed by how I was really trying to grab these words to make some sort of meaning out of it. And yet you couldn't because it was so cleverly done that he'd sort of invented this way of…

Giulia Shah
It's so interesting how your brain works that even when you know it's gibberish, I'm still trying to be like 'could it be mean this?', or 'what is it based on?' or…

Susan
I think I remember reading that he was inspired by Bob Dylan, and that weird sort of intonation that Bob Dylan has got... and I was really taken with that from a comedy perspective, I think.

Susan
It sort of makes sense with the edges of things too; the edges of words, where one word starts and the other finishes. And I remember when I was really little listening to grownups - listening to my parents and grandparents - talking and not understanding what they're saying, but listening into this weird drone. Which I suppose is a bit like that cartoon where the grown ups just make noises? And it being this kind of outside perspective of language. So when I saw that clip it instantly made me feel really young again, but then also had just this joyous attitude to it, and it really spoke to me.

Susan
I'd been looking at the North East comedians, like Bobby Thompson, and trying to capture the sound or the dialect that I loved, and wanted to share it with people as well that might not have heard it. So Adrino made it into the film just because it was such a brilliant description.

Giulia Shah
Thank you for reminding me of that. I mean I feel like we could talk forever but maybe we should do that some other time.

Susan
In Chapter Two.

Giulia Shah
Yeah. In Chapter Two... We can talk more about the casting and the objects, the chains and all the found objects that make the sounds that come from the river. Yeah, I mean there's so much going on in those 10 minutes.

Susan
Actually, when I look back on it, it's like oh my god, this was a huge amount of work. No wonder I was so stressed. But I'm so pleased that you found it and you have got a lot from it and that, because I've never shown work before. This was the first time that I've shown work in a gallery in the New Contemporaries show. Yeah, it sounds really weird, I suppose a bit naive, but it's just like 'oh, people watched it'. It's really great.

Giulia Shah
Well no. It's really great. It's a really, really great film. We're really happy to be able to not just watch it, but learn more about it by speaking to you, and a lot of other people will watch it throughout May in the Screening Room. Thanks so much.

Susan
No problem. Thanks so much for your time as well.