

Matt Zurovski

Talbot Rice Residents



Talbot Rice Residents

Artist Intro

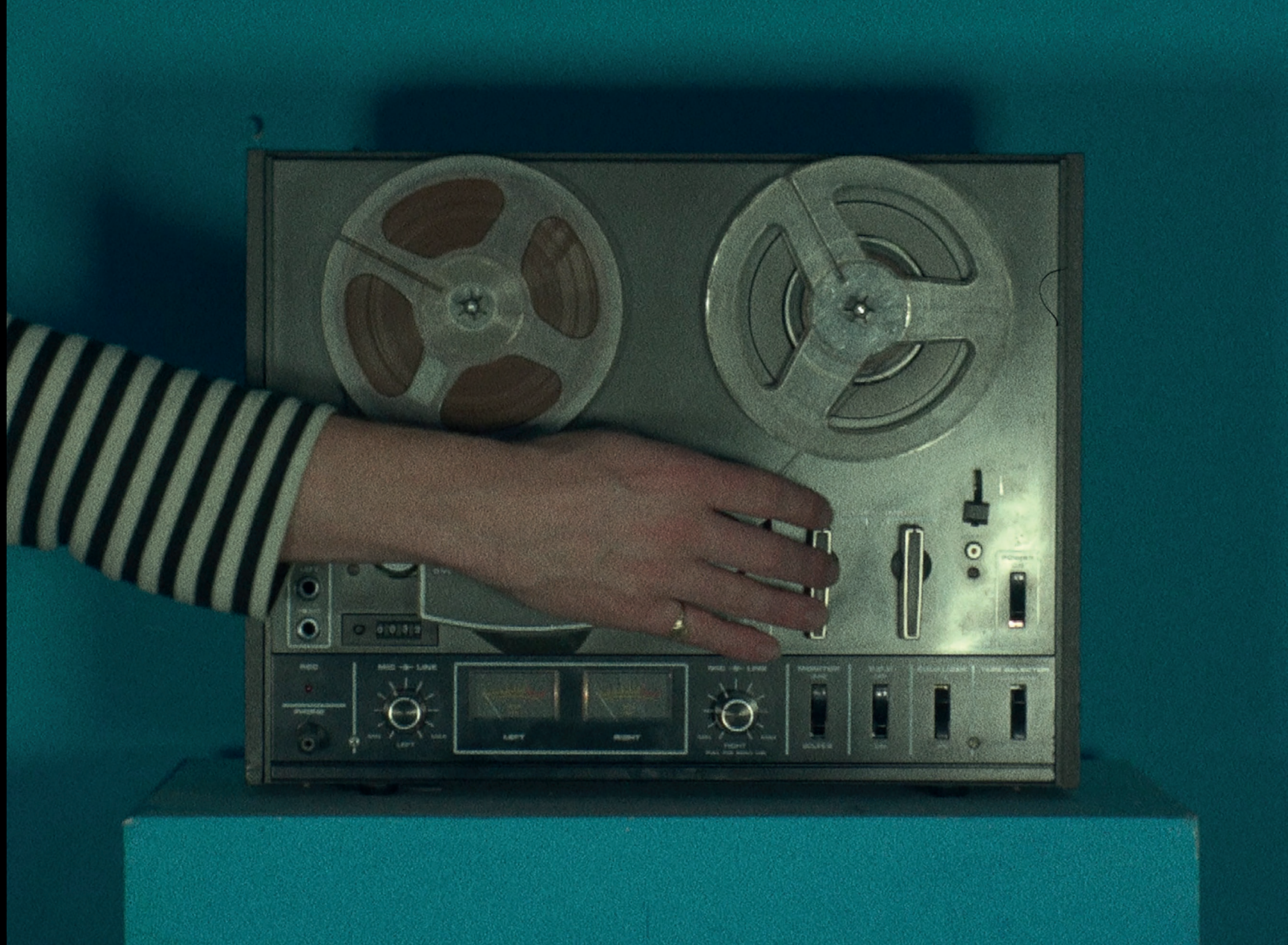
Matt Zurowski draws from his training in music composition to create installation and performance works that explore the entangled relationship between humans, nature and technology.

Zurowski's process involves field studies and recces to sites of environmental precarity and socio-political interest. He spends time in the landscape – listening, recording footage and sound – building porous dialogues between the environment, its histories and himself. This act of conversing with nature speaks to traditional indigenous practices, subverting hierarchies dictated by anthropocentrism. It turns him instead towards animism – the attribution of a living soul to plants and other natural phenomena – to reframe the terms and perceptions of the environmental crisis.

Zurowski's research centres on Scottish and Gaelic history, from ancient mythology through the Highland Clearances and current political debates around land and resource ownership, to modern advances and sci-fi futures like cloning and space travel. He explores peripheral sub-cultures and alternatives to destructive capitalist modes of living and is particularly drawn to communal structures in remote parts of Scotland and those connected to the early 90s rave and dance music scenes. His broad interests extend to shamanism, the practice of interacting with a spirit world through altered states of consciousness – and eschatology, the theological study of death and the final soul of humanity.

As well as a key research resource, archives provide Zurowski with material to directly appropriate and rework. He collects oral histories, audio and narratives which he then remixes and reworks into new compositions and audioscapes, often augmented with moving image, sculptural and performance responses. By integrating found materials with his original recordings, he combines analogue and digital technologies and lends authentic historical depth to his work – honouring and connecting with people, language and traditions from the past, whilst also complicating them with his mediation and intervention.

Within the spirit and lineage of storytelling, Zurowski's work allows space for speculative play and intuitive combining of materials – evoking untold, forgotten or alternative narratives that speak to the urgent concerns of the present.





Psalter

Stuart Fallon, 2020

Matt Zurowski's *Psalter* is a 2-channel audiovisual installation that combines the artist's interest in 90s dance culture and the traditional practice of Gaelic psalm singing, forming a meditative reflection on the collapse of humanity.

Psalter consists of two synced moving-image works and an audio soundtrack. The videos are created using 3D rendering software commonly used for virtual world building in video games. Zurowski applies its vast potential to transport the viewer into an imagined future island landscape, soaked in hazy sunshine and lucid colour. The familiar, yet exotic place, is encountered in soft focus, as if seen through concussed eyes or searing heat. The trunks of stripped, submerged trees poke aimlessly out of a rippling lake, surrounded by verdant banks, devoid of human presence. The scene is bucolic, inviting and alive, yet it reverberates with absence, scarred by some undisclosed trauma. An adjacent image follows the perpetual motion of the harsh sun following an elliptical path. Viewed from below as if from the fixed eyes of a prone entity, its light fleetingly falls into darkness when eclipsed behind the moon, before swiftly re-emerging to continue its unyielding trajectory.

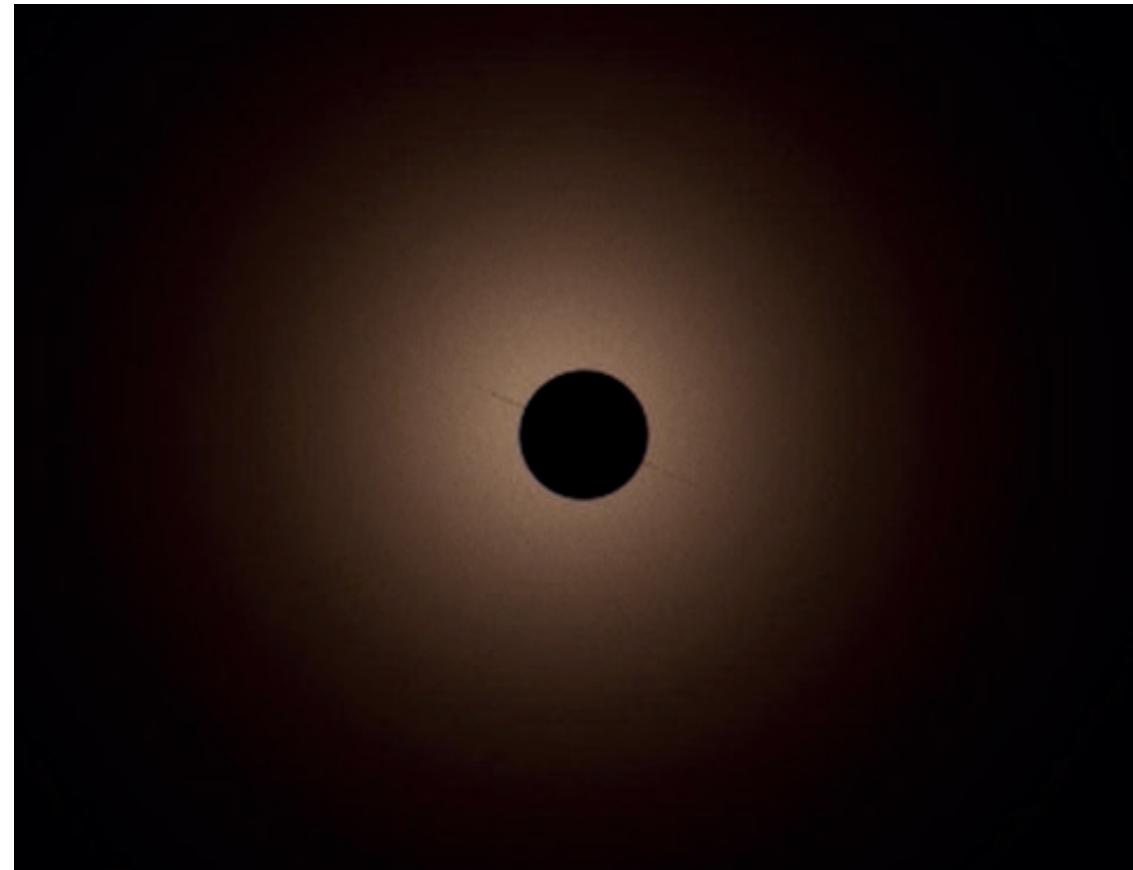
The imagery is set against a hypnotic soundtrack, pulsing with synthesised tones and distorted traces of human voice. Made from archival audio of Gaelic psalm singing, remixed by Zurowski with the technology and in the spirit of early 90s Acid House music, the fusion brings together two distinct

yet entwined cultural locations and movements. Traditional free-form psalm singing is performed primarily in Gaelic in the churches of the Hebridean west coast of Scotland. This Calvinist practice is initiated by a "precentor", with their single voice singing the scripture unaccompanied, before the congregation join, freely adapting and elaborating the melody until the whole crowd is engaged in a mesmeric, polyphonic cacophony of collective worship.

By appropriating this material Zurowski locates the islands in the videos, and by bringing it into dialogue with 90s dance music, which is synonymous with scorching summers in the Balearics, he delivers a cautionary vision of the islands' climate-changed future. The combining of the seemingly distinct musical sources also speaks to their shared cultural ideals. Both sit on the outside of mainstream society – resistant to the trappings of capitalism, and both use music as routes to reverie and altered states of being. Knowledge is shared and community is forged through sound, bodies and harmony. There is utopic hope and aspiration in their endeavours – suggesting alternative ways of being and of being together.

The altered Hebridean vision created by Zurowski is disconnected from a specific time – we are cast into an unfixed future where these islands, like many others, are rendered uninhabitable by humans, haunted by the sounds of those that once lived there. Our gaze is often cast upwards at other planets emerging through the haze – offering some possibility of exodus, some hope for continued survival – as hot water laps at our ankles. The portentous worlds of Tarkovsky are evoked, from the cataclysmic emptiness of *Stalker*, to the psychologically-charged waterscapes of *Solaris*. If this landscape is earth, it's in a dramatically altered state from how we know it. As the trees on the island warp, distorted by wind or delirium, any sense of time is eschewed – each orbit of the sun may represent minutes, hours or millennia.

On one level *Psalter* offers a now familiar warning of fluctuating temperatures and rising sea levels, and the resulting impact on humankind. However, rather than offering a lament at the prospect, Zurowski's atmosphere is more ambiguous. The sound is entrancing and enveloping, offering comfort and peace within the wasteland. It suggests that the end of humanity is not necessarily the same as the end of the world, and a shift from such anthropocentric thinking can in fact be a cause for hope and optimism. With a simple yet fundamental rebalancing of which species and ideas get to exist and thrive, Zurowski offers us the opportunity to bathe in the sights and sounds of this projected future – and it's not an entirely unpleasant place to be.





Matt Zurowski: Everything is Vibrant

Kristen Gallerneaux, 2023

It begins underwater with the bass on boost. Sound is contoured as tape stretches between two spinning reels. Intake and uptake. When magnetic tapes begin to degauss – a process of self-erasure – the high tones are lost first. Snippets of words from the mouths of people likely long-gone rumble through the room tone. Tongues cluck, inhalations and smacks of hesitation anticipate interviewees settling into language – the postures of telling. Chair wood creaks. Tape hiss. These are the in-betweens of stories that are considered by artist Matt Zurowski – stories of fantastical beings that are best not spoken of, delivered in threatened Scottish Gaelic dialects that are grappling with their own near-extinction.

As part of his ongoing research, Zurowski has mined these sounds from recordings housed in the School of Scottish Studies Archive at the University of Edinburgh. The tape reels contain interviews about the *daoine sith* – “fairy-like beings that inhabit the Scottish Psyche”.¹ Rather than sampling voices, Zurowski has extracted the silences from between utterances. In using archival data that is typically considered extemporaneous, Zurowski has created the conditions for a peculiar type of EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon) – leveraging the linguistic pause as a site for sonic manifestation and asking us to consider these acoustic geographies as a landscape for the sith to inhabit.²

Zurowski's tape excavations are undertaken with deep respect for the *daoine sith*, believed to dwell in the mounds and hills of Ireland and Scotland. These sites occupy Zurowski's childhood memories and reveal new “atomistic connections” as he has begun the process of learning Gaelic. “Worldbuilding with ancient languages”, as Zurowski believes, can lead to truer understandings of environments. The meaning-making transmission of locations like Glen Shee in the Scottish Highlands, which translates to “valley of the sith”, have degraded over time. But the folkloric, communal and ritualistic use of these spaces is often embedded in the Gaelic place names. With minimal decoding, their purpose can reveal itself along with a head-smack of recognition, if one is willing to pay attention. On his initial visit to the university archives, Zurowski was intrigued with a piece of analogue audio equipment resembling an Echoplex or something that might be found in the studio of a dub musician. The machine duplicates short tape loops of recorded oral histories from the original source, which are then listened back to and transcribed. This aids in the transcription process, which tends to ravage magnetic tape – shedding particles and recorded knowledge in the attempt to accurately capture the stories of interviewees. The loss of even a small phrase or fragment can muddy the vibrancy of oral tradition, but this purpose-built dictation machine preserves the original copy, freeing information up from its source so that it can be written into permanence.

¹ *Daoine sith*, roughly translates into English as “people of peace”. All quotes refer to an interview between Zurowski and the author in April 2022.

² EVP was popularised by Konstantin Raudive in the 1970s and involves listening to back sound recordings for the residual effects of purported paranormal interference. EVPs usually emerge as short snippets of words or phrases, which are alternately interpreted as either supernatural in origin or the effect of apophenia, i.e. recognising patterns in random information.



In *Dub Dubh* (2022), a Gaelic play on words for “Black Dub”, Zurowski overlays samples of a precentor singing a Gaelic Psalmody run between the spaces of *King Tubbys Meets Rockers Uptown*.³ But one side of the conversation is missing because, as Zurowski explains, “precentors feed out a line of the psalm and the congregation responds in an improvised manner, giving this musical tradition its characteristic feeling”. Where the congregation would traditionally swell up in reply, we hear the echo-back of King Tubby.

This meshing of time, culture and place are a constant throughout Zurowski’s projects. While folklore, ancient local customs and deep knowledge of flora and fauna are present, so too are more recent ecologies such as the tensions that exist around land use and the loss of language. These landscapes often find activation in Zurowski’s exhibits via modern electronic rituals – which he emphasises are more “sci folk” than “folk horror” – and are mired in the extra-linguistic potential of electronic music and media: magnetic tape, synthesisers and video documentation of their ritualistic interrogations.

January King (2022), an installation by Mellon Charles (a collective that includes Zurowski), makes the connection to field recording by bringing the bounty of the field into the gallery, closing the gaps between instrumentation, plant life and historical presence by pairing the type of cabbages that are the exhibition’s namesake (along with Shetland kale and wild gorse) with old school drum machines. Performances in this setting make use of traditional instruments such as fiddle and bodhrán drum, which Zurowski has been learning to play. He notes that people have theorised the bodhrán was also a way to sieve grain or carry peat back from the bog. “Different parts of the beast – hide, belly – give different sounds”, he notes, “and so I’ve been thinking about the fact that beating the thing with a stick reanimates the object and brings it to life, making it vibrant in some new form”.



January King, 2022. Audiovisual installation.

³ A dub album by Augustus Pablo and King Tubby, 1976.

In *A' Mhòine Tapes* (2019), a synthesiser on the gallery floor is flanked by piles of dirt and peat, accompanied by the sound of Mellon Charles' "Dialling" process – an attempt to tease forth the phytophonic voice of the bog. In this work the collective offers up a hypothetical pathway for the bog and all that inhabits its murk to respond to ongoing controversies among ecologists, activists, landowners, governments, the aerospace industry, and all else who tread upon its back. Somewhere in the squelches and squishes, transformed into tonal sweeps and sine-wave drones, we might find the bog's answer. More impossible language, composed in the gaps, embedded in static.

Kristen Gallerneaux is a writer, artist and sonic researcher based in Detroit, Michigan, US.

Matt Zurowski is a Scottish artist exploring the intersection between sound, folklore and ecology.



January King, 2022. Audiovisual installation.

Biography

Matt Zurowski is an Edinburgh-based artist whose work encompasses music, video, performance and installation. Driven by an interest in the porous relationship between sound, matter and environment, Zurowski is currently undertaking a practice-based PhD at Edinburgh College of Art which explores how ecological knowledge implicit in Scottish Gaelic literature and oral traditions may be expressed through sonic, moving image and performance-based artworks.

Recently exhibited works include *Eadar* as part of *In the Same Breath*, Freelands Foundation (2023); *Heatwave* (with Alex Mackay, Silent Festival, Terlizzi (2022); *January King*, Sonica, Glasgow (2022).

Talbot Rice Residents

Talbot Rice Residents is a two-year programme within the unique context of Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh College of Art and the University of Edinburgh.

A part of the Freelands Artist Programme, Talbot Rice Residents provides time and support for emerging, or re-emerging artists based anywhere in Scotland. It is supported by Edinburgh College of Art, where the Residents have a studio and access to facilities. Residents also receive year-round curatorial and technical support from the Talbot Rice team, as well as access to workshops, libraries and collections, and contact with the vast academic community within the University of Edinburgh. In addition to an annual artist fee, Residents receive an individual budget for production and travel, and meet at key points in the programme for masterclasses and workshops delivered by invited guests. The programme also includes national and international research trips, new commissioned writing and culminates with exhibitions in Edinburgh and London.

Freelands Artist Programme

The Freelands Artist Programme is a landmark initiative to support emerging artists across the UK launched in 2018 by Freelands Foundation. The programme nurtures emerging artists' practices by fostering long-term relationships and collaborations with arts organisations and bolstering regional arts ecosystems.

In its first five-year phase, 80 artists have undertaken the programme across four partner organisations – g39, Cardiff, PS², Belfast, Site Gallery, Sheffield and Talbot Rice Gallery.



Published by Talbot Rice Gallery, the University of Edinburgh.

Texts written by Stuart Fallon and Kristen Gallerneaux.

Proofreading by Miranda Blennerhassett.

All images courtesy Matt Zurowski.

All rights reserved. The translation, the total or partial adaptation and the reproduction by any means (including microfilm, film and photocopies), as well as the electronic storage, are reserved in all countries.

The publishers would like to thank all those who have given their kind permission to reproduce material for this book. Every effort has been made to achieve permission for the images and texts in this catalogue. However, as in standard editorial policy for publications, the publisher remains available in case preliminary agreements were not able to be made with copyright holders.

**Talbot Rice
Gallery**

Talbot Rice Gallery
The University of Edinburgh
Old College, South Bridge,
Edinburgh EH8 9YL

   ——— #TalbotRice

©2023 the artists, writers and Talbot Rice Gallery
ISBN 978-1-917137-06-5

Talbot Rice Gallery

The University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge
Edinburgh EH8 9YL, UK

For a digital, e-reader version of this guide, please visit www.trg.ed.ac.uk



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

 **Freelands
Artist Programme**

