

Cal Fish: *Come Again Another Day*

With collaborators Becca Rodriguez & Kwami Winfield
In conversation with Charles de Agustin

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Organized by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

Charles de Agustin:

Thanks so much for being here. My name's Charles de Agustin, Programs and Engagement Manager at the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. I prepared notes, but I don't think I could possibly prepare, really, for what we were just immersed in. I think if you're interested in learning what the performers' backgrounds are, there's bios on these handouts. But yeah, thanks so much for being here. My first, kind of initial gut reaction is I hadn't realized the extent to which this would be a truly collective creation. Not just between you three, but, yeah, when you get down to the details, everyone here has a role to play in the work.

We're going to have time for a couple questions at the end, so yeah, get those gears turning. A bit of a lob of a question: your process of bringing all these materials together, both sonic and physical. How long a time period has all of this been accumulating for?

Cal Fish:

Yeah, thanks so much for having us and for reflecting on that gut reaction. That's nice to hear. I'm very grateful to be here. I will say, yeah, definitely it's muddy. Just feeling the answer to that question, because there's some pieces from... I would say the oldest things maybe from 2017. The crocheted wires on the ground back there. When I first made the dynamic listening instrument, which is this bucket and floor thing, sculpture, tool. So, there's all this process that started then. And then most of the sounds are from, also, some of them are quite old, but a lot of them I would say are from the summer, the flooding this fall, and some very recent. Just the past weeks of interviewing friends about their experiences with flooding, or memories associated with water in the rain, play, and a whole bunch of things.

There's a bunch of music I've been working on in the past year. There's so many things in there, and it's kind of what is experienced by each person. You could have heard something from 2020. You could have heard something from this past week, or a while ago. So, I would say, at the time... the whole point is taking all the time and putting it to right now, I would say. Trying to get a wide range of time into the funnel.

Charles de Agustin:

A couple of people actually asked me what "Pre York" in particular to refers to. Can you talk a bit about what that body of work? The relationship between tonight and that body of work? Is tonight part of that, or it's a different thing?

Cal Fish:

Well, I love to hear that people are asking about that, because I would like to tell them! I just have been making interactive public sound art for the Hudson River Valley River Shed, including New York City. And as a person doing that, I don't want to just keep calling it the Hudson River. This is a dumb name for the

river and the communities around it. So, Pre York just sounds like a good medium. I'm not renaming the river, I'm just referring to this alternate possibility of it. Yeah, that's what I'll say. Oh, and then this work is about flooding. It's about these river sheds. New York City is a wetland from this river, and should not be concrete. It should be the tributaries flowing, and all these things.

Charles de Agustin:

Yeah, that's actually a perfect transition to... we've had a few conversations leading up to tonight. One thing that stuck out to me, just talking about the relationship between water and our city, or the city more broadly. Something that brings fear as opposed to something that should bring life. You say, "Our treatment of water is out of sync." Maybe you mean that literally and figuratively. And I'm interested in these words, precipitation and absorption, and how you think of these things as a city dweller that's beyond the, maybe, more everyday annoyance of being caught in a storm or flood. Or maybe what's becoming an everyday annoyance.

Cal Fish:

Yeah. Well, I definitely didn't realize that pun! That's perfect. I think the first performance work about this type of thing was about two years ago. Then it was just like, "Oh, it's flooding. This is scary." The alarm sirens, our collective listening, all these things. I think in the past year, honestly I was doing a lot of [work at] Newtown Creek, and in that process went to a soil workshop with this social ecologist, Nance Clem, who is from outside of Chicago, and did a soil workshop where we tested the porosity of the soil, and learned about how soil gets really compacted in an environment like this. That's when nothing can take root in compacted soil. Whereas with porous soil, the water flows through.

There are certain trees, like willow, that help porosity. This workshop has honestly just made me think so much about compaction and porosity in the city. How concrete is the most compact you can be. And also just how people, I feel, in the city are very compacted. This hardness to people, versus the potential for porosity in people. It's the same as the soil. I could kind of just spiral on about this, but it works with sound, too. I love just converting the sound of living objects. I think I'm just striving for absorption as much as I can. Those are some things I'm thinking about.

Charles de Agustin:

That's wonderful. Shifting gears a little bit in the interest in time. You seem to always be performing in New York, like always, always. But you've also toured internationally at a wide range of spaces with different relationships to institutionality, and money, and so on. You've talked a little bit about how you think about site specificity. If you're creating a new iteration of the same work, and in radically different content, how do you approach that?

Cal Fish:

Yeah, that's a very big, big question. And I've got to say, the tools remain the same. The tools that I make are made to be mobile. Honestly, this room worked really well for this. It made it easy for people to get into it. In the fall, I was sharing similar works in public parks. And that was really fun, and obviously that was amazing because of how much more accessible and public it is. But actually, for a lot of installations, I would say significantly less people did interact with it because of how people treat interacting with art and things in the public sphere. So, I don't know. I'll say also though that Becca and Kwami are both people who I've gone on cross country tours with. That traveling with shared art has been in million different things, and messes, and excitements. It's kind of like, you get to the place and you figure out what's going on.

But it's also just about traveling, and being in the world. So I just want to keep doing it, and figure out all of the combinations of things. But, the space here literally just helped the work come together.

Charles de Agustin:

Yeah, I also wanted to throw to Becca and Kwami two questions. How the movement work, or choreography came together for this piece. But also just how the nature of collaboration with Cal, or in your practices more broadly... how you approach collaboration.

Becca Rodriguez:

Hello. I get so nervous about talking. But, yeah, thank you for the question, and thanks for asking us to be a part of it. I think a lot of ties between our work is this ephemeral quality. The first fabric that was revealed as a watermark, we dyed with hibiscus. Something that I've been thinking about a lot, which relates to both our sound and visual work is, I borrowed a book of Cal's called Quantum Listening, which is talking about deep listening, and multiple things happening at one time. Being present with all of it, which is almost impossible... But this is obviously something you do through sound, spiritually. Taking all of these stories that are not your own and building them into this public sphere for them to become everyone's. And, yeah, listening to the sounds of an interview, but then hearing a child play in the background. Those kinds of things that a family... I'm kind of getting lost in this.

I'll come back to the actual dyeing. But, something also that I was thinking of was this artist that I follow, she had this video of her that a stranger took, that she found online, of them at Universal in line for a ride. She was really touched by finding this. This stranger was going on this ride but filming a family. And both of her parents died, but now she had this footage that was from this stranger. I feel like that is something that comes through, at least for me, in your work Cal.

When it comes to dyeing, we dyed that stuff with the tea that we drank. And I do crochet work that is so many histories of different moments. I use a lot of waste and food scraps. Which I guess is also something that ties our work together. But, yeah, just making these moments together is something that's a bond between multiple people.

Kwami Winfield:

I've seen the very beginning of everything in this room, which is kind of cool. I was being able to be in the room, or in the same building while Cal was working on things. To talk about the choreography, in a way, I know it from the building of it, and seeing how Cal has come up with movements. How mine was present in the loops, in the circles and things. A lot of it is listening to what's happening, what your movements are creating. And then I like to loop that around and do the same movement again, and so it's a similar sound. And then I let the sound guide me somewhere my body moves to naturally. And I think, too, in this iteration... I've done another performance with Cal and these buckets. I've played with these buckets for years and years in various low-key, chill, hanging out in the public park or where ever. Cal's just setting them up. With some of the movements, I'm trying to show everyone in the room how it works. When I put this down, you can pick it up and do something with it. I really like that, the physically collaborative, play with whatever you want.

Charles de Agustin:

So there's clearly so much that we have not touched on. I'm sure there's at least one or two questions.

Audience 1:

First of all, fantastic work on so many levels. There's the aesthetics of it, there's the art you're making, which is very powerful in itself. But I just wanted to share that I had the experience, being here is almost like being in a theatrical performance where I felt more connected with everybody else here. And you raise some really problematic issues, right? You know, flooding, water, environmental things. And then I had this sense that, "Well, maybe we could all get organized together." I don't mean in a political sense, but almost a spiritual sense. And so this made me feel more connected. And I'm wondering, in your design of it or execution of it, whether you think about that aspect, that art is obviously very personal, but it's also collective. I'm just curious if that's in your making conscience.

Cal Fish:

Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. I'm so glad that you felt that way. That's exactly how I would hope, that it points at that potential, or yeah, even for organizing. For all types of organizing. I think all the tools that were used, maybe... Over here [at the sound mixing table] is the most I'm controlling things, but everything else is meant to be tools that everyone can use equally. Anyone can play the bucket. Anyone can listen to the radio. So, trying to create an interactive participatory infrastructure of art. Then these recording I'm collecting are not— it's not my own recordings, but I'm sharing them. I'm circulating these fragments and bringing them together so that the chain continues. Taking time from before and putting it now. Yeah, thank you.

Audience 1:

Beautifully said, I just want to capture those words because I'm a poet. "Interactive participatory infrastructure." Great. Well done.

Cal Fish:

Yeah. Any other questions?

Audience 2:

I'm literally a marine biologist and a musician, so I'm like, how the fuck is this happening right now. Because porosity is my thing, and so is music. So it's just crazy to be here right now. I'm was literally brought to tears. I was like, "What is going on?" But, I also am Greek, and I saw all the references to outside of the US all around the world. I wanted to know if that was something you meant to do, or... it brought me back, because water is something that I love from being home, and sort of brought here. And you had some Greek on the radio. I'm wondering what was that meant to be or... but, I was just wondering if you were Greek.

Cal Fish:

Well, I'm Italian. I'm not Greek, but I listen to a beautiful radio station that plays Greek, so that happened. There's three radio transmitters in the room. I think there was at least one recording from Greece that I took. You wouldn't have known that it was from there. But I actually happen to love Greece. I do. I really love Athens and Mount Kilian area, northern Greece. I did make a lot of this work in northern Greece, where I started sowing together plastic bags into flags. I love it there, and if you're interested, I would love to interview you about your marine biologist passions. That would be awesome.

Audience 2:

Any time. Any time.

Cal Fish:

Yeah, but I like that fact that you saw those things.

Charles de Agustin:

That's all we have time for formally, but please stick around for maybe 15 minutes or so, then we'll start winding down for the night. Thanks so much. Another round of applause for Cal.

This series, Sight/Geist, supporting local emerging film and performance artists, continues a week from today, on the 14th. Same time, same place. Kamari Carter and Gladstone Deluxe are sharing a new audiovisual collaboration called "Codes." There are actually some vague parallels to tonight, as they're using some kind of police scanner radio signals to compose ambient music. So yeah, hope you come back. Thanks for being here.