

Olivia Louvel, *doggerLANDscape* : review & interview

By Karine CNUUDE (originally published on [Culturopoing](#) in French 1st February 2024. August 2024 for the translation revised by Chloé Perrin.)



« Doggerland is not a fiction. »
(Élisabeth Filhol,
Doggerland, P.O.L., 2019)

« I CAN READ DOGGERLAND UNDER
FATHOMS OF SEAS »
(Jacques Darras, in *Irruption de la
Manche*, Le Cri éditions, 2012)

For two decades now, Olivia Louvel, a British artist-composer and researcher of French origin, has been working in the field of sound experimentation, basing her work essentially on voice, computer-assisted music, and digital narration.

A jack-of-all-trades whose career has been peppered with explorations in a wide range of cultural fields, she has a faultless track record throughout the various endeavours she has developed across the Channel. So it's no coincidence that her talent, high standards, and boldness were recently recognised by the Ivor Novello Awards¹.

Three years after *SculptOr* - a formidable opus based on the voice of sculptor Barbara Hepworth² -, she comes back with *doggerLANDscape*, a new album released in mid-November. In this conceptual work, she explores the ancestral link that physically bonded the European continent to England by focusing on Doggerland, an area of partly wooded land inhabited by man, submerged under the North Sea after a landslide responsible for a devastating tsunami and a sudden rise in the water level more than 8,000 years ago. Olivia Louvel uses this geological break

1 - With "[LOL](#)", a sound intervention on the current state of political affairs in Great Britain, broadcast via the public address system of Middlesbrough's CCTV surveillance network, [she won the Ivor Novello prize for best sound art at the Ivors Classical Awards 2023](#). She was also nominated in the Sound Art category at the Ivors Composer Awards 2020 for the installation "The Sculptor Speaks".

2 - <https://olivialouvel.bandcamp.com/album/sculptor>

as a starting point for reconstructing and understanding the meaning of the history that has followed in its wake, and confronting it with the current isolationist policy of the country in which she has been living for a long time.

The album's release was preceded by 'Doggerland Channels' in 2022³, a sound installation presented at the Phoenix Art Space for the first edition of the Sound Art Brighton festival and then for Middlesbrough Art Week last autumn. It consisted of the projection of a wall map showing the original connections between English and European rivers, with small speakers placed on top like electrodes recording the beating of a heart or measuring the electrical signals of a brain.

Making visible again this "Atlantis of the North" - as Doggerland is sometimes described - begins with the title of the album, a portmanteau word whose spelling plays with alternating lower-case and capital letters. The capital letters bring LAND back to the surface as a symbol of the terrestrial cord in which the DNA of the two zones is mixed together, as evoked in the lyrics of the album's opening tracks. This common lexical fragment lets the terms 'Doggerland' and 'landscape' exist fully and simultaneously: remove this element and the two terms are amputated and devoid of meaning.

The revelation of Doggerland unfolds through the album in seven movements, like the seven stars of the Plough, also known as the Septentrion, a term used to name the lands of the North... Seven tracks giving substance to forgotten links that continue to bring together individuals and territories without them even realising it. The ensemble questions the definition of borders and insularity, and points out the aberration of Brexit. The United Kingdom acquired its island status accidentally, and it is therefore difficult to understand how it could be used to justify its withdrawal from the European Union. It was not born an island but became isolated, not by human will but because of a very violent physical uprooting decided by nature, which could just as well put the subsoil back to work and, one day, reconnect the two zones. Nature occupies a central place in *doggerLANDscape*. In several tracks, sounds pile up, intertwine, and clash, suggesting that the underground is in constant motion, and that old wounds could open at any time. The sonic textures are full of creaks, rumbles, rolls, and scrapings that echo the constant presence of the elements and build a continuous bass line. Throughout the album, Olivia Louvel twists her voice, distorted, stretched, and gathered so it can turn into an instrument: it turns into the screams of sea birds, seems to go through different states to gain its own corporeality and become genuinely tangible. Its apparent immateriality takes on the contours of an extremely powerful physical presence.

The way it is altered sometimes transforms it into a metallic echo reaching out to us from the future. The breath escapes at times, and is held back at others: "Understand The Landscape", for example, opens with a few seconds of laboured breathing that could be that of a newborn baby gasping for air, but could also be that of a dying person. This piece examines the proximity of the thresholds that are birth and death. This is the question posed by another title, "Where Is The Border": where are the demarcation lines of physical spaces, and what about the vast territories we are ourselves? To what extent do we bear the traces of the places we inhabit, and what about the border between them and ourselves? A series of photographs in chromatic clay tones that accompanied the album's release completes this reflection. The artist is shown with her arms

3 - <https://www.olivialouvel.com/doggerland-channels-sound-art-installation-2022> ; <https://vimeo.com/694476364>

outstretched, wrapped in paper imitating the appearance of fossilised tree trunks, in images that illustrate the fusion of body and matter.



The album's highly immersive arrangements give it a refined yet richly meaningful feel, offering sonic spaces that combine immensity and density. Some segments have the feel of phonic poems, combining pulsating effects and the repetition of certain sounds and pieces of phrases like litanies or even mantras. They give the whole a hypnotic, incantatory quality as if the telluric divinities of the past were being summoned. This impression is reinforced by the repeated use of throat singing, evoking something very ancient, like a primitive voice with the power to revive the buried⁴. In 'I Extend My Hands Across The North Sea'⁵, this singing is associated with the sounds that seismographs might make if they were going off.

The final track, 'Anthropological Travelogue', the longest on the album, is like an extract from a found recorded diary, like the contents of a black box that witnessed a sudden catastrophe. It recounts the search for the submerged forest of Doggerland and the emergence at low tide of stumps and trunks petrified in the clay, their roots no longer touching the ground. In the background, ominous noises emanate from nature as if it were about to lash out. The track, which ends abruptly after the peaceful phrase "*We had a wonderful walk*", reflects the suddenness of Doggerland's disappearance and illustrates the stupefaction and incomprehension generated by an unpredictable breakage in ties, such as Brexit. Some of this final track's narrative elements (as well as passages from the first text) are used in the soundtrack of [a contemplative video art piece](#) that

4 - This aspect brings *doggerLANDscape* closer to *Medúlla*, Björk's beautiful 2004 album devoted exclusively to the human voice, which also makes extensive use of throat singing.

5 - The title was inspired by Claude Cahun's 1931 photograph "Je tends les bras" ("I Extend My Arms"), which shows an ancient rock from which the artist's two outstretched arms emerge, evoking a primal, subterranean self. One of the images featured in our article shows Olivia Louvel stretching out her trunk-arms [just like the Surrealist artist](#).

forms an extension of the album and shows the remains of these sunken woods on the Lincolnshire coast, discovered by the artist in 2021.

Uprooted, fossilised trees appear on the screen, along with ghostly silhouettes: a reminder of the existence of those who once inhabited the place and continue to haunt it. The barks, now mineral, reveal palimpsests of memories of lives now shipwrecked. They also provide a way to explore our own inner cartography and become more aware of our personal burials.

Finally, the digital release of *doggerLANDscape* was accompanied by a vinyl version in a limited edition of six copies, each bearing a letter of the verb REJOIN. Purchasers scattered across the globe are thus united, reminding us of what the album is all about: ties remain even if people and territories are separated and scattered. They don't need to be visible to exist. It's also a way of illustrating the idea that humans and ecosystems are interconnected, no matter how hard we try to pull them apart.

From this hollow presence that nourishes *doggerLANDscape*, Olivia Louvel has constructed an organic work of great depth, astonishing in its raw poetry that crosses territories and temporalities. If you're lucky enough to live not far from the Atlantic, try listening to this impressive album facing the ocean, especially on a day when it's rough: the experience might not leave you unmoved, and might even make your throat tighten.



INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIA LOUVEL, December 2023

KC: Olivia, you were born in France and live in England. To what extent does this dual identity/cultural background inform your artistic work?

OL: **My duality is interesting, and it hopefully widens my perspective. It certainly plays in the subject of Doggerland, as I have an eye on both lands, the island and the continent. I feel very much European, I am appalled by Brexit, sad and frustrated by the outcome, the damage here is immense. But also, somehow I am always an outsider.**

KC: At what point in your career did it become clear to you that sound was a movable, physical material that could be shaped (and, in this sense, manipulated in infinite ways) and that it would be the common thread running through all your work?

OL: **I suppose that quite early in my practice - as my background is not informed by notation - manipulated fragments of recording. And so, I can say now with hindsight that I am very much in lineage with musique concrète, using the recorded sound as a material, directly carving it as opposed to an emulation of sound with synth music. I am fascinated by this metamorphic process facilitated by innovative digital tools.**

KC: The link between sound and seemingly inert physical matter (I'm thinking of the sculpture at the heart of the previous album *SculptOr* and the petrified trees on that disappearing strip of land in *doggerLANDscape*) is at the heart of your creative process. I think it's also the subject of your current thesis. Why is it important for you to put them into dialogue?

OL: **Yes, my thesis's title is currently 'A hybrid encounter, a concrete voice: on the interplay of voice and sculpture'. Because sound is transient, ephemeral (prior to recording) it needs a vessel, and so with sculpture or a sculptural approach, the voice, and sound in general, can acquire visual and haptic qualities and become concrete. And sculpture gains liveness and aural agency. Also, the sense of listening – besides listening to music - is under exploited, with the visual sense the dominant.**

KC: Your work always takes on a multidisciplinary dimension. Many of your projects involve music, sound installations, video art, and so on. Were you conscious at the outset of giving your artistic expression this multi-faceted aspect, or has it always been a matter of choice for you?

OL: **I think it started very early: for Lulu in Suspension, released on the Optical Sound label in 2008, I created a video art piece with a friend for the track 'For Love'. And then over time my projects became more and more multidisciplinary.**

KC: Is this a way of saying that the arts cannot exist in isolation and that each expression can only achieve wholeness by extending itself into another and being nourished by it?

OL: **There has been a considerable rise of interdisciplinary practices, hybridisation in art is a topic of interest to me.**

KC: What triggers the creative process for you in general?

OL: It's not easy to identify... It is certainly an impulse, it could be a person, an historical figure, a text (Matsuo Bashō's haiku, Mary Queen of Scots's sonnets and essays, Barbara Hepworth's writings), a place or a news article.

KC: What sense(s) did you initially use to create *doggerLANDscape*?

OL: We are multisensorial, and so why limit our engagement to one sense... To a certain extent even when you 'just' listen to a piece of music, you make your own visual mental image.

KC: What triggered your interest in Doggerland, its fantastic history, and its symbolism?

OL: It all began in 2020, coincidentally with Brexit. How extraordinary to find out that we were once connected to the continent, to Europe at a times where we extracted ourselves from it. I think I started the first track in November 2020. Then near Christmas I watched Boris Johnson's speech on the BBC who declared we - the United Kingdom - are an "independent coastal state", to then contradict himself seemingly by saying "we will remain culturally, emotionally, historically, strategically, geologically attached to Europe". So that got me thinking, I wondered how geologically are we attached? And what are the extremities of our island? I was driven by the need to find the remains of this submergence, evidence of this life under the sea, of this link with Europe. Did you know that even the River Thames once flowed into the Rhine? Fascinating stuff. I love unearthing stories.

KC: *Data Regina* has led to a live album, could the *doggerLANDscape* album exist as part of a live performance? Is it important for you to bring your music to life outside of the web or the physical medium of a record?

OL: Yes, of course. I loved playing *Data Regina* live. There was the tour with the Classical remix collective in 2018 and then a show at the De La Warr Pavilion supporting Eartheater and Semiconductors. I haven't performed since March 2020 due to Covid. I had just released *SculptOr* and was planning to prepare audio stems to present it live, but that didn't happen. I developed Long Covid and so my sole focus was to get better and complete the Barbara Hepworth audio-visual *The Sculptor Speaks (2020)*. As a matter of fact, I have only just started rehearsing again for a set with tracks from *SculptOr*.

KC: Your sound art, which is profoundly poetic, is also, in your latest creations, part of a strong discourse on the functioning of the City. I'm thinking of the *LOL* installation, for which you recently won an Ivor Novello Award, and your latest album: both are about Brexit. In your opinion, does art necessarily have to have a politically-aware dimension?

OL: Any art is somehow political because it is taking the time to create and exist in another dimension, outside the fast pace of the world. But yes, with *LOL* and *doggerLANDscape* there is a socio-political aspect. *LOL* was certainly disruptive as broadcast through the public address system of Middlesbrough's CCTV surveillance network, reflecting the current state of political affairs in Britain, and *doggerLANDscape* questions our insularity and identity in the context of Brexit.

KC: Once a project has been completed, do you already have an idea for the next one, or are you working on several at once?

OL: Yes, I work on several projects at the same time. Often one is finished and another has already been born

KC : *doggerLANDscape* is your 8th album. What gives you the energy to keep on creating?

OL: **Hopefully more stories to excavate. And yes, 8 albums already!**

doggerLANDscape, Olivia Louvel, Cat Werk Imprint, 15 November 2023

<https://olivialouvel.bandcamp.com/album/doggerlandscape>

<https://catwerkimprint.bandcamp.com/album/doggerlandscape>

<https://www.olivialouvel.com/>

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