

# LIVING WITH ENERGY TRANSITION



## Soundwalks in Words



**'Living with Energy Transition - Soundwalks in Words'** is part of a larger project called 'Living with Energy Transition' that explored overlapping energy regimes in Aberdeen. The project's focus has been to ask what it means to live with energy transition. This invites an approach that takes account of different, sensory ways of knowing and being. Artist Maja Zećo developed a series of soundwalks that took place at St. Fittick's Park in Aberdeen South, a site partially earmarked for development as an energy transition zone (ETZ).

St. Fittick's Park sits between the neighbourhood of Torry, the city's semi-industrial southern periphery and the newly expanded Aberdeen South Harbour. It is one of the last remaining green spaces in Torry, a former fishing village and now a working class neighbourhood. A sanctuary for humans and non-humans, including many bird species, deer and other wildlife, St. Fittick's Park hosts small woodlands and grassland. Patches of wetlands that canalise effluents from the nearby industrial estate en route to sea and recreational facilities share space with the ruins of a mediaeval church. The park is enclosed by a railway line, an abandoned landfill site, a sewage treatment plant, and a waste incinerator. It is a place that has had both its socio-economic heart and its aquatic edges corroded by the impact of the oil industry, rising socio-economic inequality, harmful chemicals, and the search for profit-generating opportunity.

The ETZ is claimed to help the city maintain its status as the UK's energy capital by developing a key area near the expanded harbour for new energy technologies business, including hydrogen, offshore wind, and carbon capture. The proposed ETZ comprises approximately 30 ha of brownfield and greenspace to be developed into 'hubs' for sector businesses and manufacturing. Backed by significant Scottish and UK government funding, the ETZ invokes imaginaries of green recovery undergirded by expert forecasts and technological innovation, which capitalise on anxieties around the future of the Scottish North East in a post-carbon world.

However, local opposition to the ETZ has raised questions about the ownership and siting of this project and about an inadequate planning process. For example, our community partners, Friends of St. Fittick's Park, have aimed to protect the park against the encroachment of the zone, working in coalition with broader community groups and climate activists. The planned ETZ has come to be held up as an example of an 'unjust' transition process, which reproduces existing social inequalities in the city and is dismissive of residents' needs and concerns. St. Fittick's Park has become the focus of wider regional debates about the climate crisis and how to achieve inclusive and regenerative change.



At the centre of 'Living with Energy Transition' was a series of four soundwalks developed and led by artist Maja Zećo. The soundwalks aimed to explore insights from ongoing research by urbanist William Otchere-Darko and anthropologist Gisa Weszkalnys who, starting in 2021, have examined the ambivalent and critical responses to the ETZ using interviews, observation, and other qualitative social science methods. The soundwalks took place between September 2023 and April 2024, each taking a different route around St. Fittick's Park. They were open to the public, and participants included both people from Torry who know the site intimately and some people who visited for the first time. 'Programme notes' developed by Maja acted as a guide, asking participants to listen to the sounds of 'industry', 'community' and 'nature'. They offered a portal for individuals to enter into the complexity of the site in a reflective way allowing the multiple – destructive and generative – sociopolitical relationalities that crisscross the area as well as environmental and seasonal changes to be sensed and known in different ways. In April 2024, we concluded the project with a discussion event, held at Old Torry Community Centre. The event aimed at deepening participants' reflections through mapping exercises. They were framed by questions that had emerged from William and Gisa's previous research and the soundwalks themselves: Who are the different listeners and agents who inhabit the park and make use of it? What sonic tensions can we identify around the park? How can we hear the politics of the park?

Special thanks to everyone who participated in the soundwalks and the discussion event for your openness, your generosity of spirit and staying with us through wind, rain and sleet. Your resilience to the North-East weather was second to none. Additional thanks to community partner Friends of St. Fittick's Park for your energy, trust and commitment to the project and for your unfaltering determination to preserve the park.

'Living with Energy Transition' was co-organised by anthropologist Gisa Weszkalnys, urbanist William Otchere-Darko, curator Rachel Grant and artist-researcher Maja Zećo. The project's community partner was Friends of St. Fittick's Park. Rachel, who is based in Aberdeen, has been involved in related communities through supporting various forms of community co-organising. Gisa and William, as part of a longstanding ESRC-funded project, titled 'Fraying Ties: Networks, territory and transformation in the UK oil sector', conducted research in Aberdeen from August 2021 to September 2023, which privileged interlocutors' own understandings and lived experiences of energy transition. Rachel and William met at a People's Assembly event in Torry. Rachel was subsequently interviewed for the research and our relationship has developed from there.



# SOUNDWALKS

Listening whilst walking (soundwalking) seems like a humdrum activity that doesn't need a specific framework or focused effort. However, as a practice that brings together people from different backgrounds - from nature lovers to researchers and artists - soundwalking turns our attention not just to the beautiful sounds of nature but also enables the experience of the whole range of sounds that often go unnoticed. In doing so, it increases our awareness about the acoustic environment, an undercurrent shaping the way we feel about places and, often, about ourselves.

In St. Fittick's Park, an incredibly rich sonic site, the interplay of natural, communal, and industrial sound sources creates acoustic zones that are continually in a state of flux. Birds and insects migrate, shrubs and trees can block sound, and large open areas expand acoustic horizons. The interaction between different human and non-human inhabitants creates intricate and ever-changing sonic tapestries.

Each soundwalk in St. Fittick's is an artwork developed carefully by listening to the park and its inhabitants. The methodology for the walks consisted of the following stages:

**Lead-in:** At the start of each walk, the team briefly described the project. Participants were given a notebook and a pencil to record their experiences during the walk – whether through writing, drawing, and mark-making. We acknowledged the challenges of this task, such as the inadequacy of language in describing sonic experiences. The notebooks came with printed cards (the programme notes), to provide quiet continuous prompts to listeners as and when required.

We refrained from conversation and from using technical sound-enhancing props, such as microphones. Everyone was free to follow Maja at their own pace and explore zones of their own interest during the walk.



**Tune-in:** Maja led a guided listening exercise that encouraged the group to close their eyes, listen, identify and describe to themselves the range of sounds – from sounds very close to the body, or sounds of the body, to the sounds far away. She also reminded us to be aware of sounds of different durations, directions, loudness, heights, and consistencies. We became aware of each other and different sonic agents present in the space, which sensitised us to various auditory impressions relative to our position in the landscape.

**Listening in and with the space:** Soundwalk scores are not written on paper, as a piece of music might be, but are often routes in the landscape. They are compositions that offer moments of intensity, contemplation, and release negotiated by the movements of listeners/performers and the environment. They are not composed by directing the sound sources but by navigating the landscape through different acoustic zones.

The scores that Maja developed for St. Fittick's Park followed more and less established paths through planes, reeds, and shrubs, mindful of accessibility, sightlines, and sonic activities.

*The first soundwalk* explored the larger green zones in and around the park. We listened to birds, trees, and grasses. While surrounded by thick vegetation, we experienced the intimacy of contracted acoustic corridors that led us to open areas pierced by fast-moving trains on the elevated railway tracks above us. The steady hum of the sewage treatment works, and nearby traffic dipped in and out, teasing out marks on paper in our notebooks.

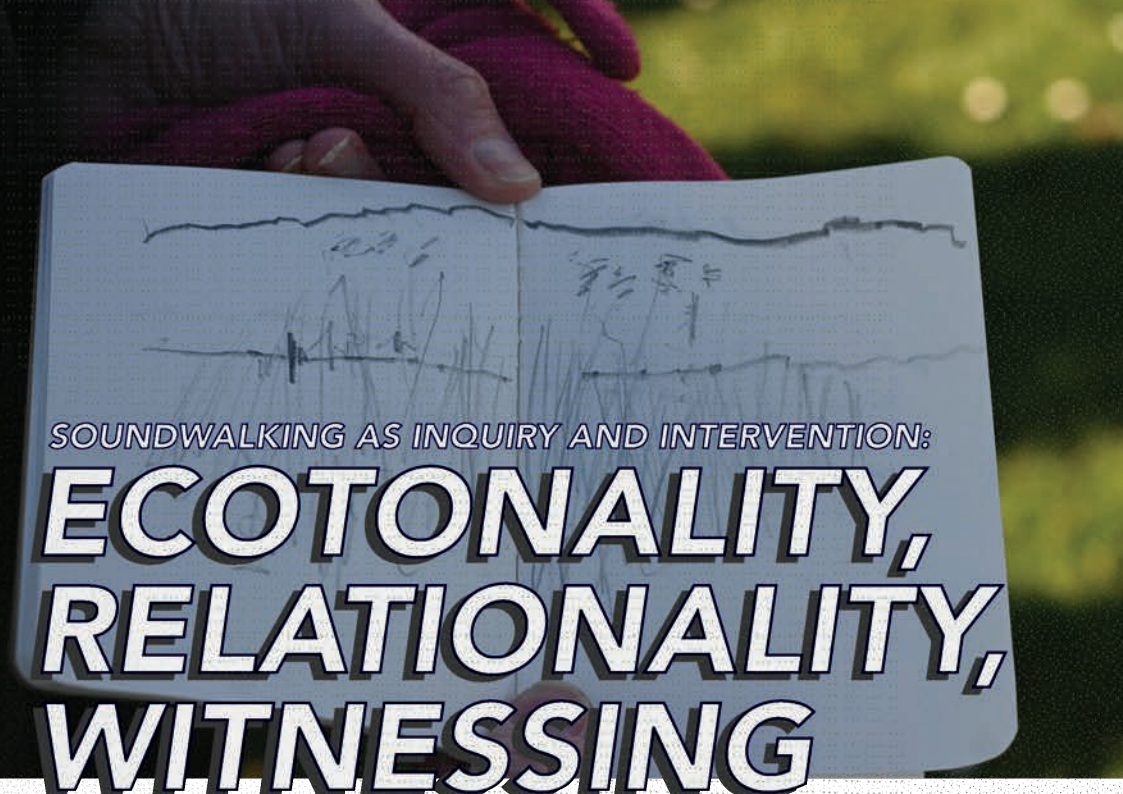
*The second soundwalk* explored the sonic emissions of industries leaning onto the park whilst also acknowledging the secluded green zones of the area. We walked in proximity to the sewage treatment works, retired landfill, and the harbour. The strong wind and rain made us pull up our rain hoods, turning them into little cocoons. These waterproof clothes still leaked sound, however, letting through the rhythmic beats of trucks and machinery coming from the harbour and surrounding industries.

*The third soundwalk* explored the park and its neighbouring communities. We walked next to Tullos School, the public swimming pool and the community centre, situated only a few walking minutes from the waste incinerator. The return route took the group through the neighbourhood back to the park. The volatile weather, alternating sunny spells and downpours, exposed the group to dramatic sightlines, soundscapes, and smells.

*The fourth soundwalk* explored St. Fittick's Park's desire paths (that is, informal paths trodden into the parkscape by its regular users) and the sonic agency of its non-human inhabitants, including ducks and other birds, insects, and vegetation. Although the walk had a defined route, most participants explored different zones of the park on their own accord. During the discussion event that followed this final soundwalk, we mapped the routes participants took, creating multiple scores.

**Sharing:** After each soundwalk, the group would gather and talk about their experiences whilst still in the park. This prompted a generous sharing of memories, encounters and observations across the generations, between people of different backgrounds and life experiences.





SOUNDWALKING AS INQUIRY AND INTERVENTION:  
**ECOTONALITY,  
RELATIONABILITY,  
WITNESSING**

There is an audible politics to place, which we set out to discern through soundwalks. Soundwalking invited us to appreciate the sonic contradictions and dissimilarities or what the sound artist and writer, Andra McCartney (2010), has called the ecotonicity characteristic of many urban sites. St. Fittick's Park is a site of contradictions that make it sonically compelling. A green space, home to celebrated biodiversity, sits surrounded by an abandoned landfill, a sewage treatment plant, a waste incinerator and the expanded Aberdeen south harbour where there was once a craggy beach. Over the years, the park has become enclosed by sounds that also travel through it, echoing where people live, play and rest. Industrial humming and clanging. Ducks flutter and splash in the wetlands as soundwalkers approach. Footballs bounce against the playground's metal cage. Passersby chatter. Dogs bark. Trains whir and screech along the railway line that hems the park. This makes for a sonic multitude which participants in our soundwalks noticed with surprise, wonder, and sometimes displeasure. Instead of labelling certain sounds as racket or noise, soundwalk participants were encouraged to attend equally to all the sounds present, to hear harmonies as well as clashes, and to identify sonic responses, echoes and overlaps.

*"I noticed when we were listening how certain sounds were out of place, ... when you hear a reversing bleeper of some truck....It's interesting because...I don't know like...the frequency of sound, maybe it's a similar frequency to an Oystercatcher...sort of slightly shrieky, but at the same time the Oystercatcher doesn't feel as intrusive as a beeping."*

[Participant - walk 2 - voice recording]

*"Wind plays plants like instruments."*

[Participant - walk 2 - notes]

Soundwalking was also a method of inquiry. It moved us beyond the premise of the academic research that underpins the project, which examined responses to the ETZ development among local residents and campaigners. As researchers, Gisa and William were not just observing what was going on. Alongside the other participants, many of whom knew the park intimately, they discovered their own listening and tuned in to surprising sounds in a familiar site. Our ears found sounds that had gone unnoticed. Other sounds – already familiar to us – were heard anew.



*"I know the place really well but I obviously filter out a great deal. I filter out you know, and now they're trapped between that constant clanging from the incinerator and the noise of the harbour. I hear the bird song. So, it made me acutely aware of, you know, the railway, the planes overhead, etc. which I normally blank out."*

[Participant 1 – walk 1 – voice recording]

However, soundwalking offered more than an opportunity to document St. Fittick's Park's audible dimension. Under Maja's guidance, the group co-created a sonic (and quite visible) intervention by walking, searching for, generating and absorbing sound around the park. This was exciting to realise. We made time for our community partners, Friends of St. Fittick's Park, to speak about their struggle to protect the park. However, this would happen at the end of the soundwalks so participants would hear the site in their own, individual ways – whether as Torry resident, art student, child, activist, urban planner, neurodiverse person, ecologist or as someone simply seeking to take a new perspective. We hoped to compel people to step into their own sound-prints whilst walking and hearing together with others. Walking and listening in silence disrupted everyday habits and conventions, and felt both calming and uncanny.

*"We don't sound our voices  
We form a particular sort of silence between us  
We don't move at our own pace  
We form one together."*

[Participant 2 – walk 3 – notes]



Participants' notes turned out to be full of beauty and poetry, translating sonic experiences into a few crisp words. We began to think of these notes as individual attempts to write and depict the park as a sonic space constituted in the interaction of moving bodies, flapping wings, car wheels on tarmac, wind whistling through tree branches, metal clanging, and much more. This was at once a shared space and a deeply personal one, as suggested by these notes from a young man who had moved to Torry only recently and joined the first soundwalk in September 2023. His reflections invoke many relationalities, including people and events beyond those present on the site.

*"At first I am very literal and structured in my note taking. Simply noting down all the noises I can hear.*



'Feet on grass'  
'feet on tarmac'  
'cars'  
'trousers rustling'  
'wood pigeon'  
'wings flap'  
'gull squawk'  
'distant voices'  
'my pencil'  
'Dead leaves sound different'  
'My breathing'

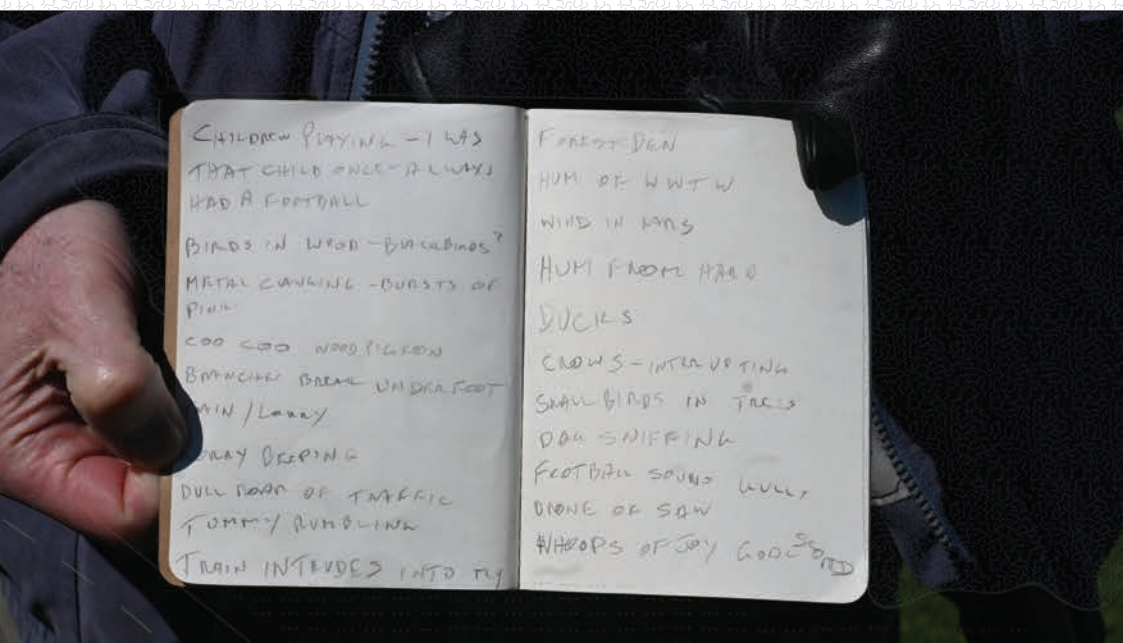
*I write about 40 things in this style. Stopping each time I hear a new noise.*

*'Sirens'*

*'A train screams past'*

*As we go deeper into the park - away from the roads and the city - I notice that I hear more birds. I push my rubber shoes against a silent dandelion stalk and realise how much agency I have to create noise.*

*My mind wonders. I am hungover and have had a falling out with a close friend. I begin to think about how this state of mind is affecting my experience. I wonder if I am hearing the 'negative' noises louder than the 'positive ones'. I write down that 'cars' 'gulls' and 'industry' are negative and that 'bird song' is positive. I wonder why I have thought this and what makes a sound 'positive' or 'negative'. I write that the gulls 'scream'. They seem violent. I feel shaky and a little scared. Sometimes I check my phone to see if my friend has messaged me. I hear the zip of my jacket pocket very loudly and feel ashamed.*



Maja's invitation to participants to put what we hear into words proved more of a challenge than many of us had anticipated. The beeps of forklifts, cranes, trucks, and vessels in the harbour. The uniform and incessant hum of the sewage treatment plant. The vrooms and honks of cars passing by. The calls of seagulls and oystercatchers overhead and of blue tits and warblers in the dense shrubs that intersect the park. But who would have thought that there are so many sounds and things we struggle to name, sounds as yet unnamed, and names of sounds forgotten? Some of us gave up, querying whether our inability to name was an indication of our inability to know. Some of us turned to scribbles, imagery, and other inventive notation techniques to express sonic events, rhythms, and emotions that could not be captured in any other way.

*"Why do we learn a duck goes quack, but not what the others say."*

*[Participant 2 - walk 3 - notes]*

Taking the time to soundwalk over several months, a privilege for sure, allowed us to hear change and difference. Soundwalking became a means of witnessing seasonal alterations, rain and shine, changing wind direction, building sites being worked and completed, new industrial developments becoming, and the migratory movements of some of the many bird species that inhabit St. Fittick's Park. Soundwalking, as we explored in the workshop that concluded the project, can be not only a method of recording the impact of sound on human and nonhuman listeners but also a manner of raising this as an ethical and political issue. We wondered whether we might be able to hear the consequences of political and planning decisions that have affected the site in the past and will do so in the future. We asked where could this practice lead us? Might it be possible to train our ears and 'do justice by listening' (Droumeva 2023)? What might a 'just transition' sound like?

Reference list:

Droumeva, Milena (2023). Soundwalking extinction: listening on borrowed time. In Jacek Smolicki (ed) Soundwalking through time, space and technologies. London: Routledge. pp. 78-95.  
McCartney, Andra (2010). Ethical questions about working with soundscapes Keynote presentation at WFAE international conference Ideologies and Ethics in the uses and Abuses of Sound, Koli, Finland, June 19, 2020. URL: <https://soundwalkinginteractions.wordpress.com/2010/06/24/ethical-questions-about-working-with-soundscapes/>





# LISTENING TOGETHER

'Living with Energy Transition' is an interdisciplinary collaboration between an artist, social scientists, and a curator. Our interest in working across disciplinary boundaries comes from the potential we see in this to generate innovative and critical forms of inquiry and intervention. The project's aim was to bring about something new, rather than simply to utilise arts-based methods to put social science findings into a more publicly accessible form. Collaboration in the context of this project has meant leaning into each other's discipline and knowledge through shared questions, contexts and resources focused around a specific site, St. Fittick's Park. Rachel, as a curator, reminded us to stay attuned to the dynamics and interplay between research, practice and publics, and to ask who research is for and how it enters into public discourse.

The art in this project is meant to keep questions open, to welcome countless perspectives, and to hold the site and those taking part in the walk. Each walk is individually and collectively created by all of those involved. It builds on a commitment to engage deeply with the site and, in this way, reveals what may have been overlooked or gone unheard. This new knowledge, at times shared with great enthusiasm and at times emerging with some difficulty (through participants' drawings or through comments such as 'every type of tree sounds differently!') can be of interest to researchers across disciplines. However, that doesn't mean it is easy to 'capture', 'measure' and 'validate'.

Soundwalks allowed us to create new situations where people – anyone who cares to come along – are invited to experience this site using all their senses and, specifically, hearing. We expected that this would invite a different kind of understanding of and engagement with the world that the qualitative methods of interviewing and participation at public events and discussions, which Gisa and William had used in their research, had not been able to reveal. Soundwalking as a method speaks to anthropological strengths, including its embodied approach to knowledge and experience that takes account of human difference in all domains of everyday life. But it also raised important new questions about how we sense and understand the politics of energy transition through the sounds we are exposed to, sounds we seek out, avoid, or can't escape.

Our collaboration upended the 'disciplined' positions we hold as social scientists, artists and curators. Soundwalking drew attention to our varied sensory capacities of hearing, sight, smell and feeling and provided an immersive method to tune into and render ourselves as embodied participants in St. Fittick's Park. Instead of simply observing and documenting 'life as it is lived', using social science and ethnographic methods, we became more open to thinking about the project as an intervention. As social scientists, we were unsure how far we could push this. We deliberated, for example, whether we should equip participants with a vocabulary for describing sounds or whether we should let people find their own words. Other discussions circled around the question whether to guide or 'nudge' soundwalk participants as to the pace of the walks and different points of sonic interest in the park. And how should we collect, transcribe and reproduce the different modes of reflection participants utilised, be they verbal, graphic, or poetic?

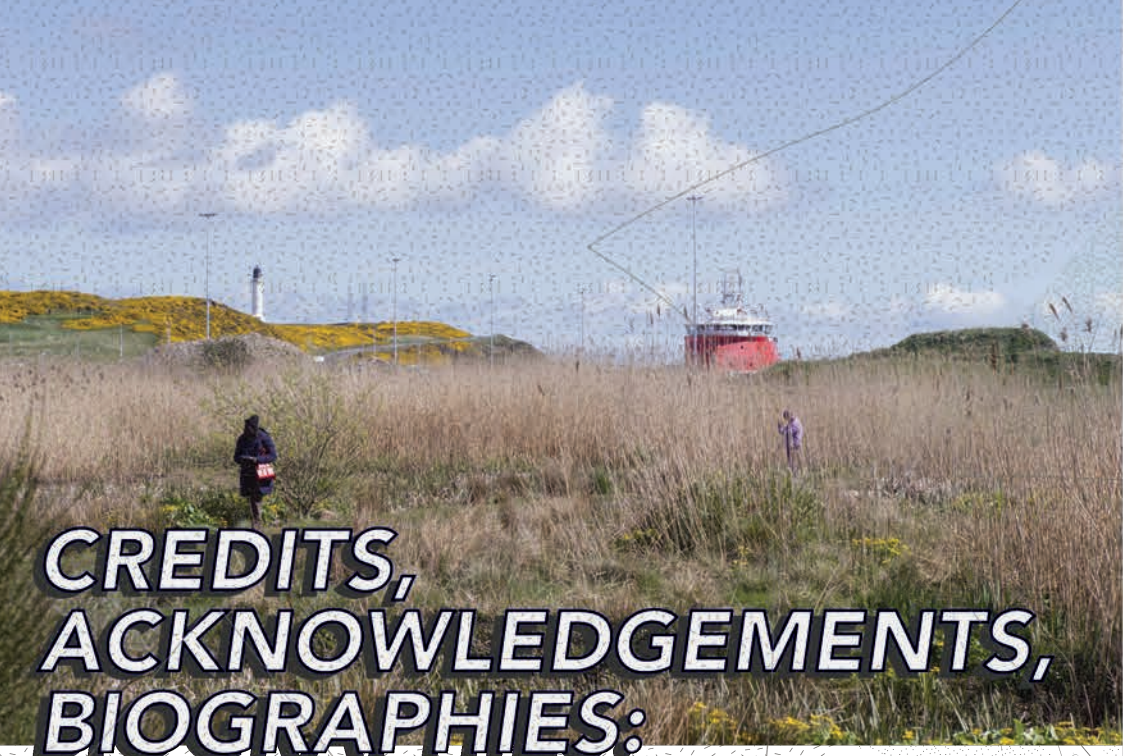
The challenges we experienced in writing this text are a testament to the project's value as an artwork. The framework we established is incredibly generative, and there are numerous other angles we might want to tease out in future exhibitions, presentations and publications. Informed by the site and conversations between Maja, Gisa, Rachel and William, soundwalks keep establishing new knowledge, insight and urgencies for those involved. These have been enabled by intersubjective encounters around a constantly changing site, St. Fittick's Park, home to human and other-than-human inhabitants. They allow us to bring ecological, economic and socio-political entanglements to the surface. The resulting situation is what keeps us engaged as researchers and excited as art workers.



We invite you to listen to St. Fittick's park and/or other sites of energy transitions in person.

While reading these texts, you can also listen to some sound field recordings of the park, available here: <https://shorturl.at/XBWuZ>





# CREDITS, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, BIOGRAPHIES:

'Living with Energy Transition' was co-organised by anthropologist Gisa Weszkalnys, urbanist William Otchere-Darko, curator Rachel Grant, artist-researcher Maja Zećo and community partner, Friends of St. Fittick's Park. Friends of St. Fittick's Park aim to protect St. Fittick's Park and the adjacent green areas from the ETZ development, celebrate the park as a place to be used and enjoyed by people living in Torry and Aberdeen, and collaborate with other action groups in the city region to maintain and improve the park and its biodiversity (<https://saintfittickstory.com/>).

The project received funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Community partner Friends of St. Fittick's Park were remunerated via funds provided by the transdisciplinary working group 'Intersecting Energy Cultures' (Kleinman Center for Energy Policy, Penn Global, Edinburgh Futures Institute).



## Biographies:

Gisa Weszkalnys is Associate Professor in Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her research has explored future making as a political, material, and imaginative practice, for example, in the context of city planning, in emerging oil economies and, more recently, in the transition to a post-carbon society.

Maja Zećo is a practice-based artist researcher exploring identities and listening in spaces of socio-political tensions and post-conflict areas. Her sound and performance pieces have been presented internationally, and her writing was published in *Organised Sound* (Cambridge University Press) and *Journal of Sonic Studies* (Leiden University Press).

Rachel Grant (Fertile Ground) is a freelance curator based in Aberdeen. Her practice focuses on interdisciplinary projects, place-based approaches and post-extractive practice. Recent work is framed by petroculture (the social relations developed by our use of and dependency on oil) energy transition and a Just Transition.

William Otchere-Darko (Newcastle University) is an urbanist with an interdisciplinary interest in energy, environmental politics, and planning practices. His research focuses on the institutional practices and lived experiences of energy spaces, infrastructures, and broader ecological contentions.

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