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Somewhere Between Breathing In and Breathing Out

Making immersive audio work about Long COVID

RHIANNON JONES AND MICHAEL PINCHBECK

■ *Breathturn*, Derby Cathedral, 8 September – 8 October 2023.
Image Rhiannon Jones



¹ S.H.E.D is a public arts, research and innovation space, run by Designing Dialogue CIC. Founded by Dr Rhiannon Jones. S.H.E.D is a safe space for issues that matter most for people to be heard. More information can be found here: <https://bit.ly/40JQITm>.

² This study was supported by an unrestricted investigator-sponsored research grant from Gilead Sciences (#IN-UK-983-6080). The authors would also like to acknowledge and extend their gratitude to the patients that took part in this research and members of the research team who supported the collection and analysis of data.

This article enacts a dialogue between Rhiannon Jones, researcher-curator of 'Shedding Light on Long Covid', an exhibition across two sites in Derby in autumn 2023, and Michael Pinchbeck, one of the artist-researchers commissioned to create work in response to scientific data collated by scientists at the University of Derby exploring the lived experience of Long COVID. This article explores the work they made together; an immersive audio installation entitled *Breathturn*. The piece sought to explore the question of how to create an interactive and immersive public experience co-created with patient and public representatives to highlight the challenges of Long COVID and increase public awareness of the condition.

'Shedding Light on Long Covid' was a unique Sci-Art Public Realm Research Project at Derby Cathedral and the Museum of Making, Derby, that brought together national and local key stakeholders – including policymakers, clinicians, scientists, Long COVID charities, NHS partners, third sector, public and artists – and a team of scientists at the University of Derby, led by Professor Mark Faghy. The project sought to use S.H.E.D¹ to help bring to life research data and patient diaries collated by a study on Long COVID at the University of Derby.²

This article seeks to approach the exhibition, and contributions to it, from the perspective of how to respond creatively to scientific data and site it within a civic context. Framed

around themes of breathing in and breathing out, this co-authored article is a dialogue between curator and artist, taken from their written correspondence, conversations and collaboration.

INTRODUCTION: INHALATION, INSPIRATION, INTERVENTION

Rhiannon Jones: The Social Higher Education Depot (S.H.E.D) was conceived in 2019; taking the premise of a garden shed, it was developed into a reconfigurable, touring space that could support cultural and socio-civic research practice. S.H.E.D has been working to address place-making, by co-designing with communities a DIY, sustainable and civic place to talk, to platform the voices of others – accepting of all points of view and lived experiences. The work of S.H.E.D developed into a research question that explores how to utilize a shed to design dialogue with communities through creative place-making, by thinking about literal and metaphorical ways in which we design dialogue. Considering this concept of design thinking, and what that means in practice, S.H.E.D is an application of it as a cultural initiative for exploring the lived experiences of society's most urgent challenges. It does this while acting as a catalyst for positive place-based change to address those challenges, from health and well-being issues, climate crisis to economic inequalities, and to promote social mobility.

For 'Shedding Light on Long Covid', S.H.E.D focused on ways to improve health and well-being services through a design-led, community-driven, hyper-local project by creating a large-scale, public installation focused on Long COVID using scientific data and lived experience research presented at the Museum of Making, Derby, and at Derby Cathedral. The installation was co-designed with patient and public representatives to highlight the challenges of living with Long COVID and increased public awareness on this subject matter. 'Shedding Light on Long Covid' provided an opportunity for a significant, positive change through addressing a pressing social challenge by connecting the creative and cultural industries with the

scientific community to produce a public art sculpture, unveiling new findings and impacts on society (including the future of design) due to Long COVID, for the first time.

Current data shows that one in ten people who contract COVID-19 will develop a lasting symptom profile, commonly referred to as Long COVID, which affects many people nationally and is a recognised public health crisis. In Derbyshire alone, there are approximately 10,000 patients living with Long COVID, and this figure is rising weekly. Services developed to help patients report isolation from society and public health messaging on Long COVID and long-term issues are missing. The project commissioned national artists, including community podcasts, photography, live performance, online and in-person workshops inspired by research data.³ The exhibition aimed to 'shed light' on this data and bring it to life creatively and over 20,000 people engaged with the project.

Michael Pinchbeck: This article discusses the ways in which *Breathturn*, a new immersive audio piece created for the 'Shedding Light on Long Covid' project, takes the concept of Paul Celan's 'breathturn' (1986) as a metaphor for the experience of people with Long COVID, and draws on patient testimonies using verbatim text to 'shed light' on neglected medical narratives. *Breathturn* was installed as part of the interactive exhibition, and this unique platform brought together clinical and academic research and creative and cultural knowledge to create a community project focused on the impacts of Long COVID and how people in the city can come together to understand and challenge its impacts. The audio project was part of a body of work I devised after the pandemic to render the dynamics of one-to-one performance into *auto-teatro* for an audience member to experience in their own time. According to Andy Lavender, audio theatre is associated with 'wider shifts towards immersion, site-responsiveness and spatial dislocation' (2016: 57). The article proposes that audio theatre situates us in an aural landscape and immerses us in archives of history. The extract below formed part of the audio experience:

³ Faghy *et al.* claim that Long COVID is '[a]ffecting 1 in 10 patients' (2022). Sivan and Taylor suggest: 'Long Covid is thought to occur in approximately 10% of people infected, so there are likely more than 5 million people affected globally' (Sivan and Taylor 2020).

*This track will last for six minutes
For this time please suspend your own sense of self
Please be open to everything
Please breathe in and out
Please close your eyes
And think about the strange moment of pause
Between breathing in and breathing out
(Pinchbeck 2023)*

Breathturn enacts what Rachel Zerihan calls a 'strange duet' between audience members and an audio track (2022). Visitors to the site were invited to use their own mobile phones and headphones, to cocoon themselves in the audio, phenomenally together but in essence alone. The audience themselves become the 'percipient' – a term coined by Misha Myers to describe the hybrid performer-participant role in auditory performance experiences, for example audio walks (Myers 2011). As Lynne Kendrick writes:

Immersive theatre is often an aural experience, yet it is directed and directional as well as utterly absorbing. Theatre aurality demonstrates how sonic immersion is not the loose, uncritical experience in which subjectivity is lost: we may well get lost in it, but this is achieved with specific intent. (Kendrick 2017: 86)

For *Breathturn*, we intended for the audience to be immersed in the aural landscape the piece creates, with the specific intent of drawing attention to the testimonies of Long COVID patients that they may not have heard, amplifying their accounts. One participant, before COVID-19, sang and wrote songs, but their voice box is now permanently damaged, making singing as a creative outlet far less accessible. Being able to give the narrative of their feelings towards Long COVID – to an artist who used them to explore themes of longing, fear and resilience – amplified their marginalized voice in a powerful and significant way (Barley-McMullen 2024). The testimonies were taken from diary entries they kept for a clinical project at the University of Derby. The audience are invited to listen to the audio in the headset-shaped benches outside the Cathedral, mirroring behaviours found inside the Cathedral, by 'directing' them to sit, pause, listen and reflect. The piece was 'directional' (Kendrick 2017: 86) in that it pointed audiences towards the act of breathing together.

RJ: Derby Cathedral, the Cathedral Church of All Saints, was founded in 943, and is at the heart of a modern city of making. It is one of Derby's most historic sites and holds the memories and the stories of the place and its people. The very presence of the building as a site asks a particular set of questions for people, about what the purpose of this building is, as a sacred space, as a civic and social space, and for this project, a space as a site for creative and cultural participation out of the direct encounter with the site of a cathedral. This installation activated the act of listening to voices from the Long COVID community, by creating a public space for their experiences to be heard, and invited participants through 'active listening' (Back 2007). The installation created new opportunities for public realm activation through its creative intervention in the space at the Cathedral. It invited people to reconnect with the site, with people and with the place in which they may live, work or study.

The synergies between the site and lived experiences led to the curatorial decision for *Breathturn* to be situated on the Cathedral Green, within the sanctuary of the memorial trees and with the backdrop of the sound of the bells calling people to pray, gather, reflect and pause from daily life, and contemplate on lived experiences and the right to rest and breathe safely. Access to the site was negotiated with the Cathedral, and *Breathturn* was open throughout the exhibition in line with its ambition to be socially engaged with the public.

The temporality of the installation was in juxtaposition with the permanent site of the Cathedral, which in its broadest sense holds the cultural identity and the story of place and people in Derby. We established a faith in partnership, working to empower local communities, to increase social inclusion and to raise aspirations of the community by enacting our city through works such as S.H.E.D. We relied on the faith of others, in their having faith that we would deliver a successful project and that we think about spirituality in the most open, broad-minded and holistic way possible. The Cathedral staff worked in partnership with the project from the beginning and were keen to learn from the previously unheard lived experience

accounts and voices of difference brought into this civic space. It was vital to encourage their collaboration in making immersive work to create a deeper understanding and sense of belonging for an individual and the community being engaged and represented. It was also key to have this shared sense of purpose to bring about the potential transformation that we hoped for, and a sense of belonging that was fundamental when we were thinking of spirituality as simply about lifting the human spirit.

‘Shedding Light on Long Covid’ saw us take risks, as artists, curators and researchers, by working in a designated faith space with a highly politicized and socially charged topic in the public realm. By working in a designated faith space in a UNESCO City of Learning, we aimed to build a story of the local community outside the first Cathedral of Sanctuary in England.⁴ The Dean of the Cathedral actively works with the language of sanctuary shaping the social realities we live in as a society. This is in the Cathedral’s vision and strategy as a key cornerstone for creating a different reality to that in which we have lived in the recent past. As The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson said of the project:

The perceptions we have and the language we use are all means of cultural production. Our perceptions and our language, the way we speak, help create the social worlds we then inhabit. So why we have partnered with S.H.E.D, even by playing a small part, is [we share] the vision to create new social realities for common good. (Robinson 2024)

For this reason, the installation site sits open to the elements, surrounded by a green space, located in a city centre. Regardless of faith or beliefs the space is an inviting green space in the city where people can seek reflection and sanctuary and, during the installation, local members of the public were keen to find out what was happening there. As the participants sit and listen to the track, it is often interrupted by the Derby Cathedral bells ringing out. The Cathedral has the oldest ring of ten bells in the world. Most of them have been there since 1678, when the number of bells was increased from six to ten. As the participants listen to the track, and

the wind blows around the branches of the trees that caress the headset-shaped benches, the audience are immersed in the landscape of both site and soundtrack and reminded to breathe by the voiceover in the audio track: ‘Please breathe in and out’ (Pinchbeck 2023). As the book of Genesis in the Bible states: ‘Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being’ (Gen. 2:7).

The site was chosen to place the audio in a dialogic space between Cathedral and city. The notion of immersion and use of the sound of water in the track spoke to the nearby river and the process of immersing, or baptizing, people in Christian religion. Though the text did not refer to religion, the site did, with the secular aspect of being on the green outside. The Cathedral Green had not been used before for art installations and provided a critical location, siting the work next to a memorial to Florence Nightingale and the wrought-iron archway at the Cathedral entrance by Robert Bakewell. The archway mirrors the shape of the headset benches and, as such, subtle yet significant links bind location and design of the artwork together. As a civic space, the Cathedral site holds many important monuments of Derby’s, and Derbyshire’s, past. The audio reflected on the present, highlighting the impact of Long COVID, on both people and place through artistic research to generate an intervention in the space between Cathedral and public, research and performance, breathing in and out, through the potential of a cultural civic space as site for immersion.

BREATHING IN – ON ACKNOWLEDGING RESPONSE-ABILITY

Stripped away and pared down, the One-to-One format focuses attention and heightens the potential of the performative meeting, activating further performance’s agency to ignite response-ability in its audience. One-to-One performances feel personal, and if we commit ourselves to them, they can affect us in a myriad of ways.

Rachel Zerihan (2009: 3)

MP: I remember the meetings we had. When people had to turn their cameras off. When they

⁴ Derby Cathedral is part of the City of Sanctuary network, and in 2015 Derby Cathedral was the first cathedral in England to be given Cathedral of Sanctuary status. More information can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3QtBA1v>.

■ *Breathturn*,
Derby Cathedral,
8 September – 8
October 2023.
Image Rhiannon Jones



■ *Breathturn*,
Derby Cathedral,
8 September – 8
October 2023.
Image Rhiannon Jones



couldn't talk because it was hard to breathe. I remember reading their words on the page. Handwriting gasping for breath. Staggering across the paper. Falling between the lines. I remember asking permission to use these words. And being struck by the pattern. The times. The dates. The doses. The fact these people moved two steps forward, two steps back. There was no sense of an ending for them. It was a dot, dot, dot not a full stop. An ellipsis. A sense of limbo. As Michael Mangan writes about limbo in *Acts of Dramaturgy*:

The two words 'liminal' and 'limbo' are cognate terms, sharing a common etymological derivation: derived originally from the Greek term *limen*, the word liminal is usually translated as 'threshold' and tends to carry connotations of positive change, and often youthful energy. 'Limbo', on the other hand, in medieval and early modern Christian cosmology is a region on the borders of hell; even in its more recent figurative sense we use it to denote a condition of stasis, neglect, immobility or confinement. (Mangan 2020: 125)

In an effort to reflect the themes of stasis, neglect, immobility and confinement, *Breathturn* turned to the personal diary entries of individuals living with Long COVID. By incorporating their voices into the soundscape, the project aimed to give form to their frustrations and make their often-silenced experiences audible to a wider audience. The participants involved in the research project led by the University of Derby had kept a daily diary of their activities while experiencing the condition, and this project was an opportunity to share their experiences.

Celan coined the term 'breathturn', to describe the moment between breathing in and breathing out. Ceramicist and writer Edmund de Waal mentions that 'Celan cannot find words to fit together easily so he brings words together into newness. One of these is *Atemwende* or "breathturn"' (De Waal 2015: 388). De Waal defines this as 'the strange moment of pause between breathing in and breathing out when your sense of self is suspended and you are open to everything' (ibid.). The breath, as part of the human respiratory system, is markedly impacted by the effects of Long COVID, and the respiratory condition the patients presented suggests their lungs were deeply affected by the virus.

The concept of ‘breathturn’ is a philosophical space where one can be both dead and alive at the same time, a Schrödinger’s Cat conundrum, where both possibilities exist at the same time in parallel. It is in this liminal space, another limbo as suggested above, that the piece exists, both reflecting on the lived experience of Long COVID patients and inviting audiences to consider their own experience. Placed in the bespoke headset benches as part of the ‘Shedding Light on Long Covid’ exhibition outside Derby Cathedral, the audio installation, *Breathturn*, sought to create a space of contemplation and reflection. It was a one-to-one performance of sorts, a duet between audience member and audio, which invited the audience member to reflect on their own breathing. As Zerihan states of her experience of a one-to-one performance by artist, theatre-maker and researcher Adrian Howells:

Marking our shared time, Howells bookended our encounter with the invitation to breathe together. We breathed seven breaths in and out at the start of the piece and a few breaths at the end to close our meeting. This loose frame is just one illustration of the subtle yet firm structure of the performance piece, bound by moments of shared embodiment that Howells had created for me, his ‘other’. (Zerihan 2009: 37)

As Zerihan explains, audiences have a ‘response-ability’ to the work in this one-to-one configuration. At the same time, it was occasionally a quartet, as more people listened to the track simultaneously. The text invites them to close their eyes and reflect on their own moment of pause between breathing in and breathing out, and the aim was for their own breathing pattern to fall in sync with the sound of waves in the soundscape. While standing on the beach on holiday in the summer of 2023, I was struck by how the sound of waves coming in and out with the tide mirrored that of inhalation and exhalation, and found myself breathing in and out with the tide.

BREATHING OUT – ON ACTIVATING PRACTICE-RESEARCH

MP: According to Italo Calvino, *cuntu nun mette tempu* – time takes no time in a story (Calvino 1988: 35); and, for *Breathturn*, though it only lasts six minutes it takes the audience on a

journey that lasts three years – the timeframe of the Long COVID testimonies. At the beginning of the audio track, the audience, coming from the Latin *audientia* (‘to hear, listen to’), were given time and space to acclimatize to the sound of the sea crashing against a pebble beach. This metaphor of the sea crashing on stones resonates with Gareth White’s notion of immersion:

The term [immersive] designates audience experiences of proximity, flexibility and interaction, and regarding the physical experience the term is very appropriate – an audience inhabits and moves through the space of a performance rather than sitting outside it, much as we might move through water rather than floating on top of it. (White 2013: 170)



Following one minute of this acclimatization, the audio track asks the audience to consider the words of people who have experienced Long COVID – these were testimonies, and the word, testimony, echoes the French *temoigner*, to bear witness. They are witnesses of this illness and their testimonies ‘bear witness’ to their suffering, *suffrir* also coming from ‘to bear’. As part of the exhibition, all artists involved were allowed access to written diary entries kept by Long COVID patients as part of the scientific study undertaken by researchers at the University of Derby. The patients were asked to keep a daily log of their behaviours during their recovery and particularly take note of anything they found to be challenging, either physically or mentally. The process for editing the text of *Breathturn* involved using some of this text verbatim. On first inspection, their diary entries resembled witness statements, which became a

■ *Breathturn*, Derby Cathedral, 8 September – 8 October 2023.
Image Alice Marshall

useful metaphor for the devising process. Tim Etchells describes how Forced Entertainment use improvisation as a way of ‘eliminating things from our enquiries’ (Etchells 2009). Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks employ a similar metaphor to describe the dramaturg’s role: they write that ‘statements are taken ... from those “helping us with our enquiries”’ (2001: 60).

In pursuing this ‘line of enquiry’ through practice-as-research, we started by highlighting words that spoke about times of fatigue, frustration or rehabilitation. Though the diary entries are written in the first person (e.g. ‘my energy is flagging’), we changed the voice to become a plural third person ‘they’ to signify the plurality of experience the diaries evidence and to allow the audience to inhabit the experience as part of the encounter. There are potential risks here of erasing the fact that COVID-19 and Long COVID were not universal experiences, and in fact exacerbated drastic inequalities, as well as revealing long-standing ones, such as those that relate to gender, race, class, disability and other key characteristics. The patients involved in the study and the scientists who led it were asked about this decision, and the text was shared in advance. The intention was that by engaging the audience in a plural narrative it is more universal and adds to the sense of a tide of testimony turning. The words on the page themselves act like waves crashing on the pebble beach.

*Their energy is flagging
 Their speech is slurring
 They are struggling to stay awake
 They are feeling sluggish
 They are staying home and resting
 Their muscles are spasming
 They are feeling tearful
 Their head really hurts
 They have brain fog
 They are fed up
 They are exhausted
 They tried laying down
 But they couldn’t sleep
 They are very frustrated
 They keep getting dizzy
 They still feel really tired
 Their memory is fading
 They rested but didn’t sleep*

*They pray
 They go to bed early
 They wake up early
 They go to choir (online)
 But are too tired to sing
 They are still feeling off
 They are really fatigued
 They woke up several times
 They are overtired
 (Pinchbeck 2023)*

The performer of the text, Hayley Doherty, represented the predominantly female demographic the condition affects, as evidenced by the data collated. Hayley and the team spoke about finding the right tone for the text and an appropriate interpretation of how to deliver it. She suggests:

For this vocal piece, I attempted to reflect the tidal nature of breath; to create a relaxed, rhythmic tone to draw the listener in, and encourage them to breathe with me. Contemplative and intimate; an invitation to consider the experience of those suffering the symptoms of Long Covid. (Doherty 2023)

After a list of diary entries, the text returns to a more reflective tone of voice and considers poetry itself as a vessel of hope. Celan talks about how: ‘A poem may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to the sea with the – surely not always strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on the shoreline of the heart’ (1986: 34–35). De Waal describes how Celan’s work evolved: ‘His poems get shorter. They become fragments, cries, exhalations, attempts to start, attempts to make sound. The spaces around the poems get larger. There is more white page than words in his last books of poetry’. (2015: 388). By chance, this description chimes with the diary entries above used to develop the *Breathturn* performance text. They become more sparse with time as patients lose breath, words lose their meaning and the space around them on the page gets larger. The audience, listening to them now, are left with a sense of suspension, a liminal space, somewhere between breathing in and breathing out. A *breathturn*. The waves continue and we hear our own breathing. In Sozita Goudouna’s book, *Beckett’s Breath* (2018), she writes about Beckett’s 1969 short play, which

contains stage directions but no spoken text and is soundtracked by the sound of breath and cries:

Breath is inherently intermedial because it operates in-between realities, in-between the boundaries of artistic media, the verbal and the visual, the audible and the scenic, in-between visibility and invisibility, in-between presence and absence/emptiness, embodiment and ambiguity of corporeal experience, in-between life and death and in-between an inhalation and an exhalation. (Goudouna 2018: 13)

Breathturn occupies a similar state of limbo in-between inhalation and exhalation. As seen earlier, Mangan writes about limbo: 'we use it to denote a condition of stasis, neglect, immobility or confinement' (Mangan 2020: 125). To express the pervasive feelings of being stuck, overlooked or restricted, *Breathturn* engaged directly with the written reflections of Long COVID sufferers. These diary entries served as a foundation for a soundscape that sought to echo their emotional struggles and bring their unheard realities into public consciousness.⁵

The performance text ends with the words:

*Remember them as you walk away
How they live every day
Waiting for an ending
To something they didn't know
Would happen to them
Limbo
(Pinchbeck 2023)*



CONCLUSION: EXHALATION,
EXPLORATION AND LEGACY

RJ: It is four years since the first UK national lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic; 1,460 days since cultural institutions were indefinitely

closed (or at least had radically curtailed their services) and digital technologies cast the offer of possibilities for performance and cultural interventions. Four years on, in a city in the East Midlands, Long COVID affects 7,500 people in Derby; and it is the place where the project the exhibition was located. In 2023, the exhibition set out to increase the profile and awareness of the lived experiences of those living with Long COVID through a creative sci-arts and place-based research project in the public realm. An interdisciplinary research project, it platformed lived experiences of those with Long COVID, bringing clinical and academic research together through immersive, interactive and public realm artwork.

MP: It was an honour and a privilege to work with the words and testimonies of Long COVID patients, and the team felt a great responsibility ('response-ability') to treat them with care. Having worked with verbatim text before, it felt important to treat the text sensitively and place it in an appropriate context, both textually and aurally. Other verbatim theatre work has been made about the health effects of COVID-19 (see Hurley *et al.* 2023) and its impact on the performance of ritual has been explored (see Edelman *et al.* 2021) but this is one of the first performance pieces to directly employ the testimonies of Long COVID patients in immersive audio work and was created with their permission and ethical approval, as well as opportunity for feedback.

RJ: This sci-art public realm project featured a display of artworks by researchers from the University of Derby's School of Arts and Manchester School of Art. A series of dedicated workshops took place online and in-person to support access needs delivered by a range of local organizations. We had QR codes located around the space to take people to further works made by local and national artists and organizations hosted online on the topic of 'Shedding Light on Long Covid'. S.H.E.D is a platform for the public to communicate their thoughts and opinions on issues affecting daily life. We were proud to platform the voices of others and provide a safe space for people in the

⁵ *Breathturn* audio can be heard online here: <https://bit.ly/412h5xG>.

■ *Breathturn*, Derby Cathedral, 8 September – 8 October 2023.
Image Rhiannon Jones

community to come together.

MP: The plan now is to find other contexts in which *Breathturn* could be exhibited, either physically and/or online. Discussions are underway for a national tour of the 'Shedding Light on Long Covid' exhibition, and we are particularly keen for the work to be experienced in public contexts, and potentially medical contexts. The voices of the patients could, and should, be heard in places where their treatment takes place so this piece can speak to rehabilitation and recovery, as much to the limbo they feel. The people who took part in the medical study and the people who visited Derby Cathedral to experience the project meet through this piece of audio work. By putting on their headphones and pressing play they hear the words the patients wanted to say. They meet in the space around the words on the page. They meet in a garden between the Cathedral and Amen Alley. Between a car park and a high street. Between the chimes of a clock. Between the waves. Between breathing in and breathing out. In the breathturn.

*And there is a moment
Between the two
Where you are in limbo
Hanging there
Suspended in time
Like a ball on the beach
at the top of its arc in the sky
Somewhere between rising and falling*
(Pinchbeck 2023)

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