

Snap, Hiss, Crackle, Pop: Counter-factual Conservation as Attentional Practice

Estalo, Chiado, Crepitação, Pop: Conservação Contrafactual como Prática Atencional

SIMON FLEURY

Independent Conservator
and Researcher, United Kingdom
sfleury@simonfleury.studio

Abstract

This essay emerged through a counter-factual approach to institutional documentation, repurposing conservation-based practices (specifically the Museum's Activity Log, officially termed the "Activity Snapshot Module") from a time-tracking tool into a creative archival practice. This unofficial experiment, straddling the pandemic and its lockdowns, became a way of attending to what goes unmarked: the textures and rhythms beneath institutional accountability. It manifests sonically and materially: field recordings of the canteen's afternoon clamour—voices, clattering dishes, the sounds of a museum in full operation—mingling later with the eerie quiet of pandemic lockdown; the mechanical hum of building systems in emptied galleries, security radios crackling through vacant corridors; surfacing digital images; objects and the conditions of care; voice notes whispered in the darkroom's red glow. The soundscape shifted from institutional din to ghostly stillness, revealing what the everyday cacophony had masked. Reclaiming this administrative tool, I sought to create a space for temporal drift, to breathe, where the liveliness of conservation work might surface beyond quantified metrics. This reclaimed space extends beyond the written page, finding a dynamic, activated form in [Museum Soundings](#), an online archive (museum-within-museums) that invites readers to experience: What does it feel like to hear a museum thinking? How does it feel to be up close to an object and in doubt? The archive houses the acoustic emissions recordings discussed here, sound walks from my wanderings through institutional spaces, and the Activity Log itself. This growing polyphonic space invites readers to move between textual analysis and embodied listening, between the essay's theoretical framework and the lived textures it describes, making the 'lived' experience of duration central to the work's unfolding.

counter-factual conservation | institutional attention | acoustic emissions | archival practice | Victoria and Albert Museum

Keywords

Resumo

Este ensaio emerge de uma abordagem contrafactual à documentação institucional, reaproveitando práticas baseadas na conservação—mais concretamente no Registo de Atividades do Museu, oficialmente designado “Módulo de Captura de Atividade”—transformando uma ferramenta de controlo do tempo numa prática arquivística criativa. Esta experiência não oficial, desenvolvida durante a pandemia e os seus confinamentos, tornou-se uma forma de atender ao que passa despercebido: as texturas e ritmos subjacentes às lógicas de responsabilização institucional. O trabalho manifesta-se de forma sonora e material: gravações de campo do clamor vespertino da cantina—vozes, o tilintar da loiça, os sons de um museu em pleno funcionamento—misturando-se depois com o silêncio inquietante do confinamento pandémico; o zumbido mecânico dos sistemas do edifício em galerias vazias, rádios de segurança crepitando por corredores desertos; imagens digitais emergentes; os objetos e as condições do seu cuidado; notas de voz sussurradas no brilho vermelho da câmara escura. A paisagem sonora mudou de burburinho institucional para uma quietude fantasmagórica, revelando o que a cacofonia quotidiana havia mascarado. Ao recuperar esta ferramenta administrativa, procurei criar um espaço para deriva temporal, para respirar, onde a vivacidade do trabalho de conservação pudesse emergir para além de métricas quantificadas. Este espaço recuperado estende-se para além da página escrita, encontrando uma forma dinâmica e ativada em [Museum Soundings](#) — um arquivo online (museu-dentro-de-museus) que convida os leitores a experienciar: Como é sentir um museu a pensar? Como é estar perto de um objeto e em dúvida? O arquivo aloja as gravações de emissões acústicas aqui discutidas, caminhadas sonoras das minhas deambulações por espaços institucionais, e o próprio Registo de Atividades. Este espaço polifónico convida os leitores a moverem-se entre análise textual e escuta incorporada, entre o enquadramento teórico do ensaio e as texturas vividas que descreve, tornando a experiência ‘vívda’ da duração central ao desenrolar da obra.

Palavras-chave

conservação contrafactual | atenção institucional | emissões acústicas | prática arquivística | Victoria and Albert Museum

The museum scientist Boris Pretzel describes the acoustic emissions of eighteenth-century furniture as revealing ‘characters and characteristics’ (Pretzel 2014), the clicks and pops that mark new surfaces arriving in the wood. I have borrowed his phrase. What I have come to think of as counter-factual conservation produces its own characters and characteristics, among them the unreliable conservator, and the museum scientist who emerge not through deliberate positioning but through attention to what institutional protocols filter out as noise. These are experimental figures, an ecology of practices made manifest in the interstices of the museum and its everyday; wandering beyond established protocols, beyond the object itself, to the interstitial spaces, the gaps, margins and thresholds where institutional certainty breaks down and something else surfaces. Museum Soundings, a growing online archive, a

museum-within-museums, emerges from these micro-events, these small ruptures in institutional routine. Not the other way around.

These dispositional characters emerge from years of intimate engagement with the museum, its materials and rhythms, what I have come to experience as the ‘deeply felt everyday’ of conservation work. The wandering, listening, attending to micro-events grew from a close, hands-on attunement to material cadences, to how objects transform over time, to the institutional rhythms pulsing beneath official protocols. Intimacy with these cadences makes it possible to notice when conditions shift, when something else surfaces in the interstices.

Canteen With Pretzel (Attentional Cadences)

If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy-nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration [...] It is no longer something thought, it is something lived! (Bergson 1998)

The museum’s staff canteen is bustling. Seated, absentmindedly turning a sugar crystal, I am waiting for Boris Pretzel, a museum scientist I have worked with for many years. He is late, and my patience is wearing thin. The afternoon clamour of colleagues, the clattering of dishes, are a noisy cacophony, a background noise echoing what we’re about to discuss. The sugar crystal, a recent playful experiment, catches the light, scattering it across the table, catching the waiting cup of tea, each facet a different frame of attention, a tuning of the surroundings.

When Pretzel arrives, our meeting is brief, informal, friendly, starting with a light-hearted moan about the Activity Log, that unloved add-on to the collections database that has us account for our hours against every project and task: an unnecessary tool, a pain. He hands me a memory stick of sound files from rhEvents, the sub-name of a material-analysis project he coordinated (Pretzel 2014): a study of how fluctuations in relative humidity register as acoustic events in an eighteenth-century French lacquered commode on open display.

Using wide-band microphone sensors and digital speckle-pattern interferometry, he and his colleagues had recorded the micro-cracks, small releases of energy as new surfaces arrive in the wood, in order to broaden the climate parameters within which such objects can safely be shown.

I mention my interest in the discrimination at the method's heart: its patient filtering of signal from background noise, its willingness to attend to events too small and indeterminate for the human ear. Where Pretzel's aim was to specify and mitigate risk, mine turns elsewhere.

Still toying with the sugar crystal, I lightheartedly speculate about how quickly it would dissolve in his still steaming cup of tea, echoing Bergson's observation about waiting for sugar to melt, an analogy for the conditions of material change and for how conservation practice might open into something else. My research inherits his instruments and his data, departing from him in what it asks the sounds to do. I'm keen, I explain, to keep the recordings unresolved; open: to experience the emissions not as damage to be managed but as a museum's material life becoming, briefly, audible.

Listening to Eighteenth-Century Furniture

Listening to an [18-second compression](#) of a year's worth of data, I'm captivated by these acoustic recordings, intrigued by the arrival of these 'characters'. A year of the commode's transformation spatialised into eighteen seconds, Bergson's melting sugar sped past audition. What the compression cannot hold is the duration it stands in for: the lived, indivisible time of the item's material condition and its containment, to which the recording can only point, where I explain duration becomes experienced.

The sounds, a by-product of the rhEvents analysis, emanate from an item of eighteenth-century French lacquered furniture (Pretzel 2014). This particular object, like many from its era, carries within its very material the colonial histories of its making: distant trade routes, exploitative labour, the embeddedness of empire. The micro-cracks and acoustic emissions, in this light, can be heard not just as material degradation but as conditions themselves becoming audible, a subtle yet persistent echo of its complicated histories. Over tea, Pretzel explains that the arrhythmic clicks and pops signify micro-events, the arrival of new surfaces in the furniture, cracks emerging with little fanfare from the background noise of a museum. These cadences create their own tuning of attention, where technical protocol meets material transformation, and listening becomes a way of attending to change.

In 2014, Pretzel and colleagues gathered evidence of the adverse effects of environmental fluctuation on antique furniture. Using acoustic emissions technology (AE) and digital speckle-pattern interferometry (laser), they sought to measure the interactions between artefacts and their surrounding climate. The research aimed to guide 'climate specifications for galleries with sensitive artefacts on display', emphasising an energy-efficient, risk-mitigated approach to their display (Pretzel 2014). Yet the same instruments can be tuned otherwise.

Human ears can only discern these elusive infrasonic micro-events through digital re-encoding. Ultra-sensitive audio equipment picks up the faint acoustic traces. These

signals mark releases of energy, the arrival of new surfaces, boundaries crossed, ‘micro-cracks’ suggestive of a change to the surface, characteristic of fluctuations in the climate that increase the risk of damage in objects (Pretzel 2014). *Museum Soundings*, by making these re-encoded sounds accessible, acts as a different kind of filter, one that amplifies these subtle releases of energy, letting us “fall into” a sonic world usually inaccessible and revealing the hidden cadences of material life.¹

This filtering, distinguishing signal from noise, is itself an attentional practice learned through intimate material engagement. What the system excludes as ‘background noise’ or ‘uncharacteristic’ reveals as much about institutional priorities as what it captures. Years of conservation work attune you to material stress, to the barely perceptible cadences that signal change. The museum in its everyday operations produces its own relentless background noise: the productivity metrics, the incessant visitor throughput, the coupling of profession and progress that drowns out the deeply felt everyday. What acoustic emissions research reveals in furniture, underlying stress made audible through filtering, the pandemic pause would later reveal in the institution itself: conditions that everyday cacophony had masked but intimate knowledge could recognise.

Here I take my lead from Brandon LaBelle, for whom background noise is never mere remainder. In *Background Noise* (LaBelle 2006) the background is not the negligible ground against which a signal stands out but the medium of relation itself, the shared field through which bodies, spaces and institutions are composed. To filter noise, then, is never simply to discard the inessential. It is to make a claim about what counts. Consider the museum’s micro-events: the snap of a new surface arriving in the wood, the crackle of a security radio, the pop of a flashbulb in an emptied studio. These are background noise in exactly this sense, not failures of signal but sonic territories the institution overlooks. To attend to them is already a small act of what LaBelle calls re-orientation, the way listening navigates the conditions of a place and the struggles over recognition and belonging it holds (LaBelle 2021).²

1 The system employs two wide-band single-ended microphone sensors [...] mounted at different locations on the commode (locations are chosen near existing cracks, operated efficiently to ensure that sounds from micro-cracking cannot be detected simultaneously by both microphones). The AE events are discriminated from the high level of background noise by comparing the signals at the two points and filtering out data with uncharacteristic frequency response or duration (Pretzel 2014).

2 My engagement with LaBelle’s work is not only textual. I took part in the Listening Academy at Iklectik, London (September 2022), part of the wider Listening Biennial network (Errant Bodies), and in Brandon LaBelle’s Poetics of Listening seminar (24 and 31 March, 7 and 14 April 2025), where these ideas were rehearsed less as theory than as exercise, closely allied to the practices of attunement described below.

Wandering the Museum

During my years at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, there was pleasure to be had in wandering. I occasionally recorded these walks. These wanderings resist goal-oriented life, following improvisational paths through the public galleries and the back-of-house spaces alike, cutting across and through the bordered museum. This was the museum at its most intimate: the conversations while waiting, the muscle memory of handling objects. The doubts and questions. These are the affective, shared dimensions, the deeply felt tempos of practice, that institutional systems fail to capture.

Looking back from the other side of the pandemic, I'm struck by the intensity of the sonic environment I have been describing. The sounds of a museum, once simply background noise, now carry a different weight, in response to my own fevered experiences of the Covid pandemic. These were not just the overt sounds but the subtle acoustic emissions, the micro-events: the distant clatter from the canteen, the faint echoes of conversations, the barely perceptible cracks opening in the eighteenth-century furniture, the ambient textures captured in the field recordings I'd made during my wanderings through the museum's less-trodden paths. All of it pointed to something shifting beneath the surface. Acoustic emissions reveal underlying stress in materials, the environmental fluctuations that cause furniture to crack. The pandemic's pause revealed the same in the institution: the unsustainable rhythms, the colonial violences, the extractive attention economies that 'business as usual' had normalised. The museum hoards time; a heterotopia of 'indefinitely accumulating time' (Foucault 1986, 26) depends on the accumulation never stopping. The pause stopped it. The museum was, I suspect, in a state of 'fever' long before the pandemic, its relentless activity masking a deeper unease.

Institutional Pause

They never imagined it happening: the technologies of production, put to work for over 170 years, paused...

The Museum closes to visitors. Indefinitely. Peace. Quiet. Save for the background hiss of air conditioning units, building management systems, data servers; occasional essential maintenance staff passing through the twilight of empty galleries, studios, corridors, and offices, the quiet pierced by intermittent crackle, fragments of conversation from the security teams' two-way radios; the regular low rumble of underground trains' mostly empty carriages, passing beneath the Museum's quietened Cast Court galleries. Not business as usual. Rather, a museum stilled, idling. In absentia, a parasymphathetic hiatus.

The institutional noise filtered out: the visitor footfall, the meetings, the performance metrics. What remained were the sounds that had always been there: the building's mechanical systems, the radios' intermittent crackle, the underground trains. Like the acoustic emissions equipment distinguishing micro-cracks from background din, the pause allowed different signals to surface. What the institution typically produced as its dominant frequency (productivity, throughput, the relentless forward motion) fell away revealing the subtler cadences beneath: the material conditions, the rhythms of care work, the attention that 'business as usual' systematically drowns out.

This unprecedented pause creates conditions for what Isabelle Stengers would call an ecology of practices, practices set beside one another so that none can claim the authority to disqualify the rest (Stengers 2023). With the conservation department emptied and the executive elsewhere, counter-factual conservation emerges not as a proposition to argue but as something to rehearse. The pandemic produced a rupture in the museum's fabric, its temporal and spatial logics disrupted. This opening created conditions for dishabitation, for pause. During this pause, the museum became alive to possibility, not the fevered productivity that preceded it, but a space of play, imagination, and care.

I imagine a museum at work (not in the strict sense). The technologies of production, the means of capture, retention and dissemination, re-attuning after years of continuous habitual use. The apparatus forging new alliances, playfully re-staging use and value. In the emptied museum, wandering returns, no longer the remembered pleasure of the working galleries but its imagined re-enactment, improvised meanders, crossing and recrossing institutional borders. The same doors I'd held open for processions of objects now opening to something else: time spent otherwise, attention growing wild. Or perhaps this is simply fevered imagination, lockdown's gift. The break, the opening, has always been here. It is not a new thing, real or imagined. The modern project alive with what it might yet become. The pandemic didn't create the crisis. It revealed what was already present, allowed what was suppressed to bloom.

In the fringing effects of the virus, the museum's *Henry Cole Wing* reverberates; laughter, voices, and footsteps echoing through vacant corridors—sound wandering through an institution in suspension; the opening refrain from Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On' from a studio radio, a joyous looping of a gathering already underway; the rise and fall of street sounds, traffic, voices, drifting with the breeze from a window, open to Exhibition Road; mingling with the *scanning camera's intense pitch* and the intermittent staccato popping of flashlights from the open darkroom studio door; the faint sounds of water, the subterranean passage of a tributary of the river Westbourne, heading to meet the Thames. This concatenation of sound³ fills the Grand Staircase, the incorporeal instantiation of Henry Cole, the architect of the modern museum project,

³ On this concatenation of soundings, and the fugitive sociality it names, see Moten (2018, 162).

overflowing with the publics he sought to welcome. The technologies of capture, already at work in the museum, making themselves felt. The absence of the executive, the keepers of the modern museum project elsewhere, prompting a cacophonous infra-mural sociality.

Or is this just memory? Reconstruction? Here the unreliable conservator surfaces, working in the uncertain terrain between what happened and what might have been. Haunting the imaginary, the sounds mixing, real and dreamt, in the fringing effects of the virus. The fevered museum conjuring what might have been, what the pause might have allowed. Not preservation but transformation. Not the museum's habitual processions but attention turned fugitive, institutional possibilities growing wild. A question haunts this re-wilding of conservation: what forms of institutional life might have emerged if we had truly inhabited the pause, rather than rushing to 'recover'?

In this stillness, where traditional narratives and institutional constraints fell away, conservation practice found itself untethered from the 'scrupulous and short-sighted precision' that had long defined it (Stengers 2023, 24). The forced separation from museum and objects, a rupture paradoxically opened new pathways for imagining institutional care. For a conservator, being locked away from the objects creates a fundamental rupture of what I call the 'deeply felt everyday'. I would not claim the conservator is ever truly separate from the object, so co-constitutive is that intimacy. The rupture, rather, made the intimacy suddenly legible. This pause revealed how conservation might move beyond its origins in the modern project towards something more attuned to ongoing material and social relations.

This enforced separation directly challenged what Stengers identifies as a key symptom of the modern project: 'the coupling of profession and progress' (Stengers 2023, 26). This coupling, which shapes conservation practice, entails specialisation, disciplinary protocols, and often leads to a scrupulous and short-sighted precision, technically effective but foreclosing other forms of attention. What Stengers sets against this coupling is precisely an ecology of practices: not the abandonment of expertise but its resituating among other ways of knowing, so that conservation's precision is held in relation rather than granted sovereignty. Counter-factual conservation inhabits that relation, to practise what Stengers elsewhere calls a care of the possible: an attention that keeps open what the institution would otherwise foreclose (Stengers 2011).

The Activity Snapshot Module was, in the institution's terms, a fix for temporal drift: the slippage between the hours a conservator spends and the hours the record can account for. Bolted onto the Collections Management System, a manifestation of the same coupling, it asked us to book our time against every project and task so that labour left no gap. It is at once an object, a field in a database, and a process, a small daily discipline shaping how the everyday is spent. During lockdown I kept it running but turned it: logging encounters and their absence, time wandering unaccounted. The tool meant to abolish temporal drift became a space for it, and in that inversion the Activity Log became Museum Soundings, the institutional time-tracking tool reimagined as archive,

a work-in-progress where wandering, listening and attending to what exceeds capture became the practice itself.

Memory became fevered, speculative, without the anchoring presence of materials. Imagination, untethered from its usual institutional grounding, worked differently in the domestic space of lockdown, another kind of space, improvised and provisional, where new possibilities could be forged. In this hiatus, removed from the rituals and precisions of daily institutional life, the pause opened pathways for imagining care otherwise, not abandoning my expertise and technical knowledge but asking what forms of attention might emerge when enforced separation ruptures habitual practice. The pandemic thus made care itself the work: political, relational, and largely unaccounted for by institutional systems.

Reopening

The Museum reopens, the restructuring, the redundancies, the return to the coupling of profession and progress. Museums faced multiple intersecting crises: late capitalism's strains, the ongoing genocide in Palestine that exposes colonial violence not as historical but as present and lethal, the climate emergency. They retreated into familiar operations rather than risking change. When institutions needed care, they exhibited carelessness. An opportunity for transformation overlooked, refused.

In the wake of redundancy, something uncanny occurred. The Museum, that solid institutional architecture of stone and protocol, began to feel like a hallucination, whilst Museum Soundings, this counter-factual archive born from pandemic fever, became the more substantive reality — a museum alive in its interstices. This inversion is the museum's dysphoria laid bare: the fevered state where what institutions claim as "real" (productivity, hierarchy, institutional continuity) reveals itself as delirium, whilst what they dismiss as noise (wandering, listening, attending to togetherness) emerges as the practice. The dispossession of redundancy paradoxically created the conditions for a different kind of work, not the museum's work, but work, nonetheless.

Yet the crises persist, shapeshifting. What we misleadingly call 'post-pandemic' is not a return to stability but ongoing dishabitation, a state of fundamental discomfort with imposed conditions, a refusal to accept what institutions normalise as inevitable. The pause had opened questions about institutional care beyond scrupulous precision, about 'making sense in common' across different practices of attention (Stengers 2023), about the museum as a place of transmission and inheritance rather than redundancy. What the pause revealed was how institutional transformation requires exactly the forms of life the institution dismisses; time to breathe, to open sense-making to what it has excluded, to make sense differently, together. These questions weren't answered but foreclosed. They remain. Yet they insist.

Counter-factual conservation inhabits the gaps, nomadic, provisional, playful. The unreliable conservator remains at large. The sounds, real or imagined, continue. Work continues, or tries to. Not because the crisis ended, but because it didn't. Because it's ongoing. The museum as virus, in the process of overwriting itself, a seemingly endless process of un-making and re-making in the ruins of our ongoing unravelling. Time playing out, otherwise. The liveliness persists in the interstitial spaces. The snap, hiss, crackle, and pop, the dishabituating, always here. The question isn't whether to transform. The question is how to live the ongoing crises with care, and with others.

Practices of Attunement

What, then, is counter-factual conservation? Not a method laid over the old, nor another layer added to the record, but the institution's own instruments turned against their function. The practice brings the field recordings of the working and the emptied museum into dialogue with the acoustic-emission recordings and the textual traces of the Activity Log, and from this convergence assembles a documentation of what was never officially recorded: not the official capture but something else, what might have been. The unreliable conservator inhabits this terroir, a documentation that refuses institutional certainty and stays open to what exceeds capture, to the social and material textures that no database can hold.

The Activity Log, built to track time as a metric, becomes a repository for what could not be done. The acoustic emissions, gathered to mitigate risk, are heard as a museum's material life rather than as damage. It is an anarchive in the strict sense, resisting the archive's ordering, keeping its characters unresolved rather than classified.

Rooted in art practice, my approach to conservation adopts slowed attention, listening, speculation and doubt, sensitivity to objects and their environments, curiosity, collective and convivial endeavour, the arts of documentation, and embodied relations to layered material histories.⁴ Adapting what I have learned there, counter-factual conservation does more than arrest change. It opens the technical protocols to imagination and speculation without abandoning their rigour, moving from an object-based

⁴ These practices were tested and developed through a research group formed during the pandemic. Emerging from an (Un-)Learning programme, the group became an online space for gathering, a respite from dishabituating, creating distributed intimacy across continents. Drawing on Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's concept of "study" (Harney and Moten 2013), we explored 'instituting' as process rather than institution, testing what holds things together when things fall apart, including through making sugar crystals as a prompt to explore togetherness and duration. Instructions for making these crystals are available in Museum Soundings, inviting others into this practice. This collective work directly informed the counter-factual methodology developed here and produced collaborative outputs including a sound work for a topologies project and participation in an economies residency, where we explored decolonisation of economic frameworks and communal sharing practices.

conservation toward an environmental sensibility attentive to conditions, atmospheres, relations, the duration of the everyday.

If this is a practice, what does it set in motion? Less a reform than a contamination. It does not petition the institution to change. It seeds an outside within it, lodged in the institution's own tools. The protocols are subtly and, I suspect, irreversibly altered: an attention, once practised, is not easily unlearned. It spreads less by policy than by being practised, the way the pandemic's stillness let what was suppressed bloom. Museum Soundings is that seed made shareable, an invitation others might take up and germinate elsewhere.

The practice asks: what if we documented this instead of that? What if the play in the machine were not aberration but call and response? What these reworked emissions and Activity Log entries required, and still require, is a different quality of attention: not the rush to classify and resolve, but something closer to simply listening, letting them remain uncertain. This suspension of classification, this not-knowing, begins to feel less like failure and more like play, a resistance I would rather affirm than explain away. Following this reworking, these “uncharacteristic characters” were welcome additions to the Activity Log.

Duration

The pleasure of those wanderings feeds my conservation-based research. Take the acoustic emissions again. The filtering that separates micro-cracks from background noise demands precision, yet that precision does not fix what the sounds mean. It only makes them audible. The conservator listening to these re-encoded emissions is not measuring damage. They are hearing material change as it happens, an ongoing process rather than a problem to solve. The same precision that mitigates risk can instead become a way of listening: not the arrest of change but attention to its cadences.

This is duration in Bergson's sense: not clock-time measured out but time felt from within, the melting sugar, the wearing thin of patience. The unreliable conservator, following this lead, engages with duration as lived institutional practice, attending to the rhythms of material transformation, the tempos of care work, the cadences beneath quantified metrics. This changes how I engage the museum: not to preserve it but to notice how a technical protocol can itself become a way of attending. The museum struggles to respond to contemporary challenges: colonial legacies, a careless pandemic “recovery” as they referred to it, ecological crisis. This asks for a different kind of care, an attention trained on what usually falls outside the frame.

In the pandemic hiatus I return to the clamour of the afternoon canteen, the sugar crystal dissolving in the scientist's cooling tea. A museum in full swing. In the spaces of the technical protocols, something else can be heard. As the process philosopher Alfred

North Whitehead suggests, ‘life lurks in the interstices’ (Whitehead 1978)⁵. The unreliable conservator serves as guide to these interstitial realms, inhabiting the folds between technical protocol and material attention, between what institutions capture and what exceeds them. Here, in these traces of a museum to come, the work is not grand systematic change but the patient, intimate work of attending to what institutional systems cannot hold: the cadences, the deeply felt everyday, the care that persists in the interstices.

5 The full line reads: ‘life lurks in the interstices of each living cell, and in the interstices of the brain’ (Whitehead 1978, 105-106).

Acknowledgments Agradecimentos

Not applicable.

Funding Financiamento

The author's PhD was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through the Midlands3Cities Doctoral Training Partnership (M3C).

Conflict of interest Conflito de interesses

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Authors contributions Contribuições dos autores

Not applicable.

Data availability statement Declaração de disponibilidade de dados

Not Applicable.

AI tools Ferramentas de IA

No AI tools were used.

References Referências

- Bergson, Henri. 1998. *Creative Evolution*. Translated by Arthur Mitchell. Mineola, NY: Dover.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. "Of Other Spaces." Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22-27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions.
- LaBelle, Brandon. 2006. *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*. New York: Continuum.
- _____. 2021. *Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity, and the Work of Reorientation*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Moten, Fred. 2018. *Stolen Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pretzel, Boris. 2014. "[Un]Reasonable: Broadening Acceptable Climate Parameters for Furniture on Open Display." In ICOM-CC 17th Triennial Conference Preprints, Melbourne, 15-19 September 2014, edited by J. Bridgland, art. 1507. Paris: International Council of Museums.
- Stengers, Isabelle. 2011. "The Care of the Possible." Interview by Erik Bordeleau, translated by Kelly Ladd. *Scapegoat* 1: 12-17, 27.
- _____. 2023. *Making Sense in Common: A Reading of Whitehead in Times of Collapse*. Translated by Thomas Lamarre. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. 1978. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Corrected edition, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press.

Biographical note Nota biográfica

Simon Fleury's work is deeply rooted in his expertise as a conservator at London's Victoria and Albert Museum (1996–2021) and his extensive background in photography and film.

His academic path includes postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art and a recent PhD from the Birmingham School of Art and Design.

As a co-founder of the Conservation Lab and the practices of attunement research group, Simon contributes significantly to the intersection of conservation-based creative and theoretical practice. His work is part of the collections of Tate and the British Council.

Institutional address Morada institucional
Studio 23B, Archway Studios, 25 Bickerton Road,
London, N19 5JT, United Kingdom

Web

simonfleury.studio

How to cite Como citar [Chicago]

Fleury, Simon. 2026. "Snap, Hiss, Crackle, Pop: Counter-factual Conservation as Attentional Practice." *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* (64): 171-184. <https://doi.org/10.34619/i9g4-4yb7>.

Received Recebido: 2026-02-02

Accepted Aceite: 2026-06-16

© 2026. Simon Fleury. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.