

OFF THE SHELF

by Doug Holder



Lyrical

SOMERVILLE

edited by Doug Holder

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Subtraction

"An artist creates not by adding, but by taking away."
Robert Bresson

First, the gold and diamonds disappeared:
my grandmother's gift of a wedding ring,
your onyx ring initialed in 24 K gold

The dresser drawers upturned
door ajar, ghostly so
someone took away the sofa, threw away the bed

Left behind the sheets and drapes
the porcelain from an antique land
tarnished teacups, the scattering of plates

The ashtray gone
along with the cigarette's flame
the matches in a pocket we stashed away.

Yet the love story,
the bodies twined into one remained,
youth had one direction and that was us

We kept our beating hearts, gave
away the car, kept to our daily walks
gave away money or spent it as we pleased

Conceptual Artist J T Bullitt evaporates the novel Moby-Dick

While at Open Studios in Somerville I came across conceptual artist JT Bullitt. According to his website: "My studio work is an ongoing series of conceptual listening experiments that investigate the invisible, inaudible, intangible forces surrounding us and underlying human experience. I am particularly fascinated by questions of identity & name, language & symbol, and the fluidity of our perception of time & space. I work primarily in sound — both large and small — and in mark-making."

I was also fascinated to see he evaporated the novel Moby Dick. We will explain later.

Doug Holder: What made you move from Maine? How do you like working along with the community of artists at the Joy Street Studios?

JT Bullitt: I'm originally from the Boston area but I lived in rural Maine for about 12 years. I loved the wildness of the coast and the deep silence of the night sky. It was really the perfect spot for a studio. But I eventually missed the stimulation of Boston's art and science scene, as well as my two young granddaughters down in Massachusetts. So I moved back to the area and found a studio at Joy Street, where I've been working on a variety of projects involving sound and making marks on paper.

I'm primarily a conceptual artist, which is a rather peculiar niche, so it's been wonderfully refreshing to meet outstanding artists here at Joy Street who are grounded in more traditional art practices. We're an eclectic group, but there's a good sense of community here. Lately we've been organizing ourselves to respond to the threat of displacement by high-end real estate development in the neighborhood. It's a challenge for artist communities all across the city, but we're doing our part. It feels good to be a part of that.

DH: Your main work seems to be conceptual listening projects. Can you explain this endeavor and how it is presented to the public?

JTB: Listening is all about making deep connections with the world. Because sound is so intimately tied to the flow of time, those connections shift and change from moment to moment. It's a very mysteri-



ous thing! My projects in sound and in other media are all "experiments" that explore these mysteries and try to get to the heart of things.

Over the years I've shared my work in many different ways: by publishing CD's, presenting recordings at galleries and museums, and sharing them with dance choreographers, composers, musicians, and film makers. In my multichannel sound installations I invite listeners to walk around my studio and explore the shifting soundscapes, to give them a chance to tune in to the act of listening itself. It can be a powerful inward-looking experience.

In some of my sound experiments I translate seismic recordings of the Earth's slow vibrations into audible sound. In others I've recorded the sounds of snails eating, the sound of the tides, or the "sound" of the grooves that the glaciers carved like a phonograph into bedrock 12,000 years ago. It's a way to experience the world at different scales of time and space and to contemplate where we fit within it all. I've also enjoyed streaming the sounds of the Earth online and broadcasting them into the air via FM radio. There's nothing quite like turning on your car radio and hearing the Earth speak!

It's always fun to see how people respond to these sounds. Sometimes when young *Continued on page 23*

We gave away paintings and photographs
you abandoned your blue suit, left the closet door
open
I left my wedding dress draped across the floor

We walked away, you in your tweed
overcoat black shoes polished, me in my suede

jacket, fur cuffs and velvet boots

The hats, scarves, and gloves we left on the mantel
the carpet and the chairs tossed into space
we were holding on to us before we vanished into air.

— Lynn Fitzgerald

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to 8:00 p.m. (Rain Date: June 18). Enjoy music, comedy, drag performances, craft vendors, and more. All are welcome to attend.

Don't forget to visit Somerville's **farmers markets**. Every Wednesday through November 22, 12:00 – 6:00 p.m. visit the **Davis Square Farmers Market**, across from American Flatbread at 44 Day St. Visit: www.massfarmersmarkets.org/davis. Every Saturday through October 28, 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m., the **Union Square Farmers Market** takes place at 66-70 Union Sq. visit: www.unionsquaremain.org/2023-fmseason.

Join **Somer Viva** for a library tour for **Chinese speakers** on **June 17**. Learn about the resources the **Somerville Public Library** has for Chinese-speaking community members, including their Chinese collection in the foreign languages section. Interested persons can register at <https://forms.gle/JQNmA2hKW7r1YYho8>.

Medford St. behind the High School is **one-way** in order to accommodate a **temporary Community Path detour**. Westbound vehicle traffic on Medford St. between Walnut St. and Pearl St. will be detoured to facilitate installation and use of these temporary bike lanes. Westbound traffic will be directed north on Walnut St. and west on Pearl St. before reconnecting with Medford St. Eastbound

travel on Medford St. will be maintained as usual. The detour will be in place 24/7. <https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/green-line-extension>.

The **2023 Taste of Somerville** takes place on **Wednesday, June 14**, outside at **Assembly Row**, 5:00 – 8:00 p.m. Produced by the **Somerville Chamber of Commerce Dining and Nightlife Group**, the Taste of Somerville is a unique way to experience our dining and nightlife scene. For tickets and more information visit <http://tasteofsomerville.org>.

The **City of Somerville's annual Water System Flushing Program** has begun and will continue **through late October**. This annual program flushes pipes at high velocities to clean water mains and maintain the highest possible water quality. Flushing will take place **Mondays and Thursdays** between 6:00 p.m. and midnight to minimize potential disruptions to water service. In most cases, residents will not notice any changes to their water service. However, some homes may experience a temporary, slight drop in water pressure and/or discolored water. In these cases, though the water may be discolored, it is safe to drink. Until the water runs clear, it is advisable to avoid washing laundry, especially white fabrics. If any rust stains appear on wet laundry, it should not be dried in a dryer machine, and residents can call 311 (or 617-666-3311 from cell

phones or outside the city) for a free bottle of rust remover. Residents will be notified via signage when their neighborhood will be affected by the flushing program. For more information, please contact the **Water Department** at water@somervillema.gov or 617-625-6600 ext. 5850.

The **Somerville YMCA** has announced their upcoming **annual golf fundraiser event**. Join in on **Monday, June 12**, at the **Wayland Country Club** for a day filled with friendly competition, networking, and supporting a great cause. Don't miss out on this incredible opportunity to combine your passion for golf with philanthropy. Register now to secure your spot and be part of this exciting event. Visit <https://lnkd.in/eJ8Af7fb> for more details and to reserve your place on the green.

The **Free Lockboxes for Seniors Program** is intended to provide **police, fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) access** to your residence in the event of an emergency where you are unable to open the door. A key to your residence will be stored in a secure metal storage device, like a realtor's lockbox, at your residence. The access code to the lockbox will only be available to police, fire or EMS personnel and used only during an emergency. The program is targeted towards Somerville residents who live alone and are aged 65+, or those

who are disabled and/or suffer from major medical issues at any age. Individuals living in apartment complexes or other facilities with maintenance staff are not eligible for this program. For more information, please contact **Debby Higgins** at 617-625-6600, ext. 2321 or email Debby at dhiggins@somervillema.gov.

Bad artists welcome! Join the **Somerville Public Library**, 79 Highland Ave. on **Wednesday, June 21** from 6:30 - 8:00 p.m. for an **Adult's Cursed Cards craft night** and create haunted, horror-filled and delightfully unhinged cards to your twisted heart's content. Presented by **Summer Scares!** Registration required: <https://tinyurl.com/5cwhnmk6>; with questions contact Bethany, bdoane@somervillema.gov.

Musicians, where do you rehearse and perform? As part of their ongoing art space initiatives, the **Somerville Arts Council (SAC)** is interested in understanding where musicians rehearse and perform. If you are a Somerville musician, please fill out this short questionnaire: <https://forms.office.com/g/0imCFX5fUR>.

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children hear the seismic background “noise” of the Earth, they will curl up in their parent's lap and settle into a very relaxed state. At the Joy Street open studios events I've had some really fun conversations with artists, mathematicians, philosophers, and people who are just plain curious about what I'm trying to do. It's a great opportunity for me to learn from others.

DH: Were you influenced by such minimalist music composer such as John Cage, etc.

JTB: My background is in science, so I feel some camaraderie with artists who borrow techniques from the world of science and technology to explore the nature of sound and silence. Cage himself was a master of silence, but he also did some brilliant compositions that used randomly tuned radios. His compositions raised deep questions about our assumptions about “noise” and “silence”. Sometimes it takes just a little bit of technology to make a profound esthetic discovery. When conceptual artist Juan Geuer shone a thin laser beam into a suspended drop of water, it filled the walls of a dimly lit museum gallery with a spectacular world of shimmering light and color. Who knew that the humble water drop contained such beauty!

Seeing technology applied this way has had a huge influence on me. It expands the idea of what “art” can be. At the other extreme, I also enjoy the use of maximal technology when it can reveal fresh minimalist ideas. For example, Janet Cardiff famously used forty loudspeakers to create a sonic sculpture from a choir of forty individual singers, while Tristan Perich built a wall of 1,500 loudspeakers, each softly playing a different tone. All of these artists who use technology to various degrees have made an impact on my approach to art. But I've also found inspiration from painters like Mark Tobey, Lee Krasner, and Hossein Zenderouti, among others. And of course, sometimes the best inspiration comes from simply listening to a field cricket on a summer evening.

DH: Although your interest is in sound, you published a version of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, entitled *The Evaporated Moby-Dick*. Your conceit was never to use the same word twice from the original novel – after a word appears it disappears, never to be seen again. What is the germ behind this idea?

JTB: I seem to be one of those strange people who actually loved reading *Moby-Dick*. I've read it three or four

times. There's something deliciously compelling about Ahab's inevitable doom that's foreshadowed beautifully in Melville's story-telling and use of language. I was fascinated by the idea that something as concrete as language can propel a reader's imagination towards an imaginary event as dramatic as (spoiler alert!) a shipwreck, where it seems that the entire world disintegrates into a floating pile of debris. The story's crescendo is really the point where language itself breaks down.

I wondered what would happen if language were allowed literally to disintegrate, until all that's left is a sea of broken bits and pieces of punctuation? So I wrote some software to sift through the text, eliminating words one by one, but leaving the punctuation intact. I think that when the text “evaporates” this way, it reveals the ultimate fallibility of language itself. Evaporating *Moby Dick* also surprised me because it revealed Melville's impressive vocabulary. Even in the last chapters of the book, where the text consists mostly of white space sprinkled with punctuation, he's still introducing new words. I think today's best-sellers would probably run out of new words after the first few pages!