



Linked map unfolded



The map folded up

A map of missing voices: Graeme Miller on *Linked* Debbie Kent

This map, part of artist Graeme Miller's locational sound installation *Linked* (2003), looks deceptively simple. The work is a trail of soundscapes experienced on headphones by an audience walking the route depicted on the map.

Linked was originally commissioned by the Museum of London following the completion of the M11 link road in 1999, which entailed the demolition of 400 homes (including Miller's own) carried out in the face of a vocal and angry protest campaign. The work involves a series of 20 radio transmitters placed at intervals along the route of the road in East London, each broadcasting the lost voices of people from the communities ripped apart by the building of the road. As an audience member – equipped with receiver, headphones and map – wanders within reach of a transmitter, their receiver picks up its signal and the soundtrack becomes audible, grows louder then fades out as they move away. Until recently the equipment for experiencing the work was available for free on request through arts organisation Artsadmin.

Over time holes have been appearing in *Linked's* radio soundscape as various transmitters blinked out of action. In spring 2020, all the transmitters that could still be accessed were taken down for repair and *Linked* was made temporarily unavailable. As it turned out, not long after I met Miller in March 2020 to talk about the map and its relationship to the work as a whole, the Covid-19 crisis put an end to all but “essential” walking in London for the indefinite future, so at the time of writing *Linked* has become almost wholly conceptual, existing in the memories of artist and audiences, and as potential sound on the damaged radio transmitters stacked in Miller's studio or the few left in situ. The map is the only piece of the puzzle that remains intact, doubling as documentation and relic of the work.

At first glance, it seems banal and ephemeral, like any other route map that folds into something you can put in your pocket and eventually discard. This is deliberate, the artist says: it was always meant to be a map for people to carry with them while walking. But

unfold it and it becomes clear that it is not a straightforward tourist map. Surrounding the central route, and the handful of streets splayed out around it, is a stark white space. As Miller says, this void is deliberate, and critical to the relationship of map to the soundscapes it charts, and the way both intersect with the participant's experience of the work.

"It's quite precisely tuned to have some areas that you would find on an A-Z map – but the whole thing has been redrawn so there are some sections where you see the arterial roads, the key roads that might orientate you, but also for no good reason a little cheeky bunch of streets that you're unlikely to go down unless you're lost," he says. "But outside the route the area has been erased. What's left is like some kind of brain tissue that's been eroded by dementia. Just as the M11 erased a community. You could almost say that what it shows is the damaged tissue of the motorway but also the areas in which each radio transmitter would somehow restore connected memory to those places."

Miller piles reference on reference while unpacking the design of the map. First he suggests it shows "the idea of Linked as a three-mile-long piece of work, a sort of sculpture made of dots", then talks of its similarity to satnav directions that ignore everything outside the route. Finally, he lands on a comparison with the sort of medieval maps that treat the world as if nothing exists beyond a limited territory, "where the oceans fall off the edge and there be dragons" in the blank spaces of the unknown.

I tell him that I did indeed get lost in those blank spaces the first time I tried to walk the route, and spent a while wandering round trying to find a transmission. He's unabashed. "The biggest gap is deliberately not putting the transmitters on the map," he says. "It would have been very easy and tempting to do it, to make it obvious. But I'm not being deliberately unkind to the walker, I'm being kind in inviting them to get lost. There is a certain amount of pleasure in discovery: you wouldn't give a kid a map of where all the eggs were in an egg hunt, it would be cruel, and I felt the same about this."

Miller talks about how the paper map, intended for participants, differs from his own conceptual map of the project, which envisages the transmitters as nodal points – "like buttons on a chesterfield sofa, that pull in the material around them". He also visualises them as fountains or the spires of mediaeval cathedrals – "the spire represented a visible and audible space which was pulling in the landscape around it – drawing it up and radiating it back out again, like a fountain. The fountain takes what's there and gives it back – so you would probably draw the transmitters as a series of fountains or cathedrals if they were on there."

The area has undergone some gentrification since the early 2000s, particularly in Leyton and Leytonstone, but when Linked started, Miller says, "it was dead ordinary". That was important to him: "Of course dead ordinary is dead interesting, and so I had the idea that you might wander off a bit and you should get lost at least twice and have to find your way back on to this red line. The line is actually quite precise, you can follow that and cross the road at exactly that point and you will find a transmitter."

When we talk about the way time has transformed the area, Miller points out that it has also had an effect on his hardware. "The trouble is there's been massive failure of the transmitters," he says. "We made the decision a few weeks ago to go out and bring a lot of them down. There's only a few bravely holding the space now. There's one transmitter that's benefited from being indoors – I think probably the people who run the building have forgotten about it – but there's a device lying in the attic that is transmitting around Leytonstone House so you can still hear sound transmissions that are now sixteen or seventeen years old, and these have been repeating over a million times now and a huge percentage of that time is unheeded."

This idea of radio transmissions that continue whether or not anyone is there to hear them is fundamental to the work's relationship with place; as Miller says: "It's the beauty of doing an analogue piece – it's analogue technology. You can't listen to it until you get there. It's not an app just using GPS to trigger a pre-stored thing. What's happening is there are real pools of electromagnetic energy that you can detect using the right sensor – and your sensor is your receiver. You can feel it crackle into clarity."

An idea has been floated to restore and repurpose the sound along the route so it could be accessed by something like a geolocated phone app, but besides pointing out that it is never meant to be permanent – "it was always billed as a semi-permanent installation" – Miller says that it is quite expensive to transfer it to an app. But the issue is not simply one of cost or technology. "There's this big existential question about it," he says, circling back to the map's blank spaces and the tension between forgetting and remembering inherent in the piece. "What do you do with a piece that's about memory when it starts losing its memory?"

The soundtracks transmitted along the route preserve stories from the residents who were uprooted by the building of the link road against their erasure by the road's development. "When things are demolished you cannot remember what was there before – it creates a completely contradictory space, and so these absent spaces don't fit into the footprint of a motorway," Miller says.

"It was a big deal to get people to do this," he remembers, talking about making the original recordings. "We worked hard to get people to describe their memories in the present tense, and it's so authoritative, it brings in the fact that it clearly was a historic moment, happening around you." People change the register of their speech when they remember in this way, he says, comparing it to the way David Attenborough speaks when he's close to a gorilla. "Their breathing changes because they're inhabiting that moment, it's all a bit hazy at the edges and then suddenly something vivid comes through."

So losing these transmissions means the loss of "some amazing stories – of people and places and wallpapers and back gardens" and the loss of a layer of forgotten sound woven into the route of the link road. But this sense of loss is at the heart of the work.

"I think this was always made as a resistance to top-down change – where the minute the motorway is open, nothing ever existed before, there's total erasure," Miller continues. "The resistance in saying memory should creak away and fade, but it's still got life in it yet, there's a sort of metaphor about human memory, that's always been an idea about this, about this being a kind of tissue, where we invest in networks beyond our own neural network, in a very similar way – but it's shared space - the map is the connective tissue between these synapses, is warped time and personal experience and belief and listening and that's carried forward. I'm interested in extending that, the life of these stories."

Miller is holding on to "the idea that you can only hear them in situ, because that's the special experience", and he suggests that one solution is restoring all of the transmitters once a year for 24 hours, making the continuation of the work being "about care over time and allowing forgetting to be part of the process," he says. "What was site-specific has suddenly become time-specific, and time embraces failure and decay ... The remaining transmitters are stoically repeating the messages and there's something about speaking things as they are and nobody listening, that's a very powerful thing."

The blank spaces on the map echo the idea of the work slipping into obscurity in this way, experienced only by a handful of people. "And actually, for me the piece becomes more and more interesting the fewer and fewer people do it," Miller says, pointing out how it's become almost like a secret.

The map I used a few years ago has become tattered and worn, torn at the fold points, so Miller gives me a brand new one to photograph. Its fragility seems to speak of this slow inevitability of decline and decay, and the effort to acknowledge it. “There's something in our times about if we're not able to reverse climate change and we are going to slide towards destruction, there's a way to do that that is humane, that involves justice, that's like an old age of our species,” Miller reflects. “My mind's tuned into that – probably because of my own impending decrepitude,” he jokes. “But it's also very much written in the future: children being born now will have to have a way to manage decline, manage retreat.”

That last note seems almost prophetic a few weeks after the interview, as London faces indefinite lockdown, with people staying indoors, traffic sparse, and high streets like Leytonstone's lined by shuttered shops and pubs. Miller's aim – to fix the transmitters and bring back an audience one day a year to follow the map once again – seems like a good thing to hold onto in the hope of seeing post-pandemic times, a careful way of restoring the city to itself. In the meantime, we still have the map.