SWEET ALCAIC METRES: ENGAGING WITH REGIONAL COMMUNITIES TO DEVELOP A NEW CREATIVE WORK

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Introduction

I n 2023, the authors were commissioned by Create NSW to participate in a statewide initiative titled *Regional Futures*. The project engaged 22 artists from diverse artistic disciplines to create a response to the question: 'What does the future look like in your region?' Each artist (or pair of artists) represented a different region of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, spanning the north, the coast, the far west and the mountainous New England North West, where this project was based.

The New England North West region is located approximately halfway between Sydney and Brisbane (about 500 kms from each), and two hours from the Mid-North Coast. It encompasses cities and towns such as Armidale, Tamworth, Glen Innes, the Liverpool Plains, Narrabri and Moree. The area is renowned for its livestock farming, mining (gold, tin, arsenic and copper) and alternative power sources, including historical hydroelectric stations and modern solar farms. Notably, it is one of Australia's first renewable energy zones (NSW Government 2024).

The question, 'What does the future look like in your region?', invites exploration through various environmental, political, cultural and educational lenses, including the growth and decline of communities, and Indigenous perspectives. To address this question, the authors began by examining historical accounts of the region, its past, its transformations (or lack thereof) and its potential future. This exploration culminated in a 15-minute audiovisual work titled *Sweet Alcaic Metres* composed of five movements, each reflecting the use, misuse and underuse of natural and civic resources within the region.

Objectives

Traditional qualitative research methodologies were employed to develop the research questions. Historical literature was examined to provide a foundation for public engagement, dialogue and collaboration. These discussions revealed that the focus of the work would centre on different types of resources, exploring their potential

Video. *Sweet Alcaic Metres*. Click the image to view.

futures and the consequences of their mismanagement. Key sites were identified to represent the region's diverse resources, including agricultural- and livestock-carrying capacity, water and land reclamation, cultural opportunities and civic heritage.

Insights were primarily gathered from farmers working agricultural land and engineers specialising in soil and water erosion. These experts shared their historical knowledge of the sites along with their current practices and concerns. Cultural and civic resource sites also played a significant role in the research, such as the Main Pavilion at the Armidale Showgrounds and the Old Teachers' College (Newling Building) which now houses the New England Conservatorium of Music.

Background

To frame the research questions and guide discussions with community collaborators, the inquiry began by examining existing artistic representations of the area, particularly the literature and poetry of Judith Wright (1915–2000). Wright, born in Armidale and raised on a property just east of the city, wrote extensively about the New England area in her letters, essays and poems. Her work often focused on the Australian environment, exploring the relationship between settlers, Indigenous Australians and the bush, as well as the broader connection between humanity and the natural world. Three of Wright's works were particularly relevant to this project: *Wilderness, Waste and History* (1991), *Facing the Past and the Future* (1991) and her poem, *Northern River* (1971).

Wilderness, Waste and History (1991) reflects Wright's deep ecological awareness, expressing concern about the impact of human activity on Australia's landscape. She critiques European settlement for its role in deforestation, urbanisation and industrialisation, highlighting the irreparable damage caused by these interventions. Wright also emphasises the significance of Indigenous Australian cultures and their profound connection to the land, advocating for a holistic understanding of the environment that incorporates Indigenous perspectives. Her 1991 essay, *Facing the Past and the Future*, examines resource consumption and overuse, exploring the effects on both the economic climate and ecological health of the environment. Water is a common theme in Wright's literature and the poem *Northern River* (1971) uses the beauty of waterways as a metaphor for broader environmental changes, lamenting the impacts of human mismanagement on these vital ecosystems. These themes informed the audiovisual work, connecting Wright's concerns from forty to fifty years ago with contemporary environmental issues in the region.

Audiovisual works can be powerful tools for engaging audiences in conversations about social and environmental issues. They appeal to emotions, intellect, and imagination by combining the emotive impact of visual imagery with the evocative power of sound. Through storytelling, imagery and sound, artists can inspire empathy, raise awareness and mobilise action towards positive change. Schafer (1994: 7) observed that 'the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it

and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society'. Gallagher (2014) expanded on this idea, describing the exploration of sounding places as 'audio geography', a form of experimental geography that represents and explores familiar places. Acoustic ecologists frequently use this medium to highlight environmental issues and provoke change over time (Barclay 2013; Tsang 2021).

Sweet Alcaic Metres engages with broader conversations in ecological sound art and environmentally responsive media. It draws from ecomusicology, an interdisciplinary field that examines the intersections of music, culture and nature. Ecomusicology often focuses on how music reflects, critiques or actively participates in ecological thought and environmental change. Allen (2011: 393) defines ecomusicology as:

> a socially engaged musicology that seeks to understand not just the music, musicians and/or [sic] musical communities, but also their interconnectedness in the world, both natural and socially constructed.

Soundscape compositions like Hildegard Westerkamp's *Into India* (2002) and Jana Winderen's *The Art of Listening: Under Water* (2019) use environmental recordings to create immersive sonic experiences that foreground non-human agency and natural soundscapes. Scholars such as Allen & Dawe (2016) have further shaped ecomusicology, exploring its concerns with sound and environment, whether through the representation of nature in music, the material impacts of music production or the use of music in activism and ecological awareness.

The collaboration between scientists and musicologists is explored by Guyette & Post (2016), exploring the value of both ecological and ethnomusicological perspectives, working together to enhance ecological knowledge and work towards sustainability. *Sweet Alcaic Metres* follows this methodological approach, collaborating with scientists and ecologists to develop a new creative artefact to highlight the ecological changes faced by the natural and human-made environment. This site-specific work is placed in regional NSW where key issues of land and resource management are at the forefront. The project sought to provide further understanding of this theme, adding to previous studies on the ecological and social value of soundscapes by Dumyahn & Pijanowski (2011). Additionally, the place-based recording practices help sustain cultural heritage by investigating site-specific environmental degradation, Indigenous knowledge systems, and climate impact (Allen and Dawe 2016; Bandt et al. 2009; Titon 2009). These approaches informed the aesthetic concepts of *Sweet Alcaic Metres*, which employs rhythmic structures and sound textures to evoke ecological processes, temporalities and entanglements.

A crucial aspect of creative work is forming sustainable artefacts that are relational and reflect past, present and future communities. In addition to Pedelty's (2012) argument for fostering environmental sustainability, Titon (2009) offers a compelling framework for sustainable music research and practice, arguing that ecological sound work must be relational, resilient and grounded in community and place. Titon's work urges musicians and scholars to approach music-making as a form of ecological care. These principles are reflected in *Sweet Alcaic Metres*, which integrates site-specificity, community engagement and soundscape composition. The work also aligns with the concept of 'field to media' (Pedelty et al. 2020) enacting ecological engagement through its visual media, sound composition and structure.

Sweet Alcaic Metres serves, in this way, as both a continuation of and a contribution to contemporary ecomusicological discourse. It synthesises poetic metre, environmental sound sensibilities and political listening to create an aesthetic and critical space for ecological engagement. The work stands alongside other contemporary pieces, such as Annea Lockwood's *A Sound Map of the Hudson River* (1982) and Jana Winderen's *The Wanderer* (2020), and immersive installations like Leah Barclay's *River Listening* (2015) and Ros Bandt's multimedia work, *Re-growth?* (2021).

This combined body of work affirms the role of music and sound as not only reflective but generative forces in environmental thought, capable of reshaping how we hear, feel and respond to the changing world around us.

Framework

The brief for this project required all participating artists to connect with their communities and local industries to gather data and information that would guide their artistic process. By engaging with individuals outside the arts, this socially engaged practice enabled

the researchers to explore people's experiences, thoughts and professional and personal perspectives, embedding themselves within the issues being investigated.

Wang et. al ([2017: 7](#)) define socially engaged research practice as:

> research developed through collaboration, participation, dialogue, and immersive experiences in one or more aspects of a research process, (including formulating research questions, generating data, analyzing data, and presenting research results) and to widen audience participation and positively transform participants, communities, or society.

Socially engaged research practice is often considered a form of arts-based research, extending conventional qualitative enquiry. Arts-based research strengthens qualitative approaches by introducing diverse methods for data collection and dissemination, enabling researchers to connect with stakeholders through non-traditional outputs. In this project, the output took the form of an audiovisual work that was exhibited live and digitally disseminated to reach broader audiences via online platforms. The research design involved collaboration with community members to formulate research questions and generate data. Conversations were held with scientists, engineers, landowners and farmers to broaden participation and ensure diverse perspectives were included. The final work was presented at the Casula Powerhouse in Sydney, showcasing findings in a creative and positive way designed to provoke thought and dialogue among a wider audience.

Savin-Baden & Whimpenny ([2014](#)) outline two key types of arts-based research: arts-informed inquiry and arts-informing inquiry, summarised in Table 1. This project incorporates elements of both approaches. Arts-informed inquiry is where 'art is used to represent the findings of an issue or situation studied' ([Savin-Baden & Whimpenny 2014: 5](#)). In this project, artistic representation was central to the research processes. By initiating dialogue with a range of community members, their responses helped shape the research questions and informed the socially engaged arts-based approach to develop the final work.

Arts-informing inquiry uses art to 'evoke a response from an audience (in the broadest sense) made to a situation or issue; the response may or may not be captured' ([Savin-Baden & Whimpenny 2014: 5](#)).The audiovisual work aimed to provoke thought and emotional engagement from its audience, encouraging reflection on the themes presented. Figure 1 provides a schematic of the different components of this creative practice research.

The Creative Work

Engaging with Others: Discussions

Conversations began with landowners, scientists, engineers and other community members. Rather than posing specific questions, participants were encouraged to share insights about their work, strategies for resources management and personal connections to the region's resources. Key topics included historical practices, alternate approaches, Indigenous knowledge and new technologies aimed at fostering sustainable farming and development.

Initial conversations centred on the dualism of wilderness and waste as well as the significance of human intervention. These themes were explored through visits to sites such as the Ottery Mine in Emmaville, the Emmaville community and the Emmaville Mining Museum. Environmental engineers highlighted the ecological impacts of removing plants and animals for civic development and explained 'putting back projects' designed to create better habitats for fish by providing alternative environments rather than simply eliminating natural resources. Other recurring topics included bush regeneration, cultural burning and the connection between people and land. The importance of passing knowledge to younger generations was emphasised during conversations at a site recently purchased for environmental education and awareness.

A central theme in the project was deep listening, a practice involving attentive engagement with the soundscape of natural and human-made environments. Deep listening fosters an understanding of the interconnectedness of living systems, human activities and the sonic environment. Practiced by First Nations people as part of land management, deep listening is also a vital aspect of sound ecology. Within

Table 1. Arts-Related Approaches. Adapted from Savin-Baden & Whimpenny ([2014: 5](#))

Type	Definition	Key features	Focus
Arts-informed inquiry	Where art is used to represent the findings of a study Where art is used to represent a response to the findings of an issue or situation studied	Use of art to enhance understanding, reach multiple audience and make findings accessible	Issues of representation
Arts-informing inquiry	Art is used in order to evoke a response from an audience (in the broadest sense) to a situation or issue; the response may or may not be captured.	Making meaning through complex performances or products that have power and are evocative	Issues of response

Figure 1. Framework for *Sweet Alcaic Metres*
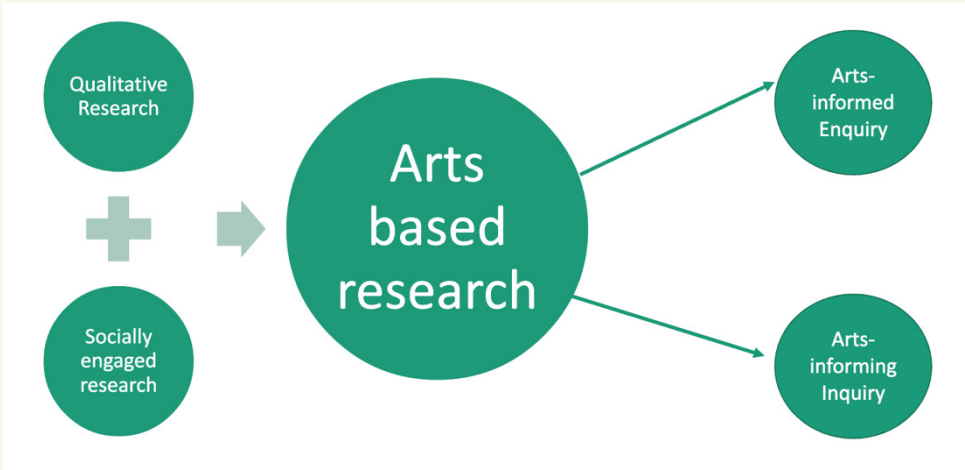
sound art, the concept of deep listening was championed by Pauline Oliveros, who promoted its use to strengthen connections between people and place through sound ([Oliveros 2005](#)). Oliveros also linked deep listening to environmental development and artistic practice:

> The level of awareness of soundscape brought about by Deep Listening can lead to the possibility of shaping the sound of technology and of urban environments. Deep listening designers, engineers and city planners could enhance the quality of life as well as sound artists, composers and musicians ([Oliveros 2005: XXV](#)).

These themes informed every aspect of the creative work, from the selection of sites to the visual and aural material used. The principles of deep listening and the insights gathered from community conversations were carefully considered throughout the interpretation and

development process. By incorporating these elements, the work reflects the interconnectedness of people, place and sound while addressing the environmental and social issues raised during the project.

Development of the Creative Work

Sweet Alcaic Metre

Judith Wright's poetry served as a foundational starting point for this project. A structural element derived from her work was used to shape the audiovisual material, ensuring consistency across the various sites explored by the researchers.

In her poem, *Northern River* (1971), Wright laments the mismanagement of waterways and its detrimental effect on wildlife.

<div align="center">

NORTHERN RIVER (Excerpt)

</div>

Where your valley grows wide in the plains

they have felled the trees, wild river.

Your course they have checked, and altered

your sweet Alcaic metre.

Not the grey kangaroo, deer-eyes, timorous,

will come to your pools at dawn;

but, their tamed and humbled herds

will muddy the watering places.

Passing their roads and cities

you will not escape unsoiled.

The phrase, 'sweet Alcaic metre', stood out as an opportunity to connect the project's themes with Wright's poetic structure. The Alcaic metre is a classical form of verse originating in Greek poetry, later adapted for use in Latin and Germanic works (Cudden 2013). In Latin poetry, each stanza consists of four lines is organised by a consistent pattern of long and short syllables, divided by a caesura (a deliberate pause or break).

To translate the Alcaic metre into the audiovisual medium, durations were assigned to each syllable type:
   - (-) LONG = 10 seconds
   - (u) SHORT = 5 seconds
   - (:) CAESURA = 3 seconds

Video clips were edited to maintain these durations, creating a rhythmic visual structure aligned with the metre (see Fig. 2). While most clips adhered to this pattern, minor adjustments were made to optimise the interplay between imagery and audio.

To avoid repetition, lines two and three of the four-line stanza were omitted and the first verse was split into two sections to bookend the middle line.

<div align="center">

Figure 2. Alcaic Metre Structure

</div>

Line 1,	- - u - - : - u u - u-
Line 4	- u u - u u - u - -
2nd half of line 1	: u u - u - u :

This template for the imagery was designed to function as a visual poem, with a latent structure beneath the surface that unifies the individual sections. By embedding Wright's Alcaic metre into the audiovisual composition, the project pays homage to her poetic legacy while exploring contemporary themes.

Video

The aim of the audiovisual work was to represent resources through moving imagery and recorded sound. Unlike the linear and straightforward structure typical of mainstream documentaries, this piece adopted a more fluid and contemplative approach. Longer clips (20–30 seconds) were used to allow the resources to speak for themselves, with minimal camera movement showcasing the surface materiality of the sites. Elements such as light and wind interacting with the environment were intentionally highlighted to evoke a sense of presence and connection. The filming was inspired by Salomé Jashi's *Dazzling Light of Sunset* (2016) and *Taming the Garden* (2021). In these works, the filmmaker avoids frequent cuts between angles and focal lengths, instead allowing people and organic movement to flow naturally through the frame. This approach positions the setting and environment as the central protagonist. Camera movement was limited to drone footage, which captured slow sweeps through spaces or aerial views of landscapes, mimicking the viewer's movement through these environments.

Audio and video were often collected simultaneously by the researchers working in close proximity. They worked independently, at other times, later reconnecting during the editing process. This collaborative dynamic proved one of the most fruitful aspects of the project, as it allowed for the blending and matching of each contributor's unique perspective. The audio was composed, in some edits, to align with the edited imagery, creating a harmonious interplay between sound and visuals. Specific video clips were chosen, in other cases, to complement the existing audio landscape, ensuring that both elements worked cohesively to convey meaning.

One particularly effective example of the interplay between film and sound composition occurred in Movement Five (10'45 – 14'46). Here, imagery of empty classrooms was paired with the sounds of a busy orchestra rehearsal. This juxtaposition highlighted the resources being represented, space and staff for cultural and artistic education, and served as a poignant reminder of what is at stake if these resources are mismanaged. The haunting image of a lonely, shuttered classroom, accompanied by audio that evokes the activities that should be taking place within that space, underscores the potential loss of cultural and educational opportunities. This moment encapsulates the power of audiovisual media to provoke thought and refection on critical issues.

Audio

The audio soundtrack for the project was inspired by Tsang's approach to sound art as a means of exploring aspects of place (Tsang 2021). In Tsang's work, sound is used to encourage listeners to form alternative perspectives of a place, inviting them to 'stop, float across temporalities and to re-imagine their relationship with place' (Tsang 2021: 112). For example, Tsang's *Automata* (2020) integrates visual elements as narrative devices and drivers of sound, allowing the audience to imagine themselves on the Warren River. Tsang describes the relationship between people and land as embodied and dynamic, with sound reflecting the history, geography and emotional responses of its listeners.

The aim of the soundtrack was to use sound to explore the cultural, historical and ecological aspects of place. To achieve this, the audio samples included environmental sounds captured directly from the sites to reflect their unique sonic characteristics, acoustic instrumental sounds featuring violin and recorder and historical sounds juxtaposing past events with current contexts to highlight continuity and change.

Site-specific sounds were often recorded simultaneously with the video footage to ensure that the environment became a co-creator in the work. This approach fostered co-constructed relationships between the external environment and the creative process, strengthening the dynamic connection between land and people.

When audio was placed under the visual media rather than visual media being aligned to the audio), shorter and more subtle sounds adhered to the Alcaic metre prescribed by the visual breakdown. Longer sustained background tracks were layered to

create flow and development within the storyline. This method ensured a seamless integration of sound and imagery, enhancing the narrative's depth and emotional resonance.

An example of this approach can be seen in Movement One (00'00 – 03'47), filmed at a property outside Armidale. The visual and audio timeline (rough working) in Figure 3 encapsulates the interplay between video changes, soundscape and meaning, based on conversations and literature. This movement also featured a melody played by one of the creators on a Renaissance tenor recorder. The piece, *O tu qui servas* (also known as *Song of the Watchmen of Moderna*), is a ninth-century lyric poem that was slowed down for this project. Its hauntingly beautiful melody was chosen to evoke a sense of watching, waiting and longing. Suspense and tension are built through dissonant layers over the imagery of the river, reflecting Wright's description of its changing and muddied state. This aligned with discussions held with the landowner on-site regarding issues of erosion and environmental degradation.

This opening movement examines evidence of soil erosion, renewable energy, technological advancements and humanity's connection to the land. Through visual and auditory elements, it highlights the interplay between environmental challenges and opportunities for sustainable development.

Movements Two (03'47 – 07'31) and Three (07'31– 09'41) rely exclusively on ambient sounds to create their soundscapes. In Movement Two, the sparsely built backdrop of an empty pavilion underscores the underutilisation of country halls and spaces, which now serve as backdrops to campsites. The absence of melodic or harmonic material invites the audience to engage with silence and stillness, drawing attention to the visual imagery. This approach encourages deep listening, allowing viewers to reflect on the situation and form their own emotional and intellectual responses.

Figure 3. A Sound Map for Movement 1, *Sweet Alcaic Metres*
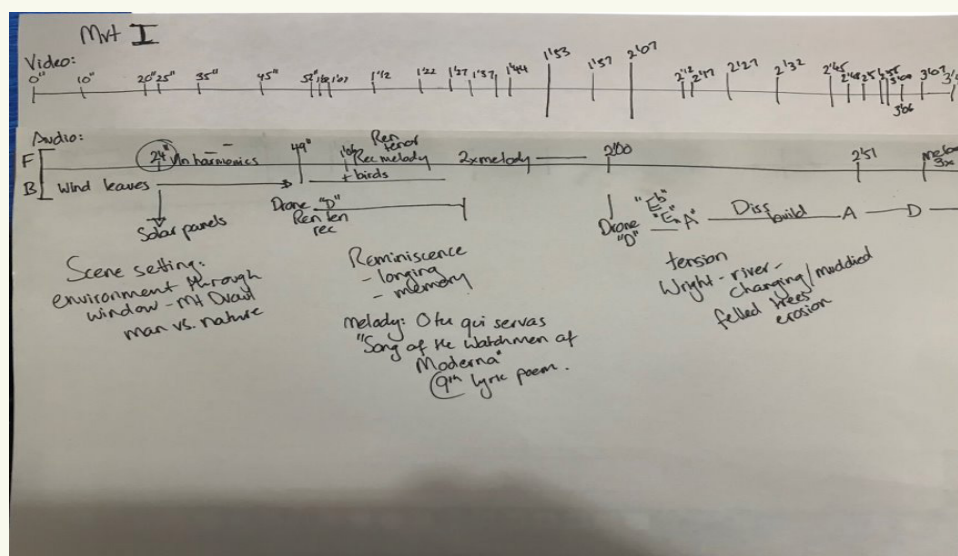
Movement Four (09'41 – 10'45) focuses on the decommissioned Ottery Mine, raising critical questions about water usage, pollution, land rehabilitation and the closure of industrial sites. A single tonal drone is used to enhance the atmosphere, creating an immersive soundscape that evokes illusions of movement. Spatial effects are used to transport listeners to different environments, deepening their engagement with the themes of environmental impact and recovery.

Conclusion

The work was premiered at the Casula Powerhouse in Sydney in July 2023 as part of the *Regional Futures* exhibition. This audiovisual site-specific project emerged from deep discussions and collaborations, blending arts-based research with community engagement. The work aims to inform and enhance understanding of environmental and human-made developments for diverse audiences through evocative and impactful artistic expression. Rather than relying on traditional scientific communication to address concerns about the environment and resource use, this project embraced a creative approach. By engaging with community members, the researchers were able to foster dialogue, formulate research questions and present findings in a respectful and locally relevant manner.

The arts have a unique ability to evoke responses from audiences, particularly on topics that resonate with a community. They can present familiar sights and sounds that connect viewers on an emotional level, provoking thought and conversation about environmental issues (Curtis 2006). Future plans include a dedicated showing of the work to capture responses form the local community. Early feedback from audience members has already highlighted the work's impact. Two attendees, both former residents of the New England region, commented that the piece transported them back to the area and encapsulated its unique sites and resources. These reactions underscore the significance of audiovisual works in provoking memory, thought and nostalgia about a place, especially when the information presented is rooted in meaningful engagement with local communities.

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Appendix

Movement Timings

Movement 1	00'00 – 03'47
Movement 2	03'47 – 07'31
Movement 3	07'31 – 09'41
Movement 4	09'41 – 10'45
Movement 5	10'45 – 14'46

SOUND AND IMAGE CREDITS

Video footage and editing: Mike Terry. Sound design and composition: Alana Blackburn

ABSTRACT

Sweet Alcaic Metres is an audiovisual work commissioned by Create NSW to contribute to the 'Regional Futures' project in 2023. The creators were asked to respond to the prompt 'What does the future look like in your region?' and were encouraged to engage with experts and members of the community to develop a creative response. This audiovisual project began by exploring historical creative responses to changes in the environment through the writings and poetry of Judith Wright, followed by discussions with soil scientists, engineers and station owners to capture the use, misuse and underuse of natural and civic resources within the New England North West

area of New South Wales. This project is an example of qualitative arts-based research combining both arts-informed and arts-informing inquiries as a representation and response to an issue or situation.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alana Blackburn is a professional recorder player and Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of New England, Armidale, NSW. As a professional musician, Alana performs both early and contemporary music as a soloist and in collaboration with several ensembles and musicians. Her research interests include performance, pedagogy and arts management, and has recently collaborated with sound designers to develop new impactful creative works.

 Mike Terry has worked in photography, film and analogue collage in commercial, academic, editorial and fine-art arenas internationally. He earned a B.A. in Communication from the University of Utah in 2010 and was awarded a Fine Art, Music, Architecture and Dance Graduate Scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in 2011, through which he earned his M.A. in Visual and Media Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin. In 2014 he developed the course, Space and Place, with Dr. Christian Reichel and lectures at the Freie Universität Berlin and Hochschule für Medien und Kunst in Berlin. Mike has been the visual producer for the studio of filmmaker Yulia Mahr and classical composer Max Richter in the United Kingdom.