

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Aeolian Piano

By Catherine Yass



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor Catherine Yass
Name of Output:	Aeolian Piano
UCARO link:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/5433/
Output Type:	Q – Digital and Visual Media; artist’s film
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>SCREENING Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), London, 28 February 2017</p> <p>EXHIBITION Upcoming: <i>Falling Away</i> solo exhibition, 2021 London Festival of Architecture, Ambika P3, London (rescheduled from June 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak)</p>
Key Words:	BBC, sound, film, performance, verticality, regeneration
Funding:	Arts Council: £20,000 White Noise: £1,000 and in-kind funding Galerie Lelong, New York: £5,000 Alison Jacques Gallery, London: £7,500 Private donation: £10,000 Sale of work: £15,000 Techniker Engineers & Hughes Meyer architects: in-kind funding

Synopsis

Aeolian Piano is a research output by Professor Catherine Yass comprising a 20 minute 23 second film and a series of light-box photographs. The work depicts a grand piano suspended by a crane and circling above the BBC Television Centre during its conversion into residential property.

The site of the BBC TV Centre exemplifies how publicly-owned property passes into private ownership. The film is a lament for the departure of the BBC and to this end uses sound in a new and experimental way. The cranes supporting the piano are symptomatic of the cranes probing the sky all around London. They are harbingers of new skyscrapers and apartment blocks about to fill the sky and turn it into real estate. They will change the horizon both physically and in terms of society's view of itself.

Aeolian Piano draws on the circular shape of the building to emphasise the original vision for the BBC to embrace the

world and bring it into the centre of every home. The work also expands on Yass's research into verticality and the way in which photography and film have been used to reinforce ideologies of power embodied in architecture. Yass harnesses the motion of verticality to undermine and draw out the precarity of built structures and the ideologies behind them.

Aeolian Piano was screened at the Royal Institute of British Architects in 2017. A 2020 solo exhibition of Yass's work, including *Aeolian Piano*, was scheduled to be held at Ambica P3 gallery, London, but has been delayed to 2021 due to Covid-19. The exhibition will focus on the theme of verticality in architecture.

This portfolio outlines the project's underpinning research context, aims and methods, and its research insights. It includes images of the production of the film and stills from the finished piece.



Still from Aeolian Piano



Archival photo of BBC site

Context

Aeolian Piano was one of eight works commissioned by White Noise, an Arts organisation based in White City, to mark the departure of the BBC from the iconic BBC TV Centre in Wood Lane. The BBC TV Centre was built in 1960 when Britain had an idea of itself as a voice of the world, and the BBC as a voice of the nation with an impartial world view. This aspiration was as deeply flawed as it was visionary, relying on the idea of a Britain that could speak for the world as if it still owned large parts of it, and assuming that an impartial world view is even possible. However, the BBC did represent a voice that aspired to be independent of government, political interest and advertising, driven by the desire to look outwards and embrace the world, and to bring it into every home.

When the BBC TV Centre was vacated, over 60 grand pianos were found abandoned in the basement. This led to Yass's research into historical abuses of pianos, as anthropomorphic objects and subjects of iconoclasm. The commission coincided with Yass's ongoing research into suspending a grand piano so that the wind could play in its strings. The discovery of these pianos made *Aeolian Piano* an immediate choice for sounding a swan song for the departure of the BBC.

The project grew out of Yass's research through practice into idealistic projects of modernism, often expressed through verticality, and into the perceived failure of modernist architecture. The project marks a development in Yass's practice of exploring ideologies that are now regarded as failures. Her work questions what is meant by failure, for instance in her films *Lighthouse* (2012), *High Wire* (2008), *Wall* (2004), and *Descent* (2002).

Aeolian Piano draws on historical and contemporary practice in its concerns and form, particularly the sculpture and performance of the 1970s that explored verticality and entropy, which Yass references in relation to high-rise buildings and the collapse of ideology. The work's sound, produced by the wind in the piano strings, grew out of research into experiments with sound in the 1970s.

The use of chance by artists such as John Cage and Merce Cunningham produced a sense of vulnerability which seemed appropriate for this project relating to the BBC in 2018. Yass investigated the entropy inherent in, for instance Robert Smithson's *Glue Pour* (1970) or Gordon Matta Clark's *Splitting* (1974). Once made they could not be undone, just as the BBC's departure and the manic building of luxury real estate tower blocks cannot be undone and has been embedded in our capital. Anna Minton addresses these questions in her book *Big Capital* (2017), which informed the research aims in *Aeolian Piano*.

Key texts:

Deriu, D. (2016) 'Don't look down!': A short history of rooftopping photography', *Journal of Architecture*. Volume 21:Issue 7, pp 1033-1061

Deriu, D. and Kane, J. (2018) 'Towards a vertigology of contemporary cities', *Emotion, Space and Society*. Volume 28, pp 79-83

Minton, A. (2017) *Big Capital: Who Is London For?* London: Penguin.

Research Questions and Aims

Research question:

Yass's primary research question grew out of her research into the history of the BBC as an organisation, and into the BBC TV Centre. The idea that a British, or any, organisation, could be impartial is questionable and so too is the idea that a country could speak for the world. This aspiration suggests that in 1922, when the BBC was formed, Britain still had an idea of itself as an empire, controlling and speaking for most of the world. Yet for all its flaws the BBC and the building it occupied stood for some kind of clarity and reliability. Yass therefore framed her research with the following question:

—How to find a way of mourning the transformation into luxury flats of this visionary building that embodied the world outlook of the BBC, whilst acknowledging that this global vision was also deeply flawed?

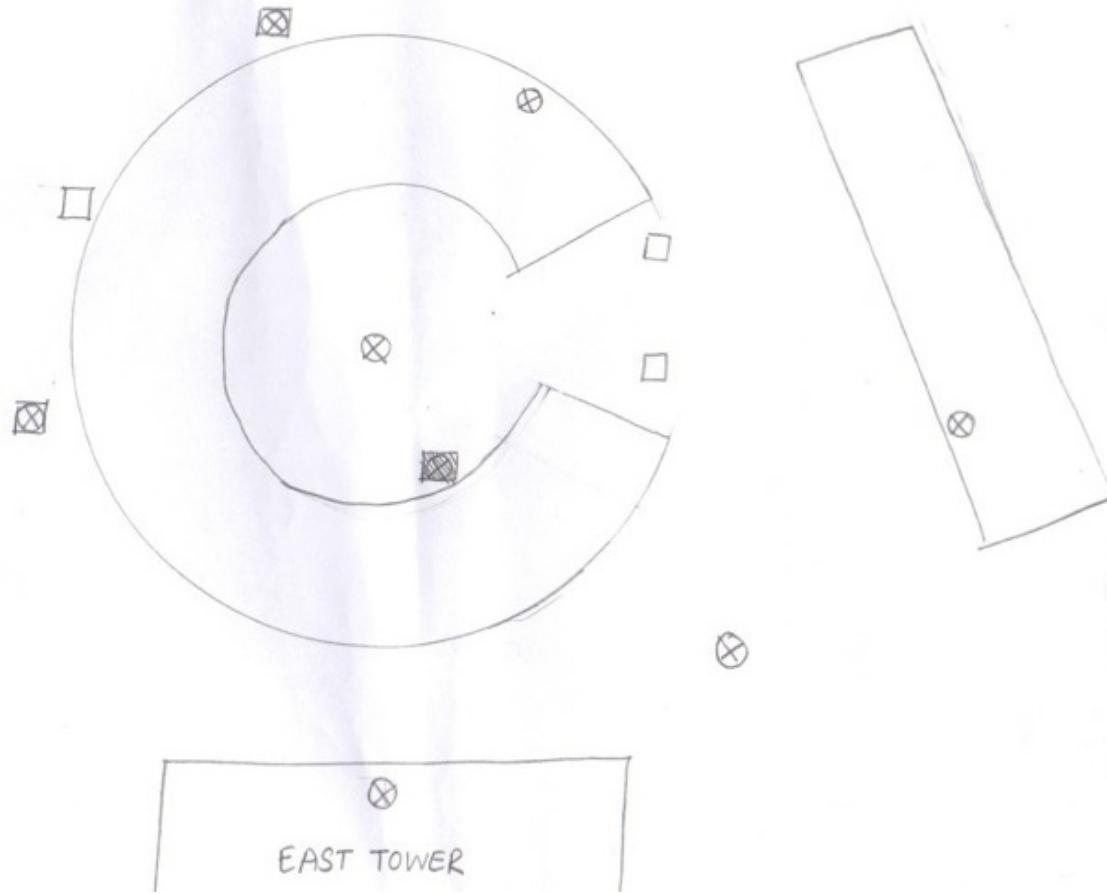
Research aims:

To raise awareness of the BBC's departure from the TV Centre and make a record of it as a visionary building before it was turned into real estate.

To mark this moment of departure—physical and symbolic—of the BBC from its centred position within a circular building, at a moment when the BBC's aim to deliver independent programming was continually under threat from government pressure.

AIR PIANO AT BBC. INITIAL THOUGHTS FOR CAMERA LOCATIONS
TBC AFTER RECCE.

- crane
- ⊗ camera
- ⊗ camera on crane
- ⊗ camera on piano lifting crane





Tower crane locations

Research Methods and Process

Yass researched the history of the BBC TV Centre through the BBC and RIBA archives. These included plans and photographs of models for the construction of the building, photographs of the building process and the first moments of occupation, and a film of the opening ceremony. Yass brought together material from these two archives for the screening of *Aeolian Piano* at RIBA.

In order for Yass to fulfil her research aims and realise the film and photographs, conceptual and technical solutions had to be found, permissions sought, and risk assessments and health and safety checks passed. Each design and safety decision grew out of the concept of the work and in turn impacted upon it.

Collaboration was key to the research. Yass worked with Hughes Meyer Studio architects who brought on board Techniker Engineers. With Yass they came up with the design of the crane cradle for the piano and the method of suspending it. She worked closely with the production manager David Broder to liaise with the construction company and develop risk assessments observing health and safety requirements.

The choreography of the multiple cranes used to make the film originated with a crane map and included complex

discussions with the crane drivers about the direction, height and speed of the cranes, and what was and was not possible. All of the camera positions and shots were worked out from photographs which were given to each camera operator. The sequence of filming from multiple positions involved ensuring that no cameras were in shot.

The method of recording sound was the most complex and uncharted part of the research. Yass worked closely with sound artists David Shepherd and Simon Keep to develop a method of recording the vibrations of the wind in the strings and converting it into sound. It was necessary to prevent, as far as possible, the actual sound of the wind disrupting the harmonics. Hughes Meyer secured the commercial MIRA wind tunnel for a day to test the microphone take up in high wind conditions.

For postproduction, Yass worked on the offline edit over several months in her studio. Simon Keep worked with her on the sound, distilling the digitally-recorded vibrations in the piano strings into harmonics. These were then played back through the piano and recorded, and the process repeated until the sound became more and more abstract, while still being rooted in its original state and the site. The online edit with Silver Salt Film Restoration involved scanning the 35mm ciné film, compositing and grading it for colour.

Research Insights and Contribution

The process of researching and making *Aeolian Piano* saw the emergence of different and complex histories that inflected the meaning of the work. Yass's original idea of marking and mourning the departure of the BBC, with its world view embodied by the building, was complicated by her realisation of how flawed that world view was. The question that arose was how to hold onto the valuable aspects of that vision, of an organisation that is independent from government and believes in being as impartial as possible, given that impartiality is never possible, and given Britain's imperial past. It was these aspirations that were both celebrated and mourned by *Aeolian Piano*.

The grand piano suspended above and circling the building communicated a baroque grandeur which appeared to be under threat as the piano swung in the air, vulnerable in the wind and destabilised by the crane's movement. The piano had anthropomorphic qualities that made its appeal more emotional. As part of her research, Yass investigated historical instances of heavily symbolic 'abuse' of pianos, such as when the Russian army threw Chopin's piano out of a window, when Nazis threw a piano out of the window on Kristallnacht, and when IS burned an Iraqi citizen's piano because playing is against Shariya law. Such moments suggest that the piano stands for something human and resilient, challenging and inviting repression by dominant powers. In the film the frailty of the sound in the piano strings prevails over the giant structures of cranes and buildings that are taking over the site and turning it into real estate. The music produced

by the wind in the strings is more of a plaintive elegy than a composed work.

At the screening at the RIBA, showing the film alongside plans and photographs from the archive gave the project depth and context, which was reinforced by the location of the event in the iconic RIBA building. The panel discussion explored the issues raised by the work and set it in an architectural and historical context. Robert Seatter of the BBC showed documentation of how the building was first used by BBC employees, and this felt particularly poignant when contrasted to recent footage of the deserted building and the design details and signage that employees took as souvenirs as they left. This underlined the meaning and emotional impact of moving the BBC out of its visionary building.

The photographic work that resulted from the project opened up new technical and conceptual possibilities. Yass was able to develop her established practice of combining positive and blue negative photographic film by adding a new layer, showing clouds photographed at the time of filming, to give the piano an elevated sense of suspension, suggesting lyricism equivalent to the sound of the wind in the piano strings.

Aeolian Piano involved a substantial number of organisations, funders, advisory experts, crew and postproduction team. Collaboration was key to its success, and managing this number of people will be important for Yass's future projects.





Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination:

Aeolian Piano was screened at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 2017. It was shown alongside material from the archive of plans and photographs of the BBC TV Centre held at RIBA, to give the project a historical context. Like the BBC TV Centre, the RIBA, built in 1934, is an iconic building which set a precedent as a modernist building that embodied an optimistic and idealistic outlook.

The screening was accompanied by a panel discussion with Yass, Robert Seatter (Head of BBC History), Francesca Hughes (partner at Hughes Meyer Studio) and Alice Cicolini (of White Noise), which explored the issues raised by the work. The audience included architects, artists and writers.

Information about the screening and panel discussion were published on the websites and social media of RIBA, White Noise (the commissioning body), Alison Jacques Gallery, London and Galerie Lelong, New York.

Follow-on-activities:

Yass discussed *Aeolian Piano* in April 2020 in an event at the Contemporary Art Society, in discussion with George Vasey, Wellcome Trust curator (CAS artist conversation series).

Aeolian Piano will be included in *Falling Away*, a solo exhibition of Yass's work at Ambika P3 gallery that has been postponed from June 2020 to June 2021. This will be accompanied by a one day symposium on Verticality, and the publication of a book, *Falling Away*.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Influence of research:

Falling Away has developed out of ongoing research events and discussions with Davide Deriu, Reader in Architectural History and Theory and Assistant Research Director at the School of Architecture and Cities at Westminster University. In 2015 Yass gave the keynote talk at *Vertigo in the City*, a two day symposium at Westminster University.

Ambika P3 is another highly symbolic building relevant to Yass's work, constructed as a huge underground concrete testing laboratory. Curator Michael Maziere has dedicated the space to film and installation, showing artists such as Chantal Akerman and Lindsay Seers, and collaborations with Artangel.

The *Falling Away* book comprises two overview essays by Davide Deriu and Michael Maziere, and an essay on each film. For *Aeolian Piano*, the essay is 'The Power and the Fury' by Lucy Reynolds.

Aeolian Piano is discussed in a further essay, 'Missing Music', by Michael Davidson, Professor of American Literature at the University of California San Diego, in his forthcoming book, *Distressing Language: Mishearing, Misspeaking and the Poetics of Error*.

Aeolian Piano has been discussed in Yass's artist lectures at the Universities of Newcastle and Sheffield, Chelsea School of Art and most recently at UCA. It was shown at the RCA as part of the film studies programme.

Yass's seminars at UCA on Verticality have included discussion of *Aeolian Piano* in relation to verticality, aspiration and falling.



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Stills from Aeolian Piano

