

Report for Ma Composition and Sonic Art Module.

2009-2010

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automother autoson autospirit

Abstract:

This report will explore the directions and decisions taken during the conception, production and delivery of a work of art as undertaken by Paul Rutter in the special subject area of the Ma Composition and Sonic art. Supporting materials may be found in the appendices on the attached CD.

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Section: Deviation

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Key words.

Kinetic, sonic, autonomous, art-work, aeolian, drone, process.

Introduction.

The purpose of this report is to examine the processes involved in attempting an artistic action. The 'work of art' that was shown for the feedback forum at the OVADA gallery was an expansion of a previous sketch. A continuation and development of a process that was begun in mid 2009. It could be variously described as; a kinetic sound machine, a sonic event, an installation and an immersive sound environment.

Section: Process.

At my last tutorial a discussion was had about the difficulties involved in realising work. It was suggested that considering maquettes as a solution to the problem of understanding and presenting an idea to the group or galleries and/or for use as a tool for proposal writing¹ could be an option. The artist Max Eastley advocates the usefulness of content modelling in the working process, to help realise problems of scale and to better understand the work in situ. Nevertheless, maquettes were never really an option for this piece, as I just knew instinctively that it would 'resonate' in an acoustically vibrant space. Some works would probably not derive much benefit from the model making process, A final outcome could be reasoned and imagined, but in reality only the objects location in space would be fully understood, the sonic and dynamic elements are almost impossible to replicate without precision made models and/or computer modelling. The discovery of new ways of making the work may arise through the production of maquettes however, and should not be dismissed as an additional process.

¹ I spoke at length with Stephen Cornford about the proposed piece, and I had said that perhaps I would be making maquettes and showing a PowerPoint presentation which would give a better overview of the research I have been doing if circumstances conspired to stop the work at OVADA. Please see appendices.

Section: Deviation.

A few ideas were sketched out for musical compositions, mobiles, kinetic sculptures, software based sound applications and other sonic elements, most of which will never leave the paper. The windbells had started to be actuated with other, more mechanical means. It is these experiments, which almost definitely drove the ideas behind an autonomous, self-perpetuating instrument. The aeolian drum from the last forum, had stuck in my head as a potentially good opportunity. And so in exploring the history of aeolian instruments lead me to the idea of a self-propelled or auto-aeolian sound machine. A dark poetic thing, a mournful object, conversing with the sound of its own composition, oscillating back and forth, generating a reflexive discourse between the objects. Both, spatially, visually and sonically.

A sacred trinity.

The bass, the drum and the amplifier.

The female form, the rhythmic device, the bringer of the spirit noises.

“The works of sound installation, seek out a specificity of sound in which location and listening intersect. The place of sound becomes as much a part of auditory experience at the material of sound itself” Brandon LaBelle i

Incorporating the means of producing the sound and also the means of delivery, presented the whole of the concept as a totality, and so, rather than struggling with the idea of separation and/or undisclosed sources we are presented with an complete body at work. Since the sound must have a source, and we can take that as read. The decision to include all of the aspects of the process, making them visible and indivisible from the whole seemed to be the only possible course of action. This move is paradigm shift for me, previous work had attempted to occlude the means of production, the choice to only reveal the auditory aspect of the work had been paramount. This, in my opinion is now a to a large extent a flawed approach, as the listener will formulate a *loco originis* source to compensate for the lack of any other information. As this allows for a wide margin of misinterpretation why not see the means of production as an

integral part of the experience? As we see the performer play or perhaps note the loudspeakers in the lounge.

Section: Divergence.

The installation had to be executed as planned, by necessity it had been rather better organised than before. The dimensions of the room were known, some time had been spent at OVADA getting to know the room, listening to the acoustics and noting the whereabouts of the power points² It was evident to me that the work would activate in that space.

Aesthetic consideration.

The main elements of the piece, the hogtied³ Bass guitar⁴, the suspended drum⁵ and a Peavey bass amp⁶. The heavy industrial electric motors, jerry rigged fans and old school lamps. The objects themselves have historical and aesthetic density which adds a certain depth, or resonance to the work. The rope work in English Hemp⁷ was all done at the studio, as was the wiring and any other construction needed. As far as was possible everything was planned outside of the building as there was only one shot at getting it right. In on the Friday, set up then the gallery closed until the day of the crit. So the pre-preparation was critical.

2 A vital and often sadly overlooked piece of information. The immense hassle of planning an electrically dependant installation and then arriving with no idea of the whereabouts of the supply is a recipe for disaster.

3 Mainly used in BDSM but a variation of the hogtie can be used to torture and kill its victim: the hands are tied behind the back and the feet are tied together, with one end of the rope around the victim's neck. The tension on the neck-rope can only be relieved if the victim keeps their neck, back and legs arched; eventually, the victim tires and strangles to death. [allegedly used by US forces in Guantanamo bay]

4 [1964 Hofner Verithin] I had chosen the bass over the normal six string, not only for its aesthetic qualities, but because of the difference in tonality that it could produce, also it is my first instrument [that I play].

5 1960's Pearlite, hanging tom, Which really is its popular nomenclature, and a good title for another piece too.

6 Pulled fully working from a skip last year, its amazing what people will chuck out.

7 The 'hempen harness' was a popular name for the hangman's noose, hemp rope was widely used in restraining slaves or prisoners. .

Section: energy

Shamanic Divination.

For me, the unknown aspect of the work is always the exhilarating bit. The resultant aggregate of object, sound and motion. One can see the piece in the mind's eye, visualise how it will be in a given space, imagine how it will behave and speculate about the sonic elements. But one cannot know exactly how the final work will influence the space, or how the details of the sonic environment [feedback loops, standing waves, reverberation etc.] will act upon each other when excited by the addition of the generated sound. The objects respond to each other in a multitude of chaotic interactions, which are dependant on some of these factors, the pitch of the Bass, the resonant regions of the room itself, the loudness of the reproduced, regurgitated material and the geographical locations of the objects in the space. So the work is always a journey of discovery in the making, tuning and conclusion. Is it a body without organs?ⁱⁱ A Listening, speaking, breathing, machine?

Not Like That Please.

The danger of it ending up fatally compromised, extremely frustrating and useless for any constructive feedback was the cause of much apprehension. Open space was a vital component of the work, as the occupied territory marked out by the sound, delineated the extent or power of the encounter. *"I was really struck by the sound as I was coming up the stairs"* P. Whitty As we can hear, the piece extends itself beyond the normal parameters of the visual idiom. Without the space for people to move around the work it would have failed utterly, and so, unwilling to compromise on this front and after looking at the available spaces in the university⁸ I decided to go outside and find a more acceptable space.

⁸ The Arena. Deadlines too tight. The lobby. Health and safety nightmare. The Drama Studio. Architecturally busy, and very black. The Harts Bar room, too loaded with musical references.

Section: Methodology.

My preferred method of working is to sketch endlessly until an idea which seems to be worthy of attention, what normally happens is that a seemingly unimportant moment of a sketch or idea begins to stick, or rather, it is not dislodged by all the other ideas and concepts which flow by, its kind of like a pearl, a pearl of wisdom, a callous. The idea sticks and bits of other ideas get caught on to it until it becomes large enough to be so troublesome as to demand serious attention. Then some riffing with any available/relevant objects/materials must be done. This physical element is important to me, thinking with my hands, seeing and hearing an evolutionary pattern. This process is almost exactly what happened in this case.

Section: Context.

Invisible force. Natural force.

This work is firmly grounded in the kinetic tradition and is not alone in its use of wind as a generative source, most notably the artist Alexander Calder employs wind as the driver for his mobiles as does Theo Jansen who constructs walking sculptures that are animated by the wind. My own work is probably closer to Max Eastley in its origin, as the sonic element is given predominance over the visual. However, the aesthetic properties are not overlooked, they just take a back seat. The drone aspect is obviously not a side-effect of the machine but a generative aggregate that is at the centre of the experience. It is not music in the traditional way, but a robotically generated improvisation, governed by machinic rules and architectural details, a microtonal self-replicating autonomous feedback loop. In being located within the instrument, we are made part of it, our organic bodies interrupting the machine circle, subtly changing the acoustics of the room, interfering with the aerodynamics of the space.

Artists I have been looking at: Tinguely, David Beattie, Paul Klee, Max Eastley, Lamont Young, Nick Ramage, Phil Niblock, Pali Mersault. Cornelius

Cardew. Ray Lee Naim June Paik, Brandon LaBelle, Len Lye, Christian Marclay.

Section: Feedback.

The work was situated in the upstairs room at the OVADA Gallery, everyone waited down stairs before the machine was switched on, the audience then mounted the stairs and entered the room. After a short period the machine was turned off and the audience was invited to vocalise their initial responses.

"I thought it was lovely, I enjoyed your humour and your ideas about how we can view these things visually, but even more so the industrial aeroplane and deep sound I really enjoyed those klonky bits of machinery and where you put them, and the rope, a mixture of the expected and the unexpected and that lovely big sound, its delightful."

The humour in my own work is a bit lost on me, it is an unintentional outcome, which perhaps should be used to better effect, juxtaposition of objects could have lent a humourous perspective. Perhaps I don't get my own jokes?

"I thought it was very predominant, the sound of the bass and the electrical sound from the amplifier when I closed my eyes it was as if everybody in the room was talking, but when I opened them they were all silent. It was a weird compilation of different sounds that was quite complex."

The image of the sound as some kind of received telepathic language I really like. The sound element is amazingly complex, full over overtones, distortion and dissonance, if one listens to it closely. It is a hard act to balance out the visual impact and the sonic content. If achieved, the harmonisation of the senses would be an interesting thing to experience.

"I really loved the deep sound, but there was this really high frequency sound that was really mesmerising I don't know why. It was very intense, I got a flashback from the Ipress file when he uses torture. But I struggled to find a meaning. But I was blown away by the acoustic qualities. But by contrast I couldn't hear the drum"

Although the drum did not have as much impact as hoped it was present sonically and visually in the room. The mention of the Ipress Files is a

good indicator that the torturous implications of the piece were not entirely overlooked, the high frequency sound is actually computer network chatter radiating and being picked up by the unshielded telephone cable that I had employed as the link from the guitar to the amp. Making a feature of this by boosting the Hi-frequency (16k) on the amplifier was a part of the natural process of discovery when setting up an installation; one can go with the flow or be frustrated by it.

“Purely looking at the sculptural side of it there are exquisite materials or objects, the knot work the, rope work the way the things are tied, it’s all beautifully set up.”

“I liked the contrast between the really big sound and precarious swinging and the instruments are so finely balanced, they look as if they would be destroyed by the fans.”

That risk absolutely existed and there was a very real danger that my beautiful bass could be smashed to matchwood, not to mention the possibility of my audience being peppered with flying debris. I was concerned, but had to have faith in my abilities as a maker⁹.

“I was really struck by the sound as I was coming up the stairs, I thought it might be a bus, but I was glad to find that it was not a bus, it seems to be a really celebratory kind of a sound, there is something very free about it what really struck me was the heritage of these instruments which is easily implied, I cant help thinking about the last tune played on that bass guitar. And the drum is curious it’s kind of beautiful with the white diamond effect. I really enjoyed going and listening to the Amp, there are some really nice sounds of the guitar and then to explore the threshold of that sound”

The fact that the work can extended its self out of its perceived container is an interesting aspect of sonic art, particularly if there is a visual element that is vital to the piece. Did the work become real in the ears of the listeners before it was made whole through the visual? After the initial sonic tease, there seems to be a direct and tangible relationship with the objects, their history imagined or otherwise, and afterward a more considered listen to the generated sound.

⁹ The home-brewed fan had been tested with a 2-hour continual run, then short runs and careful inspection.

“I find it incredibly poetic not just formal, the word I am looking for is post-human”

Although the human agency has left, the machine goes on; this imagery is very potent for me, as the working title for this piece was “what will it be like 50 years from now?” In a world much changed from the already swiftly changing one we inhabit right now. It was almost as if we had stumbled across this self assembled noise thing hundreds of years after the humans had left. I am not sure if I am consciously a post-humanist, I am aware of the term through Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto”ⁱⁱⁱ and Manuel de Landa’s “War in the age of intelligent machines”^{iv} and although they take differing views¹⁰ that is apparently allowed within the fluid nature of the post-humanist philosophy.¹¹

Section: Un/Successful

Sound effects.

Placing a work in to the gallery setting does not immediately give it credibility or kudos, in fact just the opposite is more probable, as the gallery setting highlights any flaws in the making and the execution of the work, the white cube gives an expectation of artistic intent or egotistical endeavour which may have placed unnecessary pressure on myself/the work. The home-grown fan, although a marvel in its self, was sonically overpowering, its rough edges and square non-aerodynamic form created a wild chaotic sound, [which was not a bad thing] another pre-fabricated fan head has since been acquired to balance out the sound levels. Sonically the drum was weak but the idea is good, next time a snare drum could be used to cut through the bass drone. The room was more than adequate but in fact a much larger area would have allowed the work to breath, as the piece benefits from a surfeit of space. I still think that the visual aspect and the sound component need more balance as a lot of attention was directed

10 De Landa calls post humanism ‘very silly’

11 Post human does not imply that all the humans are absent but more like we have evolved or devolved from what we now understand of the human state.

at the composition and construction of the work. An enquiry regarding black outs for the room would have been prudent as the environment totally changed as the ambient light faded, a network of looming shadows began to move about the walls giving an even more pronounced reaction to the interior space. It was a little surprising that some of the darker, more perverse overtones in the work were not picked up on, or at least not vocalised by anyone present. I had wondered about the meaning/s that would be projected as, after the guitar was strung up for the first time it was obvious to me that the symbolism of that action would not be lost. Suspension [or the notion of] has a particular significance for me and has featured in a fair percentage of the more sculptural works that are made, but a more brutal overtone to the work became evident as the installation took shape. There was a moment when I became worried as to what people would make of it, or indeed what was being revealed about my inner workings. Consciously revealed or not some sinister personal demons are lurking near the surface of that particular piece.

In Conclusion:

On the whole the process and end result was quite an accomplishment¹², the experience and the knowledge gained by making the effort to resist compromise was worthwhile. However, in my opinion there still needs to be more debate and serious critique based around the work we all do, as polite responses garner polite responses¹³, guilty as I am of that particular crime, it still feels a little dishonest to not really tell the hard truth in here, in the relative safety of this group, because out there in the hard cold world of art, crushing blows will be dealt to the naive.

As for the piece, one can only hope it touched a few people and gave them something to think about for a while. There are now more questions to be answered than before, but that is in the nature of progression, some times the shavings on the floor are more interesting than the carving itself, if one just stoops to pick them up and look.

¹² Considering all the mitigating circumstances conspiring to derail the job.

¹³ See appendix one.

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