

Expo 09

Various venues, Leeds, UK

Behind the face it presents to the world as a no-nonsense commercial city driven by shopping, bars and the pursuit of the young professional pound, Leeds has long had a keen pair of ears for sound art and underground noise. This lesser-known side was acknowledged by the introduction of the FuseLeeds festival in 2004, and now by the arrival of Expo. Previously held in Brighton in 2008 and Plymouth in 2007, the annual sound art festival saw Sound and Music (the organisation formed by the merger of the British Music Information Centre, Contemporary Music Network, Society for Promotion of New Music and Sonic Arts Network) and MAAP (Media and Arts Partnership) curate a wide-ranging bill in a variety of gallery and music venues. Featuring numerous new commissions, site-specific pieces and works selected from an open call, Expo's takeover of the city's sonic life offered plenty to intrigue both the informed fan and the curious bystander.

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The opening concert in the Grand Theatre's recently restored Howard Assembly Room featured five pieces based upon field recordings, of which Peter Cusack's *Baikal Ice (Spring 2003)* (2003) took the most abstract and conventionally musical approach (pictured above). Cascades of melting icicles from a thawing Siberian lake formed an appealingly percussive chorus, with flowing, marimba-like passages disrupted by sudden crashes. Jez Riley French's *Audible Silence/Ridings #2* (2009) combined recorded surface vibrations from Yorkshire buildings with live electronics. The low rumbles and stilted pulses evoked a disquieting sense of

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vertigo. But as French studiously dropped grains of sand harvested from the actual buildings onto a contact mic, it was hard not to see this (literal) *musique concrete* as lacking the more playful and imaginative relationship with sound enjoyed by contemporaries such as Matmos.

Lee Patterson's *Tower Works (A Study of Resident Sound Forms)* (2009) was a more rewarding mix of live and recorded sounds, presented as the 'sonic rescue archaeology' of a derelict mill. Capturing building vibrations, crunched snow and marching ants, it highlighted how stasis can be illusory, collapsing with shifts in the scale of time or size.

Two other works at the concert were drawn from the Positive Soundscapes Project, a three-year research programme led by Peter Cusack that anticipates the future sounds of places. Ever the twitcher, Chris Watson predicted how the unchanging peals of York Minster would be joined by flocks of Black Redstarts driven north by global warming in *York June 2030* (2009), a rather linear condensation of 24 hours. Yannick Dauby's *Taipei 2030* (2009) was more intriguing, foreseeing the city's future as spatially disjointed, with air-conditioned skyscrapers becoming isolated refuges from stifling heat whilst the marketplace remains a hub of chatter.

An anonymous seminar room at Leeds Metropolitan University was the venue for *Thin Air* (2009), a site-specific sound and visual piece from 2008 Northern Art Prize winner Paul Rooney (who had a recent solo show at Matt's Gallery in London). Framed as a recorded lecture by fictional Belgian academic Annette Gomperts on the obsessive Electromagnetic Voice Phenomena (EVP) investigations of similarly fictional 1970s researcher Alan Smithson, *Thin Air* wove stories of ghost voices and building memory around some of the real-life radicals who challenged the art department of the former Leeds Polytechnic. Jeff Nuttall and Green Gartside became catalysts for psychic disturbances captured by the fabric of the department's brutalist H-Block, along with other less-remembered but equally fervent students, whose activities Rooney commemorated with clippings of contemporary newspaper outrage. Rooney has explored flawed and fragmented memories before, most recently in *Lost High Street* and *La Décision Doypack* (both 2008), and *Thin Air* created a parallel history steeped in melancholy and lost idealism. Its eeriness was slightly undermined, however, by intermittent disembodied heavy breathing, the effect of which was less academic séance than Blackpool ghost train.

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Over in Holy Trinity Church, Expo Live featured a range of newer artists. In composer Oliver Carman's *Converging* (2009), a duet between baritone saxophonist Ben Cottrell and pre-recorded electronics, Cottrell constantly surfed a crest between acquiescence and resistance as the two parts squirmed and twisted together. As The Pony Harvest, Sheffield's Richard Bradley donned a prog-Tudor cape and placed a stuffed crow atop his Theremin, for a live set of poisoned lounge music inspired by *The New Atlantis*, Francis Bacon's 1627 Utopian treatise in which 'divers instruments of music likewise to you unknown' are revealed.

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Christina Kubisch's electrical walks have featured in several galleries and urban festivals to date, including Birmingham's Ikon Gallery (2006) and Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (2007); for Expo Leeds she also presented the site-specific *Magnetic Consumer* (2009), filling a vacant shopping centre unit with a web of cable. Experienced through headphones, the resulting hums, whistles and crackles brought both a heightened awareness of space and a feeling of claustrophobia. Other installations provided more casual encounters: visitors to the Victorian cells under Leeds Town Hall could throw spiky sonic nuggets around a virtual sandbox in Andy Dolphin's computer programme *MagNular* (2009), whilst Monomatic's festival commission *Peal* (2009) in Leeds Museum offered 360-degree bell-ringing triggered

by laser beams.

The closing concert packed in short sets from another varied batch of artists. In her simple but witty performance *Pedaling Under London's Clouds* (2008), Sonia Paco-Rocchia played the back wheel of an amplified upside-down bike with two spoons. Her shadow, projected onto a background of sky, took on the proportions of a deity manipulating the spinning heavens. Whilst with his live performance titled *Codebox*, MCLD attempted to simultaneously beatbox and enter numerical parameters, turning a geek's party trick into a thought-provoking interrogation of electronic musicians' reliance upon programming interface to improvise and create.

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Frieze

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