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54th Venice Biennale

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When mixing art and national agenda, a curious discrepancy appears in a showcase as prestigious as the Venice Biennale. Among the hundreds of artists, pavilions and collateral exhibitions, political statement-making and spectacle become the norm, while the more personal and philosophical investigations, along with sound art, are the brilliant exceptions.

For the most part, sound presented itself more as an intervention and an underscore than a medium in and of itself. At the Future Generations Art Prize exhibit, Emily Wardill's soundscapes added an important sense of tangibility to the unnerving themes of her film sketches in *Game Keepers Without Game*, while Iceland's Under Deconstruction used opera to emphasise archaic edicts in *Constitution Of The Republic Of Iceland* (2011). The same composer, Karólína Eiríksdóttir, arranged the mezzo-soprano, guitar and trumpet for *Il Tuo Paese Non Esiste* (2011) – performed on a gondola and articulating the realities of Venetian tourism. Although not including sound as such, Canada's Steven Shearer explored issues of masculinity and isolation through Death Metal culture in the paintings and poetry of *Exhume To Consume*. These were hidden behind the pavilion's custom-built façade resembling that emblem of disaffected youth, the backyard shed.

Those that brought together social awareness with introspection most adroitly had sound as their primary focus. The installation by Silver Lion winner Haroon Mirza was hidden in one room of Monika Sosnowska's star-shaped Para-Pavilion at the ILLUMinations exhibition. *Sick* follows the UK artist's preoccupation with the point where incidental sound ends and music begins. Generating a pulsing loop from the

electrical current of an LED light tape, the viewer (and listener) was led inside the sound sculpture. The repetitive rhythm, played through stripped-down speakers, produced a magnetic physical response not unlike the impact of beats in electronic music. Images of an Islamic gathering flashed on a screen on the floor in time with the electrical impulses, while a gold nugget bounced to the vibrations of a speaker, creating its own percussive addition to the greater audio-visual experience.

Curator Amy Cheng presented Taiwan's political and social soundscape more directly in a group show entitled *The Heard And The Unheard*. Defining the intrinsic link between sound and collective consciousness, Cheng brought together the works of two artists, along with an exhaustive sound library concerning the reactionary politics and social conscience of post-martial law Taiwan. Through film and music, one was led through a history of radical change and performance art that remains a force behind the country's social and political revolution.

Folk-punk group The Village Armed Youth claim to be "taking up their guitars as rifles" on their album *Fuck! Government*, while Kou Chou Ching presents hip-hop with a conscience. The rich history of Noise and the avant-garde was presented in the 1995 documentary *Post-Industrial Demolition* by Ming-Chuan. Held in a vacant brewery, the Taipei Broken Life Festival included controversial, destructive performances by Noise and horror-theatre groups, including Switzerland's Schimpfluch and Japan's CCCC (Cosmic Coincidence Control Center). These emphasised an aggressively emotional, rather than intellectual engagement with sound and performance.

In contrast to those works of extreme dissidence, artist Hong-Kai Wang looked at

the politics of listening with her soundscape *Music While We Work* (2011). Wang solicited retired sugar factory workers from her hometown of Huwei to articulate and record the sounds that resonated within an industrial community, developed under Dutch and then Japanese occupation, now in decline. An accompanying documentary showed Wang working closely with volunteers, not only teaching them how to use the recording equipment but also exploring the psychology of hearing. An exercise in sound-recognition led one volunteer to mistake the sound of roasting coffee beans for a more familiar industrial de-waterer, while the group was encouraged to listen to their surroundings with eyes closed, to divorce themselves from the influence of visual stimuli.

The outcome of these workshops was a soundscape that combined the recordings of each collaborator from in and around that civic core, the sugar factory. The hum of machinery and echoes of distant conversations eddied along the stone walls of a darkened room in the Palazzo delle Prigione. The audience was transported from the 16th century building near Venice's famous San Marco Square to the cooperative mindscape of a Taiwanese factory town. The drone of industry and the occasional intrusion of the humanity surrounding it were accompanied by a projection of photos from the area on the walls. The imperceptible transition of images, superimposed one upon the other, mimicked the shifting and overlapping sounds being played.

For *Sounds Of Nothing*, the relatively young artist Yu-Hsien Su explored outsider sound art by working with people on the margins of society: a group of Indonesian fishermen, a scavenger called 'Uncle Mao' and a homeless ex-drummer living under a

highway, San Lian Wu. The fishermen were filmed performing with their two-week-old musical troupe on a fishing boat, while Uncle Mao ran through the different kinds of plastic and their properties, at the same time conveying the acoustic and percussive sounds that can come out of them. Wu played drums in a style typical of his distant disco drumming days, in direct conflict with the din of traffic echoing off the steel and concrete of the highway bridge overhead.

The Heard And The Unheard focused on environment and how it is informed and influenced by sound, but New Zealand artist Michael Parekōwhai's work transcended context, rather using the music itself to situate... *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer*. His work was named after the poem by John Keats, the subject of the film *Bright Star* by New Zealander Jane Campion – director of the 1993 film *The Piano*, which deals with white frontier settlement on Maori land in the 19th century. As a physical representation of Parekōwhai's own cultural dualism (being of both Maori and European descent), as well as an exchange between New Zealand and Venice, the grand piano and its surrounding bronze sculptures presented a symbolic interplay between Parekōwhai's personal and historical contexts. Once owned by pianist and Jewish-Hungarian exile Lili Kraus and intricately carved in traditional Maori patterns, the refurbished Steinway was played non-stop by performers for the duration of the exhibition. Music filled the multiple rooms of the Palazzo Loredan dell'Ambasciatore and united all the contrasting symbols of identity within a single ephemeral space. Sound creates a sense of place for Parekōwhai, and his work recognises how flexible and relative that sense of place can be.

Steph Kretowicz