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Susan Philipsz at the Radcliffe Observatory



Susan Philipsz *You Are Not Alone*

Radcliffe Observatory/Modern Art Oxford,
Oxford, UK

Sound artist Susan Philipsz is known for serenading you when you least expect it. Be it over a tannoy at Tesco, or out of a speaker at a bus stop or under a bridge, she'll sing to you. Her choice of music varies from site to site, encompassing rock (Radiohead's "Airbag"), opera (Offenbach's *The Tales Of Hoffmann*) and folk (Irish ballad "The Lass Of Aughtrim"). Each song is recorded in her singular style – a cappella, almost as if she was singing to herself, in an assured but muted manner and with absolutely no vocal acrobatics or theatricality. The result, as her solitary voice seeps into these everyday, anodyne spaces, is that Philipsz instils in them a sense of intimacy and a psychological charge.

Recently, though, her choice of site (outside of her gallery based work) has expanded to include not only those locations where you wouldn't normally encounter an artwork – let alone a wistful chanteuse – but those to which you wouldn't normally have access, such as the roof of London's ICA building.

Philipsz's new commission in Oxford continues in this vein. It's situated in the Radcliffe Observatory, a lookout to the stars built in 1773, and not normally open to the public. What's rare is that it's one of Philipsz's few installations not to utilise her voice at all. Instead, a choir of vibraphones beckons visitors up a grand spiral staircase to the dome at the top. There, four speakers emit different radio interval signals which are transmitted from the roof of Modern Art Oxford.

These 'musical signatures' from the 1920s and 30s were used between transmissions to allow listeners to identify a certain radio station. Here, they are

arranged in such a manner that you never hear one in its entirety, only discerning snippets of a tune before others interrupt. Although the music is a far cry from a snappy jingle, the installation works best in its extremes: when either the four melodies clamour together, creating a haze of saccharine throbs, or in the slower, minimalist segments, which, in a minor key, possess a melancholy air.

The vibraphone produces a very sculptural, physical sound, which is entirely appropriate for this setting. As an influence, Philipsz cites the belief of radio pioneer Guglielmo Marconi that sounds never really die. The quieter moments – when there's scope to listen to the duration of a note – aptly convey this; the shadow of a sound reverberating around the dome, clinging on and on, before gradually dissolving.

The sense of longing with which her vocal works permeated other locations isn't evident here. Instead, at times (particularly in the faster, more euphoric moments) the installation strives too hard to be ethereal and ends up being twee (unlike its hippy sibling the xylophone, which can be too mellow, the vibraphone, with its aluminium keys, can be cloying, as if you're stuck inside a doorbell). Essentially, Philipsz doesn't transform this site as she has in other works, but rather complements it, and the soaring nature of the vibraphone too easily conjures images of twinkling stars.

Nonetheless, the mood instilled is her trademark one of contemplation, and musing on the invisible movement of sounds is made easy and certainly very enjoyable in an observatory perched in the clouds. With light pouring in, the views from the dome's massive windows are mainly of the sky, with only a sliver of the city of Oxford visible below. The Romantic in me wanted to stay for sunset.

Isabel Stevens



Liv Strand's Åke Hodell tribute on the Stockholm ferry

Homage To Åke Hodell (*Ljudkonst På Djurgårdsfärjan*)

Djurgården Ferry, Stockholm, Sweden

Former Stockholm resident Åke Hodell was a radical poet and novelist, a writer of radio plays, a film maker, performance artist and a major text-sound composer, associated for many years with the groundbreaking Fylkingen society for experimental art and music. This sound art event, staged on a ferry criss-crossing Stockholm's inner harbour, was conceived both to mark publication of a new book about Hodell by independent scholar Magnus Haglund and to launch two DVDs in an invaluable series documenting current sound art, issued under the aegis of the Swedish Music Information Centre.

In his introductory remarks, Haglund explained that in July 1941 Hodell, then a young fighter pilot, survived a near fatal air crash. He emerged from his hospital bed a few years later with his sense of life and creativity profoundly conditioned by that narrow escape from death. One of his most memorable text-sound compositions, *The Djurgården Ferry Across The Styx* (1972), mixed his voice and environmental sounds with electronic treatments, transforming the familiar ferry boat into a mythic vessel carrying the dead to the underworld. For this occasion, eight artists were invited onto the ferry itself to present new or recent sound work responding in various ways to that piece.

Watching composers hunched over laptops or mixing boards, occasionally tweaking a volume knob, can resemble a parody of performance in a conventional concert venue. The ferry provided an altogether more dynamic context, because of its motion and because it generated its own vocabulary of creaks and clanks in unpredictable counterpoint to the composed works. This proved especially effective during Johannes Heldén's meditative *Crop View*, a cool electronic mantra that matched the rippling constancy of the grey waters around the vessel but

also corresponded beautifully with the insistent chug of the engine.

Nadine Byrne took that mechanical rhythm as her starting point, gradually transforming it into an alluring siren song. Hanna Hartman's sophisticated *Färjesånger* (*Ferry Songs*), played in her absence, steered a creaking piano through a dramatically imagined maritime soundscape. Liv Strand presented images of water in sound and vision, subtly modulating in and out of abstraction. Daniel Skoglund and Daniel Rozenhall sampled Hodell's voice and relocated it in vigorous new surroundings. Mathias Josefson conjured suitably otherworldly sounds from a bowed metal wand. The most haunting piece, though, was a simple list of villages affected by the segregation wall in Palestine, read by the recorded voice of Lina Selander in a flat, matter-of-fact monotone. Hodell's own work often involved transformation, but a lot of its impact derived from direct, unsentimental engagement with materials. Selander has clearly absorbed that lesson.

Throughout this two-hour presentation the ferry went about its usual business. Local residents made their short trip across the water and discovered that today it had an additional dimension. Some retreated to the far end or went on deck, others lingered, intrigued. Several of us who experienced all eight pieces noticed how our sense of linear motion seemed to dissolve into the new space opened up by the sound works. The ferry often appeared to be drifting or circling within its own acoustic domain, despite that purposeful engine and occasional glimpses of landmarks on the banks.

This homage to Hodell was an inspired event, appropriate to his memory. More importantly, it demonstrated the creative energy of sound composition in Sweden today, imaginative work by women and men aware of their rich inheritance from an earlier generation.

Julian Cowley

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