

SONAR 2006

13th Barcelona International Festival of Advanced Music and Multimedia Art

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Like the technology known as SONAR (SOund Navigation And Ranging), which uses sound waves to detect objects that are submerged in order to render them visible, the annual SONAR festival has a reputation for unearthing subcultural music and art and presenting it to a large international audience of revelers in Barcelona. There were many inspired and inspiring performances at SONAR 2006, but in some ways the festival failed to live up to its reputation and self-proclaimed mission of presenting “advanced music and multimedia art.”

Many famous and seasoned performers were on the bill, including Digable Planets, DJ Krush, DJ Shadow, Goldfrapp, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Alva Noto (aka Carsten Nicolai) and Ryuichi Sakamoto. Perhaps it's a mistaken assumption that “advanced” work is produced by unknown artists, who become recognized for their avant-garde contributions. Surely, well-known artists can and do produce advanced work and, to be fair, bringing together the diverse mélange mentioned above is itself a remarkable, if not enlightened, gesture. But perhaps SONAR is showing its age in paying tribute to history, rather than making it. To its credit, the festival continued its own historic and important role of leveling the playing field between live performance and DJ mixing and quite a few performances blurred the lines between them.

Noto and Sakamoto's *Insen*, for example, joined the latter's exquisite touch and phrasing on grand piano with the former's digital laptop manipulations. Noto, aka Carsten Nicolai, is a well-known German contemporary artist, whose work has been exhibited and performed at the Venice Biennale and Documenta. Sakamoto earned international renown for his Academy Award-winning film-score for Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987), and for scoring the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona (1992). The two collaborated in 2003 on the album *Vrioon*, which *Wire* magazine voted record of the year.

Insen combined a complex sonic layering and visual rendering of the two performer's intermixed forms, though the visuals were unremarkable and Noto's electronic sounds rarely could match the sensitivity and subtlety of Sakamoto unplugged, particularly in the superb acoustic environment of the L'Auditori. While *Vrioon* represented a novel and arguably “advanced” collaborative approach to joining acoustic and electronic performance by two well-known artists, *Insen* failed to push that approach substantially further and I remained unconvinced that a solo piano performance by Sakamoto would not have been more gratifying.

Allison Goldfrapp's dramatic performance overcame the abysmal acoustics of the SonarClub, compelling the crowd to demand an encore. The band responded with a sultry rendition of *Strict Machine*, which reached #1 on the Billboard Hot Club Play chart in June 2004. Although

not quite mainstream, Goldfrapp produces pop music, albeit with a better haircut, metaphorically speaking. This accomplished and polished headliner surely helped lure larger audiences to lesser-known artists, but one could hardly place the band's work in the category of "advanced music."

With respect to identifying more counter-cultural performers, SONAR's SONAR was most sensitive when it came to spotting homegrown Spanish talent. Collective La Màquina de Turing, formed in 2001 in Vila-real, turned in a potent and politically charged performance of electronic music and video generated using open-source software. The Barcelona-based audio-video duo, Earth, Wind, and Firewire, produced an interesting range of techno beats and visuals, while Ibiza-based American performer, Beatmaster G, rocked the crowd with his *a cappella* human beatbox performance. In RAW, dancers manipulated aspects of the multimedia system via PDAs, engaging the body directly in the electronic flux of the performance. Nearly all these acts successfully combined sonic and visual elements in their performances, though the sound aspect predominated in all but RAW.

A standout among the multimedia performances, Ryoji Ikeda's *datamatics [prototype]* integrated sonic and visual elements in an almost overwhelming way. This work employs vast databases of information as the raw input to generate highly variegated patterns of sound and video that are at once abstract and highly specific, in as much as they are directly related to information patterns derived from hard-drive errors and studies of software code to astronomical features of the universe. There first of several movements began with a deafeningly loud, low and steady hum. Utilizing a strictly minimal vocabulary of white wireframe graphics and its sonic equivalent, the work nonetheless exhibited a great dynamic range, with modulations of pitch, volume, rate, density, and dimensionality, pushing the limits of human perception of time and space, both ocular and aural. This highly disciplined visual and sonic language was handled with an extraordinary sense of precision, enhanced by the power and fidelity of the sound-system and the brilliant, high-resolution projector. Despite the confidence instilled by such exactitude, tension mounted between the flawlessness of the audio-visual content and the uneasy sense that this immaculate technological system might be on the verge of going out of control – or at least extending beyond the human ability to manage it. This edginess was reinforced by the corporeal absence of Ikeda, which suggested that the work was being performed by an autonomous robot - and perhaps it was. It was unclear to what extent any real-time manipulations were being enacted by the artist, yet the phenomenal quality of the work possessed the sensory intensity of live performance, despite its computationally hard-edged quality.

The term "Multimedia Art" figures prominently in SONAR's extended title. Yet, compared with festivals like Ars Electronica, ISEA, SIGGRAPH, or Transmediale, relatively few works of such art could be experienced in the section dedicated to art, SonarMàtica, now in its third season. This year's exhibition, *Always On*, focused on mobile culture and featured a three-day preview of Blast Theory's latest work, *Day of the Figurines*, scooping the 24-day premiere of the full piece in Berlin, scheduled for September, 2006. Now that's what I call advanced! Unfortunately, *Day of the Figurines*, loosely modeled after the TV series *24* starring Kiefer Sutherland (each day is one hour and one must work with others to avoid a cataclysmic event) is not nearly as compelling as other work by the collective, such as *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003). Whereas in *Figurines* one communicates via SMS with others to reposition avatars in a

virtual world, *Uncle Roy* requires that participants actually take to the streets and, aided by hand-held devices that track location and enable communication of queries and clues, find their way to a secret destination.

Other participatory locative media projects included Michelle Teran's *Life: A User's Manual*, for which the artist led walks and hacked into surveillance cameras, revealing and mapping a hidden side of Barcelona and making manifest the proliferation of private wireless CCTV streams. There were also opportunities to participate in geocaching (a widespread cultural phenomenon in which users employ GPS units to play a treasure-hunting game, exchanging small gifts), to experience Akitsugu Maebayashi's *Sonic Interface* (a wearable device for expanding human auditory perception that premiered in 1999), and Yellow Arrow stickers were on sale for those who wanted to mark meaningful locations with them and enter text messages into the project database to share with others who encounter those yellow arrows.

Most of the work in SonarMàtica was presented in three screen-based exhibitions under the rubric of "Arte Digital a la Carta," designed for personal viewing on LCD monitors incorporated into *ultra-moderne* chaise-longues. These shows included Google Earth and Google Maps Hacks, curated by Régine Debatty (who scribes the media art blog "We Make Money Not Art"), My Friends Electric, selected by Mike Connor (Head of Exhibitions, British Film Institute), and Please, Sit Back, Watch, and Listen organized by the Barcelona-based contemporary art journal *a minima*. Most, if not all, of the work in Debatty's and Connor's shows are available on the WWW, including socially conscious projects such as Christine Hanson's *Delocator* and Jim Nachlin's *GarbageScout* in the former and super-hip works like Emma Davidson and Paul B. Davis's *Da MySpace Hustlerz* (2006) and Paper Rad's *My Favorite Homepage* (2004) in the latter. Highlights from Sit Back, Watch, and Listen include Scott Hessels' *Brake Lights* (2004) and Mark Lafia and Frank Lin's *The Battle of Algiers*, co-commissioned by the Whitney Artport and Tate Online.

The *reactTable*, created by the Interactive Sonic Systems Team led by Sergi Jordà at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, was exhibited at the Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, the site of the Sonarama concert stream, which included performances by Ikeda and others, just down La Rambla from the main SONAR daytime events. *reactTable* work employs a tangible user interface to enable users to collaboratively and intuitively perform music synthesis. The movement of translucent 3D icons on a table is tracked by a video-camera and the system generates corresponding changes in sound, based on the position, orientation, and proximity of the icons, while simultaneously projecting correlated visual feedback onto the table. While the work has been used for live performance (it premiered in a 2005 concert incorporating two units, each at a separate festival in remote locations, the International Computer Music Conference in Barcelona and the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz), perhaps its greatest value is pedagogical; for its combination of haptic, visual, and sonic elements enables novice users to quickly and intuitively gain an understanding of sound synthesis. Also at the Centre, though oddly out of place at SONAR, was Mike Nelson's *After Kerouac*, a traditional installation that more properly might have been entitled *After Kaprow*. One follows a spiraling corridor (Mertz's Fibonacci sequence meets Kerouac's *On the Road*) to an old door that opens onto a circular space filled with old tires, a la Kaprow's *Yard* (1961).

One of the most rewarding events during SONAR, though only loosely affiliated with it, was the opening reception for French artist Arno Fabre's *Dropper01* at the Fondació Joan Miró. This installation generates sound from a circular ensemble of eight acoustic percussion instruments that resonate when carefully sequenced drops of water strike them from twenty-four computer controlled pipes. This delightful amalgam of low and high-tech devices (including several very rough-hewn instruments, such as a series of clay pots set within each other but free to resonate independently) produces pleasing tonalities and Fabre's orchestration draws out sonic subtleties of both the individual instruments and their various combinations. One experiences a childlike sense of wonder and delight at the simple cause and effect of water striking surface and generating sound, while marveling at the rich musical possibilities that such simple instruments are capable of, when part of a generative system that incorporates temporal, spatial, and combinatory factors.

A highlight of SONAR for aficionados of multimedia art was a performance by artist Toshio Iwai and two collaborators on electronic devices not originally designed as concert instruments. Iwai, whose *Piano as Image Media* (1995) has become an early classic of media art, also has a long history of developing material for the entertainment and electronics industries, including the videogame *Electroplancton* for Nintendo and the digital sound and light instrument *TENORI-ON* for Yamaha. During the SONAR performance, Iwai and Yu Nishibori performed on *Electroplancton* and *TENORI-ON*, accompanied by Naoaki Kojima on *Sound Lens*, a device that translates light into sound, created by Iwai in 2001 for an art installation. Video cameras projected visual output from the devices onto large screens behind the stage, revealing the close relationship between sound and image. The unexpectedly wide sonic and visual range produced by these devices was fresh and captivating, just as the excitement of the performers as they repurposed them for live music performance was exhilarating and contagious.

Although there was innovative and exciting work at SONAR, especially in the domain of performance, the festival could dig deeper to present more novel, diverse, and challenging works of multimedia art. One would especially welcome more sound art at the nexus of multimedia and site-specific installation. Including such work by artists David Birchfield, David Dunn, Bill Fontana, Granular Synthesis, Christina Kubisch, Bernard Leitner, Andrea Polli, Susan Robb, Jeff Talman, and Lauren Weinger (to just name a few who have not previously participated in the festival) would help SONAR live up to its name and reputation as an international festival of advanced music and multimedia art.