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Muzak for concrete chaos

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Non place n° 4, Aircraft interior, Kansai Airport, 1999.



Non place n° 2, 1999, Railway Lines, Tokyo.



Non place n° 3, 1999, Petrol Station, Tokyo.



Non place n° 1, 1999, Hotel corridor, New York.



PERFORMANCE

TASMANIA

MUZAK FOR CONCRETE CHAOS

Battery Operated, Hobart Fringe Festival,
Working Men's Club, Tasmania (Australia). February-March 2000

One of the highlights of the Hobart Fringe Festival in Tasmania, (Australia) in February-march this year, along with Greg Kingston's guitar act, was the experimental electronic sound performance given by the sound duo who call themselves Battery Operated.

It was at the Working Men's Club, in the upstairs area transformed to host the surround sound performance, that the artists had installed their equipment on one of the cafe's tables in the centre of the room, as opposed to being elevated on a stage. Immersed in amongst the audience they transmitted their electronic sounds to the 4 speakers on the corners of the room and the audience, seated at small tables around them, could experience the movements of the sounds as they reverberated and explored the dynamics of the space.

The artists known as Battery Operated have composed, a 45-minute sonic tale divided into 8 *Chases through Non-Place*. Each of them being designed for, and using the sounds of specific spaces they define as "non-places".

The artists describes non-places as being "spaces that cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity". Non-places such as airports, hotel chains, convenient stores, train stations and communication networks are a measure of our time and they expound concretely upon the tendency towards globalisation. These supermodern and very coded architectures that anthropologists also call areas of "cultural contract" are spreading rapidly across the planet and buildings such as Seven Eleven, McDonald's and other shopping malls are "virtually a virus made concrete" as the sound duo put it. Their designers do not consider the socio-political, racial or sexual grounding of the urban context they will be part of.

Architects such as Greg Lynn take the movement of people through and around the buildings as bases for their design. Ironically, the experience of the traveller as they pass through these spaces, en route to elsewhere, is reduced to signs, billboards and other textually mediated substitutes rather than of actual places.

As these buildings are the symbols of a movement within global culture that negates contextualisation, Battery Operated recorded the ambient sounds at the Melbourne Airport, the casino and the supermarket. Using found sounds they have composed 8 sonic narratives that reference and are critical of the muzak which usually emits within these types of buildings.

Soundtracks for chase sequences were constructed for each architecture, using the location recordings. The

chase, being by nature unplanned and chaotic transgresses the repetitively coded contracts usually enacted in those buildings.

Effectively, each track is composed following a structure that incorporates sonic elements themselves linked to a wide range of origins in the culture of sound and music. The end results are a mixture of processed and non-processed sounds. The processed sounds, representing the non-place architectures is a "fucked up version of muzak" as the duo names it. Layed upon it is the unprocessed and more percussive, semi chaotic sounds that act as a metaphor for the chase : the beats.

The sound artists affirmed that their inspiration was mainly Music Concrete, Muzak and also Hip-Hop culture. The techniques they use : recording on location using a DAT machine, then processing these sounds and creating loops. This way of creating soundtracks is partly derived from Pierre Schaefer's experimentations with Music Concrete. At the end of the 1940's Sheaffer proposed a way to rethink the traditional musical notation system and to redefine what could be considered as music as opposed to sound and noise. One could not use the same pitch, time, volume and tonal system whilst the envelope, density and space movement had to be added to the description of sound.

Thus what is the most interesting part of a live performance by Battery Operated is not so much the structure of the pieces, (the composition is done previously using digital editing tools) but rather the way in which the sound occupies the space when elements of it pan from a speaker to another when the artists twist and turn the knobs on the desks in front of them. Consequently the notion of live music performance is transformed as the course of the chase is sonically pursued. The fleshy and smoothly toned "inverse" Muzak produced by Battery operated, is more stable and unflagging delineating the architecture of the non-place. Meanwhile the jumbled and jagged percussive tones derived from Break Beats and Drum'n Base culture effectively pursue one another throughout the space, between the tables.

The way in which Rap culture, and later Drum'n Base culture challenged notions of urban space in the inner cities with "Tagging" and "Graffiti" often done on forms of public transport render them more than relevant forms of music to use in a sonic composition that questions transient urban space. These activities emphasise the individuals right to express their identity in an urban space which otherwise refuses to acknowledge their presence.

The status of the beats in Battery Operated's composition signifying the chases while the buildings that stage them are sonically depicted by a strange version of Muzak or "elevator music" synonymous of mass culture and consumerism is also a pertinent play. The juxtaposition of the once subversive Hip Hop beats and Muzak, (which was originally used as an industrial efficiency control tool (Taylorism) and later in shops and hotels), within a sound piece is crucial to the duo.

Take this and then mix it with the production and theories inspired by the techniques of Music Concrete which also questioned attitudes towards composition (but within a totally different demographic group), and you have a potent work which moves every time you try and pin it down. The ethereal echoing sounds that constitute the "inverse" Muzak when layed against those uneven and frantic but often soft beats render some rather relaxing, almost hypnotic sound scapes to immerse oneself into. The two contrasting elements complement and bounce off each other to constitute strangely harmoniously balanced pieces. On one hand the beats that tie those sound scapes back to Hip Hop culture seem to have lost the harshness they often conveyed when part of that once controversial genre. They have taken on a more cartoon like quality that makes them almost affectionate and humorous.

On the other hand however, the "inverse" Muzak takes a functional formula of sonic production and turns it on its head. As Muzak was and still is used to sooth and lull shoppers into a false sense of economy (thus they have more money to spend on credit than they really do) Battery Operated take it and make it disruptive and unruly.

This deconstructs the formula of Muzak (a term coined by a military General – George Squier by mixing the words music and Kodak) which was once used as a tool to sooth the mood of workers and invigorate consumers. Muzak was made and programmed for business environments to reduce stress, combat fatigue and enhance sales. All this originally done with the War effort of the Second World War in mind. Muzak was to the surprise of many a product of the military industrial complex and remains a well-researched and used management tool.

The sounds produced by Battery operated which they

themselves call "Inverse Muzak" (a reworking and deconstruction of the formulas strategically laid down in the 1940's) means that the tracks take on more of a nightmarish rather than reassuring or invigorating air. Hence one could easily imagine some of the sonic works as theme tunes for dystopian cities in a science fiction set of the late Twenty First Century.

In the post-Y2K anticlimactic climate we are currently experiencing, the transient nature of architecture is of interest as much as the contingent mobility of the chase. There is never clearly an end result to those chases and they seem an appropriate antithesis to the mass panic and cultural anxiety that occurred in response to the Millennium Bug : a metaphor for collective apocalyptic fears. Those non-linear abstract narrations seem to unfold continuously through diverse layers of time rather than culminating on one precise end point.

The chaotic sound tracks act as questioning tools, which urge an audience to reflect on the spaces they live in, and through. Rather than actively enhancing the individuals productivity or passivity, Battery Operated breed a mix of psychologies which propose collision, contingency and miscommunication as viable modes of behaviour. A proposal which holds some credence as cities increasingly develop and rely on surveillance mechanisms and the mandatory codes of behaviour within the transit temples of society.

Effectively these sound works demonstrate a clever incorporation of several different cultural signifiers in the genres of Music concrete, Muzak, and Hip-Hop culture. The social and critical structures of the compositions lending themselves to critical analysis along the lines of what is more traditionally written about in Installations and visual artwork.

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