

# SOUND

## a.a.s: Circle of Fifths

Now in its third Nottingham space, artist group Reactor is behind more than ten years of performance events and actions involving different community constituencies in expanded practices. Principal organisers Niki Russell and Daniel Williamson have recently shifted focus from curated installations and performances by regional artists to working as part of the Reactor collective developing projects seen as frequently abroad as in Nottingham. Lately they have involved external coordinators like Pil & Galia Kollektiv or, in this case, Stuart Tait's a.a.s to stage events in their studio located in a former primary school, west of the city.

As a drone performance, *Circle of Fifths* staged a theatre where sonic material could develop into acting entities, with the performers functioning discretely behind the noise. Indifferent to the audience, the three individuals, Graham Dunning, Hexachordal and Phillip Henderson, alongside the quartet Samekhemem, sat amid their equipment facing each other around an antique hourglass that timed their respective sets. Without the flow of sound pausing, this hourglass was then inverted to cue the next player's turn. After four turns of a half hour each, a fifth set with all musicians playing together completed the circle. With transitions barely discernible, the five sections accumulated into a cohesive minimalist work using the spatial properties of the large studio room to sustain reverberation and sonic envelopment, creating an omnidirectional and object-like sound. Although Steve Reich regarded drone as the framework for improvisation rather than a process in itself, Reactor's event recalled his commitment to making perceptible the processes beneath sound compositions. Reich compared performing musical processes to watching sand fall through an hourglass or studying the minute hand move across a watch face.

Samekhemem's meditative acoustic set using hand-pumped harmonium, clarinet, cello and singing bowl started as a soft early-evening light flooded through the tall schoolroom windows. With the four instruments in close harmony and rhythm, attention was on maintaining a steady drone so that the slight fluctuations conceded by the musicians were perceptible within the low-pitched swirl of sound. One antecedent here was the early 1960s drone of The Dream Syndicate recordings, particularly John Cale's organ playing in *Sun Blindness Music*, although the introspection of Samekhemem's music differed from that shriller and more aggressive New York sound. The Dream Syndicate's high-volume drone had evolved as one way around John Cage's paradigms, prevailing by the end of the 1950s, of

aleatory composition, indeterminate performance practices and tolerance towards incidental sounds. Drone embraced the loudest urban soundscapes where envelopment by clamour became the practice model rather than the equanimity of residing alongside a subtle array of sounds. In rejecting a rural soundscape that had been central to American folk and classical music, this new Minimalism used instruments to generate a self-sufficient sonic event of loud pulsing sound. Drone inverted the sound ecology advocated by Canadian musicologist Murray Schafer, who valued inveterate human, animal and meteorological sounds threatened by encroachments of manufacturing and machinery. Recognising its rejection of his own paradigms, Cage was interested in this immersive volume as a new experience when he listened to La Monte Young's performances in the early 1960s. Later he acclaimed the drone of traffic noise outside his New York apartment as his preferred sound experience, as something always changing and unconcerned with expressing feelings and ideas.

Dunning's electronic modulations resembled the contemporary drone of musicians like Tim Hecker or Vladislav Delay. In such work depth and texture are generated by minimally varying loops of sounds whose distinct timbres determine the plangent qualities of the music. Notwithstanding recordings that he calls 'music by the metre', modelled on the concept of Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio's process paintings, Dunning was able to build a progressively rich sonic architecture using samples of locked-groove records featuring big band performance, sine wave and alarm sounds, and a cassette tape loop of a Bollywood singer. Over this pulsed a dry sweeping white noise as the performance accelerated towards its end.

Using only mic and delay pedal, Hexachordal's virtuoso vocal performance recalled the roots of 1960s drone by way of Young and Marian Zazeela's *Dream House* incantations and noise provocation *X for Henry Flynt*. Repeatedly shifting registers from quiet and tentative syllables to deafening shouts, Hexachordal constructed a surprising range of reverberating and sustained sounds by working with the signal as it broke down across dozens of cycles, the vocal residue ascending to the intensity of air-raid sirens before subsiding to subdued percussive utterances. Drone music submits individual sounds to the logic of a total work rather than separating noise elements whose individual material qualities can be discerned. In this way Dunning's and Hexachordal's music comprised radically dissociated noises drawn centripetally towards the body of the drone which, like a hive of music, absorbed constituent sounds into its assemblage.

With a long involvement in performance and writing around Minimalism, Henderson focused his set on a small number of telling variables. Playing a

single note on modified electric harmonium across three and then four octaves, he superimposed the high-pitched improvised tone of a metal detector whose unpredictably fluctuating whine and varying pulse would align with the steadier notes of the harmonium before veering off again. The most reductive of the four, Henderson's approach enabled the listener to concentrate on the acoustic qualities of what he called the 'impurities' of stripped down sonic components.

With minimalist music the musician disappears into the drone in a form of stoical theatre where the withdrawal by some noise artists, like Kevin Drumm and Russell Haswell, prioritises sound rather than performer. The disappearance of the experimental music performer under waves of sound is a legacy of Cage's success in undermining hierarchies of music performance and empowering the listener by getting rid of what he labelled the conductor policeman. Diminishing the gap between performer and listener, Cage was also committed to disengaging sounds from associations of value or accomplishment. The minimal sounds of the *Circle of Fifths* performers, unembellished and innate to particular instruments or processed as barely identifiable samples, shared this disengagement from connotation and significance. As darkness finally fell across the studio, the group performance of the fifth set marked a drone centenary by playing a reconstruction of one of Luigi Russolo's Futurist *intonarumori*. Accompanied by energetic drumming, its grinding baritone drone that in 1913 had celebrated what Russolo described as the 'pounding atmosphere' of Milan recalled Cage's enthusiasm for the ever-changing rumble of traffic. ■

Circle of Fifths took place at Reactor Halls, Nottingham on 1 June.

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