



Graham Dunning

### Reactor Halls E16: Ghost In The Machine Music

Reactor Halls, Nottingham, UK

Imagine if an extraterrestrial intelligence were to conclude that a worn out Victorian pumping station was the dominant form of intelligent life on Earth and then tried to communicate with it, and you should get some idea of the sound of Tom Mudd's performance tonight. Mudd's software sought to model algorithmically the acoustic properties of various real physical processes, resulting in a simulacrum of French acousmatic music as rich and as resonant as the concrete originals.

In the second half of the set, Mudd turned his midi controllers over to volunteers from the audience. If our notional alien interlocutor now came across as a little drunk, the language was recognisably the same. In this sense, Mudd's set was typical of an evening in which systems often seemed to have a logic of their own, which their human operators might collaborate with but never truly overpower.

Housed in a red brick former primary school, Nottingham's Reactor Halls feels like a suitable place for a haunting. Outside in the playground an old sandpit has gone to seed, a wooden tricycle is left abandoned

upon the tarmac. The whole place feels like the location for the sort of creepy British ghost story the BBC once excelled at. Inside, the reference is made explicit by the title of Graham Dunning's *Stone Tape* (2015), a chunk of blackened slate found by the artist on the Thames bank, resembling a cassette in size and shape. Taking its name from the 1972 broadcast written by Nigel Kneale about a group of engineers who discover the bricks of an old mansion bear the ghostly traces of its former occupants, the work comes as a pair, subtitled "master" and "copy", the latter being a plaster cast of the former. Naturally, being an analogue copy, the copy renders its subject somewhat imperfectly, leaving the odd bubble on the surface – artefacts of reproduction, like tape hiss and dwindling bandwidth.

The evening was curated by Dunning, and his mechanical techno performance was one of the highlights. Building up loops from multiple records perched on top of a single turntable, Dunning built up and broke down a series of infectious grooves with a sound somewhere between Detroit minimalism and French filter house. Each spinning disc resembled a Milan Knížák sculpture in motion, augmented by drawing pins and bits of other records, triggering percussive

hits and whooping sound effects on each rotation by striking contact mics, solenoids and light-sensitive synths.

The whole set up is enormously precarious and part of the drama comes from the threat that it might all teeter out of sync or collapse at any moment. If the trend in recent dance music has often been to artfully engineer a certain wonkiness into an otherwise strict digital framework, Dunning has found the appeal of the precise reverse: struggling to maintain grid-like rigidity in a system inherently antagonistic to it.

One of the last performances of the night was also the most atmospheric. Leslie Deere's set was accompanied by a film of animated polygons dissolving into chroma keyed watercourses, a woozy confusion of real and virtual spaces. As a soundtrack, she sent out a storm of deep drones and howling whistles from a music box processed by a tape echo. No mere novelty, this music box was housed in a hexagonal pine container on a long wooden pole. Originally part of an outdoor installation where its mechanism would be operated by wind power, here the box provided a shimmering, immersive atmosphere of its own, the acoustic result akin to the keened lament of banshees.

Robert Barry

### Ken Cox

#### Poetry Machines

CHELSEA space, London, UK

In a 1968 interview with *The Daily Telegraph Magazine*, sculptor Ken Cox claimed: "The task I set myself was to bring some kind of unity between movement as such and the meaning or the hints of meaning, that are buried in the words I choose." It was a creative intent that identified Cox's body of work as a radical but integral part of the British concrete poetry movement. While contemporaneous concrete poets such as Dom Sylvester Houédard, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Bob Cobbing were concerning themselves with the positioning of words on the page, Cox was building kinetically powered poetry machines, which made words into physical objects moving in space. Moreover, the search for unity that lay at the heart of Cox's aesthetic underscored a spiritual urge, best demonstrated in the piece *Three Graces: Amor Voluptas Pulchritudo* (1966-68), in which three slowly revolving columns of the constituent letters of the Latin words *amor*, *voluptas* and *pulchritudo* morph and merge into each other, revealing Cox's yearning for a union between the three concepts of *love*, *passion* and *beauty*. Cox described the work as "dancing figures, turning and interweaving, exchanging symbolic gestures – love as passion fired by beauty."

It's just one of the sculptures gathered for this long overdue collection of Cox's poetry machines. In fact, it's the first time his works have been shown in London in almost half a century: Cox was killed in a car accident in November 1968, at the age of 41, just a few months after his first – and last – solo exhibition, at London's Lisson Gallery. Those who were close to Cox suggest that he was prone to manic episodes and that his early death came as little surprise, yet his work reveals a profound depth, patience and simplicity in both meaning and execution. *Four Season Clock* (1965) takes the form of a circular clock face, with the words winter, spring, summer and autumn – in white, yellow, blue and red respectively – turning, merging and forming new combinations of letters, then meeting to display the original words every five minutes: a visual metaphor for the circularity inherent in the calendar of the seasons. *Semaphore Machine* (1965) is a plain white board with stark black letters rigidly twitching to form new words and unknown greetings from the letters HLFEA – Cox's attempt to revel in the infinite possibilities of semiotic language. All of these machines were hand built by Cox and a peek behind the painted facades reveals tangles of wires, solder, cogs and tiny electric motors; together in one room, they emit a cacophony of rattles, clicks and squeaks cutting through a continually purring motor hum. It's tempting to close your eyes and imagine you're listening to the restless mind of their brilliant late creator.

Daniel Spicer