

Sean Dower - reflecting on his residency in the Victorian railway arch space at Beaconsfield arts, London. March 2015

It is hard finding a place in London where you can both make a loud noise and leave everything spread out while work is in progress.

The first thing I wanted to do when starting the residency at Beaconsfield was to bring in some of the instruments and sound making materials I have gathered over the years. I wanted to listen to the sound they made within and in relation to this amazing arch; to listen to modes of playing and how these sounded in the space. Instruments, especially percussion instruments, are often played according to certain constructs - types of music and their perceived function in society. I have frequently worked with other percussionists where drums have been the sole instrumentation. If you liberate the drums from time-keeping and other prescribed functions and start from scratch, you need to explore a greater range of sound making and play differently. I also worked and played drums in a railway arch for a number of years, so the acoustics and energy of this kind of space and the sound of the trains overhead felt familiar.

I spent whole days in the darkened arch, listening and recording different sounds to see what worked sonically in the space. Railway arches remind me of caves. I spent some time in my twenties visiting caves in France and Spain, caves that were occupied by humans in Paleolithic times. There were paintings in many of them, often adapted to the topography and form of the spaces. I was fascinated by the idea that there might have been music made in these caves and that this might have evolved out of the acoustics of the space.

All the sounds and rhythms I made in the arch were activated manually. Some of the instruments might be classified as mechanical or electrical, like the football rattle or the sirens, but these are still played and modulated by a performer. When playing percussion I am often more interested in sound and modulation rather than regulated rhythm. The materials and the space itself become determining factors.

For the first public event at Beaconsfield on the 30th of January there was no performer and the instruments and their sound were residual. Acoustic, live sound is obviously different to recorded or amplified sound, but there are also many versions of 'liveness' or presence. For the recordings I made, the materials or instruments were recorded at close quarters and I removed some of the lower frequencies so that you hear slightly less of the arch's reverberation in the recording. When played through speakers the reverberation was then added back by the space. By removing the performer, the viewer can become more mobile, their eyes wandering over the objects spread about the space. An audience is often preoccupied by the performer, which can be compelling. However I have made a few performances that disrupt this relationship or rearrange the priorities of looking and listening. The intention was for the audience to look at the materials more closely and listen in a different way.

For the second part of the residency, during February, I planned to bring in collaborators, people that I had not worked with before. I invited Eben Bull and Rupert Clervaux, two musicians I had met - and who shared an interest in sound design. They responded very naturally to the space and the materials I had gathered, I think they immediately understood what was unique or unusual about the situation. We were not able to schedule a live public performance, so we focused instead on recording the three-dimensional audio-space of a performance.

For the closing stage of the residency, I removed all the materials from the space and made a 'quad' mix to play over four electrostatic speakers, which were placed in the original position of four of the microphones. What worked on a regular stereo speaker set-up or through headphones was completely different to what worked through the electrostatic speakers. I had to remove a few sections that the speakers just couldn't cope with. It was not an illusionistic recreation of 3D space – what you heard altered as you moved or turned your head even slightly. The sound was subtle and emerged from the dimly lit space with an uncanny presence. It is quite impossible to describe the spatial effect, but the playing was somewhere between music and the incidental ambient sound of a manufacturing workshop. I am quite interested in these non-musical reference points. I grew up in the Black Country, an industrial region in the Midlands. When I was young, I used to accompany my Dad on architectural surveys of factories and the noise of these industrial spaces and being allowed to climb up mountains of scrap metal etc, undoubtedly had an effect on me. As a teenager in the early 1980's I started making Industrial and Noise music, playing with several bands. The performances were usually improvised and confrontational, using tapes, electronics and percussion. When I started playing percussion I set myself a couple of rules: not to learn by copying anyone else's music; and not to play a drum kit. I eventually found my way to art school in London to study sculpture and around that time I also began touring with the performance group Bow Gamelan Ensemble. I obviously picked up some percussion skills along the way, but remain primarily interested in the materiality and physicality of sound and how it is performed.

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