

Sonic Acts

Various venues, Amsterdam, Netherlands
"Imagination creates agency," asserts author Ytasha Womack during her Afrofuturism talk on the closing day of what has become one of the most politically engaged and intellectually probing Dutch music festivals. Over the course of four days, venues across Amsterdam, from the underground club and exhibition space De School, to jazz staple Bimhuis overlooking the IJ river, or modern art museums Stedelijk and Paradiso – the latter spawned and transformed by the hippy and punk counterculture movements – hosted talks, vertical cinema screenings, workshops, installations, site-specific performances and DJ sets, in a programme so packed, keeping up proved a real struggle. Any first attempt to clearly define the premise of the festival might make the undertaking look too ambitious. But the structure of Sonic Arts is far from rigid, creating the platform for researchers, musicians and artists to interrogate the concepts that motivate them. This opened approach resulted in a programme boasting musically gripping performances without avoiding occasional and quite unexpected anticlimaxes.

Jennifer Walshe's spoken word and audiovisual work *Everything Is Important* was one of the highlights, with the composer and vocalist lamenting the "emotional inefficiency of sanitised middle-class life" or her need "to find whoever is responsible for inspirational quotes on Instagram", condensing – in the company of regular collaborators Arditto Quartet – all the absurdities, contradictions and tensions of contemporary existence in a show that refused to eschew humour.

Earlier, the Norwegian duo of Signe Lidén and Espen Sommer Eide presented their *Vertical Studies* project in a disused, 46 metre high water tower. Their investigation of the vertical dimension and sound, using elongating metallic structures and custom-made plexiglass formations filtering their expanding, growling drones, created a post-

industrial sonic jungle where chirps, noise and foreboding low-end frequencies alluded to disembodied entities trapped between fading memory and the uncanny present.

Emptyset were thrilling, employing a custom-made electric guitar used by James Ginzburg more as a percussion instrument than anything else, plucked with ferocity fitting the duo's brand of resolute, pulverising techno. Chicago based Teklife affiliate DJ Earl proved a smooth dancefloor operator, setting every single foot in Paradiso in motion, blasting a set of mellifluous footwork sprinkled with drum 'n' bass explosions. Brussels based US composer Christina Vantzou transmitted expansive synth works, preparing the ground for BJNilsen and visual artist Karl Lemieux's minimalistic work *Yujiapu*.

Less welcome surprises included pop-trap outfit Killavei whose stage performance included the AutoTuned lip-synching of a member struggling to take selfies, while the lead vocalist beside him was trying to finish the show. South London based Klein's live set of fragmented samples, soulful vocals and fleeting melodies was a bit underwhelming but one could blame the fact her music translates better in more intimate settings than a vast concert space.

Elsewhere, the Sonic Acts exhibition touched upon dystopian future perspectives of AI's impact on history, the weaponisation of biometric facial recognition, and ecological degradation. Technological innovation, neoliberalism and their sociopolitical implications were focal points of the conference programme, with speakers including feminist political writer Laurie Penny, *Wire* contributor Nina Power and US film maker Ben Russell talking about psychedelic ethnography. With such a multifaceted programme, Sonic Acts raised more questions than it put to rest, but maybe that was its intention all along: to send out a call to action by triggering the imagination necessary for an urgent debate. Sophia Ignatidou



Espen Sommer Eide and Signe Lidén

Clare Simmonds

The Church Of St George The Martyr, London, UK
The first concert of South London's latest new music series kicked off with a note of foreboding: a heavy clunk deep in the left-hand side of the piano keyboard. Tom Armstrong's suspenseful *Capriccio* ventured only rarely into the keyboard's middle octaves, favouring the instrument's extremities for its brisk alternation of jazzy chords and tumbling clusters that would not have sounded out of place in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

The piece is quickly followed by a set of miniatures by Colin Riley. Pianist Clare Simmonds introduces Riley's *While Stars Light Your Way Across The Night* (*Six Lullabies For Solo Piano*), calling the piece "very poignant". Indeed, it has a certain melancholy tenderness, not unlike the instrumentals of Louisville post-rock group Rachel's – their *Music For Egon Schiele*, in particular. It opens fragmentarily, like shards of glass gleaming on a sandy beach.

Still, there is too much of the Freudian psychodrama about the work to function as lullabies without risking strange dreams. Simmonds noted she had previously heard Riley's lullabies accompanied by flute and viola. Here, the siren of a passing police car more than compensates for their absence.

Miniatures, Simmonds mentions between pieces, is the theme of this first installment of Borough New Music, a lunchtime concert run in the musty confines of the Church Of St George The Martyr. The meat of the hour-long set is a run of new "one minute commissions", not all of which, Simmonds concedes, last one minute. The best of the bunch are those by Ian Mikyska, Timothy Cape and Caitlin Rowley. The latter pair, in particular, familiar from the more puckish setting of their own *Bastard Assignments* series, made an intriguing addition to these more sedate surrounds.

Rowley's piece was entitled *Dot Drip Line Line* and consisted of a text score bearing little more than the words of its

title. Simmonds prepared three possible interpretations of this gnomic fragment and waved the pieces of paper at the audience, asking them to choose. "The first one!" came the unanimous response. As it happened, the first one meant the pianists got to sit, head bowed and immobile, behind her keyboard while a tape played bearing the sound of Simmonds herself asking various people simply to read out the words of the score – or in one case, whether on invitation or simply having mistaken the request – to interpret what the lines suggest to him.

Cape's *Glance* did involve some piano playing, though more as a kind of punctuation for the repeated spoken sentence "*birds have stopped singing*" delivered in a jerky staccato. Weaving in and about this, Simmonds performed a series of dance-like gestures from the piano stool, from a sort of heads-and-shoulders-knees-and-toes self-pat down to a slightly too hurried caress of the side of the piano

itself. Evidently not naturally inclined to the theatrical, Simmonds responded to the unusual demands of this score with a game determination.

Mikyska's piece, *fading at unequal rates*, as its name suggests, asked its audience to focus less on the attacks of its various chords than the varying decay rates as they were left to resound in space. More than just an observation of certain physical processes, it became a fleeting meditation on negative space, a cooling wash of air through the pews.

Borough New Music is a welcome addition to London's already blossoming contemporary composition scene. If today's concert resembled more a standard classical recital than some of its more experimental competitors, Simmonds should nonetheless be commended for bringing to that most sober of concert genres a little touch of something weirder, a gentle queering of the orthodoxy. Robert Barry