

On Location

Live and kicking: festivals, concerts, events in the flesh

Marginal Consort



Energy Births Form: Junko and David Keenan



Instal 08

VARIOUS VENUES
GLASGOW, UK

Instal 2008 may have involved a similar number of musicians as in previous years, but it elected to employ them in fewer and more collaborative events, utilising longer durations, and attempting to deal with (or at least paying lip service to) a particular theme or concept. Most were co-productions with other curators. Their contrasting agendas, along with the stylistic diversity of the bill – like Kill Your Timid Notion and Music Lovers' Field Companion, the other festivals organised by intrepid Scottish curator Barry Esson, Instal has become incrementally more expansive in its focus – lent the weekend a rather misshapen form and a distinctly awkward rhythm.

An event titled Self-Cancellation (reviewed in its own right in On Site, page 79) strove to translate London based artist Gustav Metzger's notion of auto-destructive art into the realm of sound, in the process proving that some ideas are only weakened by being executed. Another session, Translation, invited a disparate collection of artists – Achim Wollscheid, Kenneth Goldsmith, Jarrod Fowler, Simon Morris – to address the complex issue of appropriation. The term was defined so vaguely as to render it almost meaningless, and the results, encompassing poetry reading, performance pieces and vocal improvisations, consequently offered scant few nuggets of insight.

Ersatz neo-hippy bonhomie irradiated Golden Cherry Ball, a collaboration between

Matthew Valentine & Erika Elder and mystifyingly ballyhooed Nashville skiffle folk troupe The Cherry Blossoms, which aimed to replicate the atmosphere of a typical evening at MV & EE's Vermont homestead, the delightfully named Maximum Arousal Farm.

Energy Births Form, co-curated with *The Wire*'s David Keenan, assembled an all-star cast – Incapacitants, Alan Silva, Kazuo Imai, vocalist Junko, percussionists Sabu Toyozumi and Ben Hall, koto player Michio Yagi, Keenan himself and Borbetomagus's Don Dietrich on saxophones – to investigate how an improvising group attempting to meld free jazz and noise rock might generate new means of interaction and come to utilise structural forms over the course of a three hour performance. As Keenan put it in the programme notes: "It's about playing as intensely as you possibly can and not relying solely on your ears for guidance... a three hour show, all improvised, high energy, no 'listening' – at least not just with your ears." It's a problematic concept for any number of reasons, one of the more obvious being its regressive glorification of volume and velocity. To no one's surprise, the group produced an over-the-top blowout, whose singlemindedness and relentless maximalism was the festival's most successful act of self-cancellation. If any new modes of communication were chanced upon, they certainly weren't making themselves apparent. It's doubtful whether the audience would have been able to discern them if they had, such was the volume at which the group were playing.

Japanese quartet Marginal Consort's

performance, which also ran for three hours, dealt with similar ideas, albeit much less selfconsciously and much more effectively. Each of the four occupied a corner of the performance space, sitting at and moving around a table covered in instruments, gadgets and sound making objects. Each was backed by their own speaker, meaning one's exposure to the sound changed as one moved around the room. The group's ability to establish and maintain a balance between sustained sounds and flurries or interjections of instrumental mark-making meant each individual's discrete contributions both coexisted harmoniously in relation to each other, and cohered lucidly into a frequently riveting collective improvisation. It was an at times astonishing experience, and indisputably the festival's highlight.

A delegation of three representatives of German label Edition Wandelweiser, Radu Malfatti, Manfred Werder and Antoine Beuger, provided the starkest of aesthetic contrasts. The trio took up residence in a basement room for the duration of the weekend, where they performed their own and each other's compositions, all of them conveniently identical in style: just-audible hisses and tones separated by lengthy, stopwatch-timed periods of complete silence. The elongated running time of the residency – just shy of 24 hours in total, an absurd amount of time for music this sparse to have to fill up – and the musicians' resolutely immobile, gnomic physical presences meant the room's ambience was by turns reminiscent of an art installation, a peculiarly anticlimactic piece of performance art, or an inverted chill-out space.

Regardless of the virtues and shortcomings of the hyper-Reductionist strand of modern composition espoused by Edition Wandelweiser, this was hardly the best context in which to present or experience it. The room was far from soundproof, and the tiny slivers of sound the trio permitted themselves to produce were repeatedly drowned out by the ambient sounds of the venue, and of punters entering and exiting the room. On the Saturday night so much noise from the Energy Births Form performance leaked downstairs that they gave up altogether and shut up shop early. Ironic that they should be stymied by a group grappling with questions which Malfatti in particular decided quite emphatically almost two decades ago weren't even worth asking, let alone answering.

That two musics not so much mutually exclusive as mutually antipathetic should be asked to cohabit the same space illustrates the conundrum which clouded the weekend's events. What connects Gustav Metzger to MV & EE? Or Blood Stereo to John Butcher? Nothing – except Esson's attempts to create a context where they can appear side by side. In this his ambition and enterprise are to be applauded, especially in such precarious times for arts funding. Instal's string of disparate events certainly made a strong statement about diversity, but its lack of – or inability to generate – a conceptual underpinning to thread them together meant that it was made at the expense of any sort of curatorial consistency.

NICK CAIN

Instal photo gallery at www.thewire.co.uk