

INSTAL

WORDS: MATT EVANS PHOTO: ALEX WOODWARD

"This year's Saturday night fist-fight set is a three-hour power-improv marathon"

INSTAL 2008

THE ARCHES, GLASGOW

Even for an experimental festival renowned for its sense of aesthetic wanderlust, Instal is particularly deep in the boondocks this year. Every other act is acting under high-concept auspices, to varying effect. Friday is Self-Cancellation night, inspired by the auto-destructive art of Fluxus satellite Gustav Metzger. In visual terms, the central idea boils down to one of painting with acid, where the process of creation itself utterly destroys the artwork. So an evening with Bon Jovi this is not; little-to-no chance of lighters-in-the-air singalong action. Sorry.

An arresting concept in theory, it turns out that self-cancellation is a little trickier in practice. At least two sets this evening involve standing in pitch blackness, in near-total silence – those at the front during sound artist Lee Patterson's set report soluble painkillers being dropped into glasses of water; Sarah Washington apparently interprets the theme by using dying radios, though for all intents and purposes they are already dead. Robin Hayward's idea, playing a tuba that slowly fills with sand, would be intriguing, were it not for the fact that the composition is so painfully sparse and slow that any warping and nullifying effects are entirely imperceptible. More audible expressions were to come though. A self-sustaining performance finds John Butcher stimulating and manipulating vibrations from an acoustic guitar, piano wire, a snare drum and saxophone feedback. The method is captivating and ingenious, the simple drones less so – except when Butcher somehow coaxes a remarkable tabla-esque passage from his eccentric setup. Martin and John Bain

bring the weekend's first bit of fear and sonic violence, literally shaking the building and replaying its structural stresses in devastating sub-bass form – though, thankfully, it never reaches a cataclysmically self-destructive climax. A collective improvisation from the self-cancellers reverses the evening's trend of 'conceptually interesting but musically bereft', their fizzing drones and ominous creaks displaying a wealth of ideas and subtle interplay, but bearing no obvious relation to the 'score' – a series of sudoku puzzles projected one on top of another, becoming gradually more illegible. Finally, Rhodri Davies pays explicit and thrilling homage to Metzger's acid paintings, light sensors converting nylon corrosion into caustic sound.

Following the migrainish joys of Instal 2006's relentlessly brutal Jazzkammer set, this year's Saturday night fist-fight set is a three-hour power-improv marathon under the name of Energy Births Form. The concept here is one of transcendence through exhaustion, establishing a new musical language by crashing through the pain barrier. Assembled for one night only, the EBF collective – Don Dietrich (Borbetomagus), Kazuo Imai, Michiyo Yagi, Junko (Hijokaidan), Alan Silva (Sun Ra), David Keenan (Tight Meat), Sabu Toyozumi (Haino, Brotzmann), Ben Hall (Graveyards), and Incapacitants' Toshiji Mikawa – seemingly have no regard for subtlety, dynamics, or interaction. From the first second right through to the 180th minute, there's no respite. It's a blast, in both senses. The force, volume and energy of these players is immense, particularly the utterly knackered twin drum attack of Hall and Toyozumi. Although the cumula-

tive effect is a somewhat murky roiling and boiling purple-brown noise, some elements do surface – Junko's monotone screeching, Yagi's sumptuous koto, and Imai's guitar, which sounds endlessly inventive and joyful, whether he's threading chains through his strings or frittering away glorious, dextrous runs. It was said of the late free guitarist Derek Bailey that his unwillingness to listen to his collaborators was both his genius and his weakness. A similar principle applies tonight; the look-inwards-and-blaze-away approach produces staggering levels of sheer power, but the lack of variation is painful over a three-hour period. The sound may be astonishing, but the excessive duration seems like a self-defeating gimmick – three hours of unchanging assault leads minds to wander and feet to do likewise. Perhaps what it takes three hours to say could be said in 30 minutes, and make room for more than just one band.

Some of Instal's most rewarding treats are not quite so monolithic, but tucked away and furtive – if that term could ever really apply to being trapped in a small, dark basement office for a one-on-one with noise actionist Kylie Minoise. By far the loudest act of the weekend, possibly the millennium, Kylie's ultra-harsh torrents take on an even more intimidating edge than usual in this intimate setting. By contrast, Nackt Insecten takes a more communal route. A sizeable band of festival-goers find themselves led out and under the streets of Glasgow for an illicit drone performance in a packed subway carriage, a mischievous and deeply fun shared experience that draws baffled glances from non-Instal travellers.

Sunday sees another three-hour improvisation – or, more accurately, four improvisations sharing time and space. Normally a five-man collaboration, Marginal Consort has a melancholic tinge this year following the death of Fushitsusha bassist Yasushi Ozawa. Kazuo Imai, Tomonao Koshikawa, Keiji Shii and Masami Tada set up their stations in the corner of the room, and an empty table pays tribute to the absent fifth member. As in Energy Births Form, interplay is minimal and the individual contributions solipsistic. But unlike the previous evening's relentless battery, the emphasis here is on constant change, evolution and a sense of audience interactivity, as the overlap between sound sources shifts depending upon where the listener happens to wander. A scraped koto bleeds into violin drones; tiny clockwork machines making their way around copper bowls duet with rich synth melodies; woodwind flutters harmonise with the sounds of amateur carpentry. Imai is the most manic and compelling of the four, hurling logs to the floor, scraping a contact mic up and down the legs of passers-by, and frenetically tweaking a Heath Robinson-esque array of springs and coils. Although this year's festival at times seems more concerned with concept than content, Marginal Consort's shapeshifting set, by turns gorgeous and ridiculous, delicate and monstrous, is an endlessly engrossing demonstration of the potential of improvised music, and a tribute to Instal's uniquely ambitious vision.