



Art and Sound in Stockholm New Music 2006 and LARM 2007

Sachiko Hayashi

STOCKHOLM NEW MUSIC

As a non-native who moved to Sweden as a grown-up, I am always surprised at the open-mindedness of the Swedish music establishment toward new art forms, which at times clearly exceeds the degree of curiosity its visual art counter-part is willing to afford. Nam June Paik, for example, was first introduced to the general Swedish public in 1966 at the Museum of Technology as part of "Visions of Today" symposium, organised by Fylkingen, an artists' run non-profit organisation in Stockholm with contemporary music as their main focus. The archives of the organisation show the actual introduction of Paik even precedes that date by five years, to 1961 when he performed "Action Music" at a Fylkingen concert. Though this may come as no surprise to those who are familiar with the history of early Paik as a composer, it is significant to remember that even at the time of "Visions of Today" exhibition (one year after his first solo exhibition "Electronic Art" at Bonino Gallery in New York), he was still viewed as an outsider by the Swedish art establishment who considered his work too unconventional. Ignored by the visual art world, Paik and his work found far deeper acceptance in the music lovers of Sweden who recognised the significance in the "new-ness" Paik was just about to bring into the stale visual art scene. (*)

Stockholm New Music Festival, led by the classical guitarist Magnus Andersson as its artistic director and funded by the Swedish Institute of Concerts (a state institution promoting new music), places itself in this tradition of audio-visual link in the Swedish cultural scene. Along its 2006 theme "Place and Space," the festival included two sound-installations by the artists whose names are normally more familiar to the visual art scene than that of music: namely, Christina Kubisch and Janet Cardiff.

Christina Kubisch, who belongs to the first generation of sound artists, made her site-specific installation "A History of Archives" at Rönnells Antikvariat, the oldest second-hand bookshop in Stockholm. Established in 1929 and with its extensive and exclusive collections of academic and rare books, Rönnells Antikvariat has a history of serving libraries and other state institutions both domestically and abroad during the post WWII period. Rich catalogue lists of books which came into their possession during its 78-year-long history still exist, making the store into a unique archive of book history. Kubisch for her "A History of Archives" wired up one section of this historical shop with electric cables, creating an electromagnetic field filled with audio information. The sounds, readings of the catalogue



archives of the shop by various people, are then picked up by custom-made magnetic sensor coils in the wireless headphones worn by the public, whose various positions induce different voices softly whispering into their ears the subjects, authors, titles, years and even prices of books from various time periods. Being in a space of our own motion and sound, walking through the corridors between bookshelves filled with second-hand books at Rönnells becomes as if encountering ghosts from the past; an encounter with those unknown with whom we share our love for books, sometime on familiar subjects and titles and at other times on completely unfamiliar territories. As the visual information (the books on the shelves) merges with the audio information by the thread of "book" and "text", Kubisch's electro-magnetic field emerges almost like a 4th dimension in which our concept of linear time evaporates diffusing our sense of past, present, future.

"A History of Archives" by Christina Kubisch. Site-specific sound installation at Rönnells Antikvariat

Janet Cardiff, an established visual artist whose audio-walks are probably best known, was introduced for the first time in Sweden with her 2001 work "Forty-Part Motet". Motet is a music term originated in the Medieval period, describing a number of choral compositions in the Western music tradition. Cardiff, whose work often focuses on our experience of simulacra, took the 40-part 15th century motet "Spem in alium" by the English composer Thomas Tallis and extracted each part to be recorded separately. With each voice assigned to one speaker, 40 speakers are then placed in an oval out-line, inside which is the walkway for the public. Then the installation-concert begins, with 40 speakers recreating the beauty of renaissance chorus toward the centre of the installation, executed via sophisticated calculation by her partner George Bures Miller. As you walk freely, listening to separate speakers on the way, you are able to listen to each voice almost separately



from the rest and the speaker almost turns into a person, a distinguished individual. The stark contrast and distinctiveness of each voice is striking as they amazingly form a harmonious whole of the music piece together. Cardiff, by transforming the centuries-old music into our present-day sound-installation, succeeds in revealing something fundamentally human: the delicate balance we experience between our desire for togetherness and our basic need for individuality. Its essential experience is sensual, almost seductive with Tallis' composition, but underneath it hidden in the emotional beauty of musical tone is the intellectual undercurrents that give rise to thoughts on our human nature.



(above): "Forty-Part Motet" by Janet Cardiff (photo: courtesy of the artist and Stockholm New Music)

(below): "Forty-Part Motet" by Janet Cardiff at Konstnärshuset

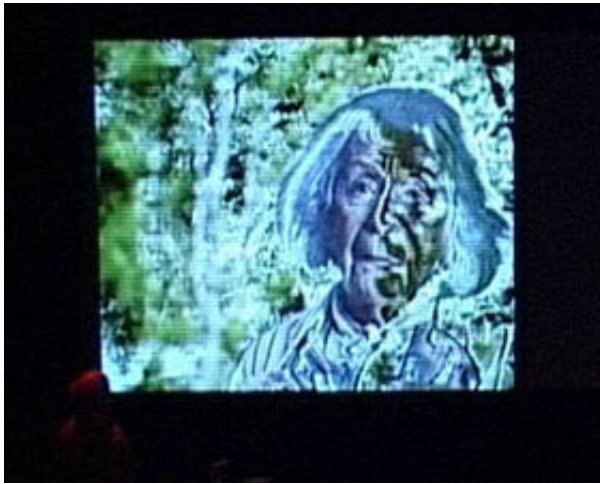
LARM-NORDIC SOUND ART FESTIVAL

A little more than a year later from Stockholm New Music, another sound-focused festival called LARM took place in the heart of Stockholm. Whereas Stockholm New Music Festival continued with the Swedish tradition of the music establishment's openness with new names in the art scene, LARM was a manifestation of the trend into the opposite direction. LARM was created by four visual artists (Maria Bjurestam, Maria Hägglund, Mona Petersson and Liv Strand), and is a good indication of the new international trend (i.e. visual artists' interest in sound and music) that has been around for more than a decade.

Unfortunately its title "Nordic Sound Art Festival" can be somewhat misleading, since the festival focuses on female artists who incorporate sounds in their works in a much wider range than the term "sound art" normally permits. The result is a nice smorgasbord of videos, music performances, sound installations, EAM concerts and radio programmes, all of which are linked together by three criteria: "Nordic (either by birth or residence)," "Women" and "Sounds."

LARM's decision to define "Nordic" by birth or residence is something new in Nordic countries, which, unlike USA, have been slow in accepting non-natives into their own. In Stockholm, for example, it is a common practice that galleries intentionally exclude works by artists with immigrant backgrounds. LARM's decision to be inclusive opened up opportunities for many artists who would otherwise be excluded from the category, thus making the festival despite its Nordic criterion international as well as providing a more adequate reflection of the present day "Nordic". For example, Natasha Barrett is an internationally renowned UK composer who lives in Norway. Her "Trade Winds", here shown as a 16 channel sound installation, is a beautiful EAM work, in which a spoken tale by a Norwegian sea captain is interwoven in its highly suggestive rich texture. Other such examples include the installations by Camille Norment (USA/Norway) and Marianne Decoster-Taivalkoski (France/Finland) that explore potentials of sound and interactivity as well as the supercollider-programmed electronic harp performance by Emi Maeda (Japan/Finland).

One of the participants of the festival was the video legend Steina Vasulka, born in Reykjavik but a resident of USA since the '60s. In the field of video art, Steina and her husband Woody together hold a special position for two reasons; firstly, several key developments in the language of electronic video through their disciplined



Steina Vasulka, "Violin Power," Kulturhuset (photo: LARM)

experimentation and exploration of video signals; secondly, promotion of electronic art through their foundation of the Kitchen in New York in 1971 which quickly became an alternative scene to the established art galleries. They also assisted the curator David Bienstock to organise "A Special Videotape Show" at Whitney Museum, a ground-breaking show that had a huge impact on the acceptance of video as an artistic medium.

Steina, a classically trained violinist, performed "Violin Power," a real-time audio-visual interactive work, in which projected video images are constantly altered in a controlled manner by her violin performance. On the screen are the artists whom she carefully selected for her video: the painter Doris Cross (as "Lilith", incorporated into "Violin Power" specially for LARM), Michel Waisvisz, the director of STEIM whose Crackle Box is probably best known and here with the instrument The Hands, the legendary voice performer Trevor Wishart, the Japanese modern dancer and choreographer Saburo Teshigawara, and Steina herself. As she attentively weaves video sequences of her artists by playing the violin, the intention becomes clear: it is not a mere audio-visual interactive performance but a performance whose interactivity is designed to conceive a dialogue between the artists on the screen and the violinist Steina. At one point, the dialogue even involves present-day Steina and thirty-year-younger herself (captured for her original "Violin Power" 1978). Visually involving video-signal experiments she and her husband tenaciously sought over the years, "Violin Power" also serves as a tale of these artists and their works, a glimpse into the history of art and performance.

Norwegian artist Maia Urstad is one of the few festival participants whose activity truly falls into the category "sound art." In her "Radiokonsert (Radio Concert)," sampled radio sequences from the world are sent via local FM radio transmitters to 30 portable radios, spread over the concert space and each held by a person in the audience. As she sends out her live-mix of multi-track compositions, the radios are turned into wireless speakers and their interaction with one another produces interesting patterns of multi stereo effects. Throughout the concert, the sound of voice characteristic to air transmission and typical radio crackles and white noise together fill the room, with higher waves of sounds appearing sometimes far and sometimes near,



transforming the concert space into an ocean of sounds. Transferring her compositional focus from temporality to spatiality, it almost appears as if Urstad, a visual artist by training, envisions the concert room to be a huge canvas on which she action-paints with various sound colorations. The work, a miniature model of the radio world where people tune into different languages in different time zones, works also as a reminder of our present-day cityscape whose passages are filled with transmitted sounds from the radios and TVs which others turn on for their joy. The remote connection of transmission is revised here into the physical connection of the city, a space we share with others through its soundscape. The presence of uncalculated sounds that derive from the use of radio speakers, such as interference by cellular telephone signals with radio transmission and unforeseen sound distortions from variations in speaker quality, also distinguishes her work from many others, for which more often than not the high-tech clean sound aesthetics of EAM is still the norm. Not a high technological work, it uses no special custom-made device nor programme; yet Urstad's "Radio Concert" stimulates our intellectual curiosity through its deliberate study of our sound world we take for granted. It is a great example of not only sound art but also how well-conceived low-tech art can be.



(above): Maia Urstad transmitting "Radio Concert," Kulturhuset (photo: Maria Bjurestam)
 (below): audience holding radios in "Radio Concert," Kulturhuset (photo: Maia Urstad)

CROSS BREEDING

The grey area of the audio-visual cross zone has been one of the most vital fields in art for many decades; Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, John Cage, Brian Eno and Ryoji Ikeda, names of those who have crossed between the two fields are many. By bringing down the old barriers, they've established new fields of activities that do not fit into the clear-cut division of music and visual art. In addition, cross breeding of values from different genres has enriched our world by making us aware of new exciting ways of seeing and listening that go beyond the classical languages of music and fine art.

Establishment of a language of a genre constantly embodies the risk of producing skillful experts at the cost of excluding others whose values and focuses produce approaches outside the mainstream discourses. For example, in the process of film becoming a fusion of theatre and moving image, other filmic languages experimented by Legé, Man Ray, Vertov, Len Lye (to name a few) in the early days of cinema and later by Joseph Cornell, Stan Brakhage and Fluxus and other experimental film-makers have almost been excluded from the notion of what we normally perceive as "film"; instead these hybrids of art and moving image have been incorporated into the field of visual art and their works are today shown mostly at art halls and museums, somehow a paradoxical and ironic situation considering film's reproducible nature.

Language dictates our thought process. Inasmuch as we need language to understand and communicate with each other, it behooves us to be aware of the danger that language, in its most staleness, inevitably stifles creativity and imagination. The fruits of the audio-visual cross zone of the last four decades are a wonderful reminder of the importance in looking at things differently and doing things the "wrong" way in order to free ourselves from the mental imprisonment the power of language imposes.

(*) Later, performances and video screenings were also organised by the same organisation when no galleries in Sweden showed even a remote interest to these art forms, which they had no idea how to translate into their commodity based activities. Yet-to-be-established art forms have often been supported by the openness and curiosity of the members of this organisation (sound art being the latest example), to which many individual artists have come in order to practice their activities that had yet no place in the Swedish art scene, but from which the knowledge and the acceptance of the new genres have often spread to the rest of the country . This journal is also published by Fylkingen.

Sachiko Hayashi is a visual artist who primarily works with video and net art. She studied International and Cultural Studies, Digital Media, and Electronic and Computer Arts. Her works have been shown world-wide at various venues including Transmediale, Berlin, Symphony Space on Manhattan, NY, the National Museum of Science and Technology, Stockholm, and Saitama Museum of Modern Art, Japan. She founded DIAN network for net artists, and currently edits Hz and curates Hz Net Gallery. Her net art works are available at www.e-garde.net

[HOME](#)

[ARTICLES](#)

[NET GALLERY](#)



FYLKINGEN'S NET JOURNAL

- © 2007 all rights reserved -