



NOTES

DISAPPEAR is a sound installation created by Robert Jarvis with the help of funding from the Arts Council and also Kent County Council's 'Rural Action'. The work was created over the space of about nine months from scratch by the composer. This was done in a few stages.

The first step was for Robert to actually go out and record the sounds. As the aim of the installation was to encourage people to (re)consider their relationship to their sonic environment, Robert decided to integrate this aim into the very process of actually creating the work. This was done first of all through an advertising poster campaign that had as its headline "WANTED! Endangered Sounds" and this was disseminated to over 300 parish councils, 450 village halls and also every Kent rural school with the generous help of The Kent Rural Community Council.

As a result of this poster campaign, people from all over Kent contacted Robert over the summer months, via email and telephone. About three to five people a week made contact to tell of sounds that they were aware of that were possibly on the point of extinction. These varied enormously: from accounts of whistling postmen to neighbours cutting the grass with push lawn mowers. In all cases, Robert followed up the telephone conversations by going out to record the sounds and talking with the people about the sounds in their environment, their historical legacy, and in particular the fragility of today's soundscape.

As the sounds began to be collected, Robert moved on the next stage which was the editing and cleaning up of the recordings preparing them for possible inclusion in the final composition. After this he began experimenting with layering the sounds and treating them electronically, and in this way the composition slowly evolved. As Robert's intention was to create a piece which would open the ears and minds of its audience (and keep them listening) he was careful to work with the sounds in a sensitive manner. By only giving the sounds subtle treatments he was able to make the composition sound musical but also for there to be an obvious link with the original sound. This was done in order that the listener would be challenged to recognise the sounds, and once recognised their memory would stay with the listener after the leaving the installation, and thus would inspire further connections and thoughts. This gradual layering of the sounds and the construction of the piece was done using Symbolic Sound's 'Kyma' computer software programme, which also offered Robert the facility of composing the piece for a surround sound environment for the eventual audience to walk into the middle of and hear the sounds move around the space.

In the end, about fifty different 'endangered' sounds are used in the composition, which lasts about 14 minutes. The piece is played on a loop continually from the gallery opening time with the effect that during the day as people enter at different stages of the composition, the sounds

creep into their consciousness as they approach the gallery, and similarly on leaving mix with the everyday, and so the piece sets up the illusion of having no beginning or no end. (This is quite important for the artist as he wants the composition to act as a trigger for listening in general (and not just to the piece and for the duration of the piece).

The work also has a visual element to it. This consists of a floor covering of about 200 descriptions of endangered sounds. Descriptions such as “Spin Driers Dancing”, “Policemen Blowing Whistles” or “Alarm Clocks Ringing” are painted onto lining wall paper with black acrylic paint and then each description is torn out of the paper. The 200 or so descriptions are then layered beside and on top of each other creating a startling carpet effect covering the entire floor space. In the middle of the installation space a few chairs are placed to encourage visitors to enter and sit down.

When people visit the installation they walk over the ‘carpet’ of endangered sounds, entering the surround soundscape where they would hear the sounds of the piece move around and through them. Their walking over the paper gradually adds to the degradation of the floor piece and thus over the five or six weeks of each exhibition it gradually changes from its untouched ‘immaculate’ state to more of an untidy mess. This then sets up another narrative, linking the act of walking on the sounds and the destroying of the written words to perhaps the reason why many sounds might be disappearing in the first place. (Interestingly, those with a tendency to listen attentively enter the gallery space more gently and thus are not as destructive as those who simply stroll in, not really listening and with their feet scuffing the paper on the floor. In this manner, the floor piece is destroyed by those not listening...).

When the piece was first exhibited in Whitstable we were impressed by the overwhelming positive response by the visiting public, and this encouraged us to also program it again five months later in the main gallery in Canterbury. This space was almost twice as large and so Robert constructed a giant version of the piece with larger writing on the floor. Again this piece inspired very positive criticism. A selection of the comments is provided with this submission.

From reading the comments it is clear that the sound installation manages to affect many of its visitors. Without doubt, the composition communicates in a very clear way to those who experience it and testimony to this is the length of time that people on average spend in the gallery with the work, as well as returning again and again – maybe to rehear the sound track, or maybe to see how the floor piece has changed as a result of more trampling of feet.

A SELECTION OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

“I could spend hours in here”

“I can’t stop seeing it”

“Absolutely wonderful. Keep it ‘forever”

“I like the way the space is so inviting – it is hard to leave”

“This is weirdly fascinating; suddenly realised that I’d been sitting here 20 minutes”

“This is the second time I’ve experienced your piece and in each case it has really heightened my sensitivity and awareness of our surroundings”

“The depth of the listening experience is increased on my repeated visits”

“I would like to stay here and listen and listen”