

Electric light orchestra

It hums, it rumbles, it rings: Adrian Searle tunes into an exploration of sound and vision

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I hear a deep electric moan, a noise with a baleful edge to it. It reminds me of standing under electricity pylons on a damp day. A picture pops into my mind: a stencilled human silhouette contorted against a yellow background, a black lightning zigzag delivering a fatal punch. The kind of enamelled sign they fix to the local electricity substation. "Don't go too close. Danger of death", it says.

Listen more attentively and the noise separates into harmonics, a 50 kilohertz hymn to the mighty electron, whirring at 50,000 cycles a second. It could almost be by Gyorgy Ligeti. Listen hard enough and any noise has music in it. At home, I harmonise with the Hoover. Is this what composers do? The sound here is a carefully modulated mix, derived from the electromagnetic fields generated by a small television, a cooker, a bar heater and a radio, all ranged along the back wall of a cordoned-off, semi-darkened space. The TV picture is a red fizz and the radio is tuned into a gulf between stations. This is an installation by Swedish artist Carl Michael von Hausswolff, in the exhibition Audible Light, at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. Audible Light is about sound, light and sculpture, and includes artists from Britain, Scandinavia, Belgium and Germany.

"Hmnnn" goes Hausswolff's work, and I go "Hm", not knowing what to make of it. The title doesn't help me: Domestic Audition Suggesting a Constant Flux of Semi-Individuals to be Detected - a sort of boffin's plodding variant on an old Damien Hirst title. The work generates the sort of sound the Aphex Twin might twiddle with on a hardcore ambient recording. Is this future disco? This morning I played all 70 tracks on the CD Trace, a compilation of two-minute sound works, a belatedly released part of last year's Liverpool Biennial. It included a man talking to himself near a spore of bear shit in the Canadian woods, and the sound of Yoko Ono doing something in her bathroom. There was lots of dweebing, and the odd gem. The 71st work on the CD I created myself, using the fast forward button.

An alarm went off as I walked through the next gallery at Moma, competing with the bells already ringing in my head. The source of the clamour, a red industrial alarm, is sealed off behind glass in a tall, shiny aluminium cabinet, a sort of sentry box standing in the middle of the room. A sensor detects you as you move in close and a bell sounds.

The point of this work, surely, is to outwit the alarm. I tried going round the cabinet in a low crouch, like Groucho Marx. I tried sidling to one side, but it caught me out. I almost tried crawling, but this was an interaction too far. Bruce Gilbert and Edward Graham Lewis, authors of Alarm (did it really take two people to think this up?), are members of

the experimental punk group Wire. Alarm is terribly slight, an ambient interruption on your way through the gallery. I wanted it to be louder, scarier, more forceful and jarring. I wanted the earth to move for me.

For that, I had to stand in Carsten Nicolai's installation. Pressure waves bent my ears; sound rumbled through my feet and my stomach. Nicolai has inset eight loudspeakers flush with a false grey floor and through them comes a low, juddering oscillation. It is a room filled with thunderous heavy breathing. Two spherical flagons half filled with water sit on the floor, doing their own reciprocal vibration. I guess they are body surrogates. You start to oscillate along with everything else in the room. I reeled out, shudder-ing. Oddly, the work made me want to pee, but I don't think that was the point.

The most accomplished work here is Danish artist Ann Lislegaard's *In Another Room*. A blank white wall cuts across a darkened space, at an angle. There are speakers inset in each corner of the wall and a powerful halogen lamp blasts a bright smear of light on the middle of it. The light flares on and off, sometimes brighter, sometimes dimmer, faster and slower, in tandem with the sound of someone moving around in an apartment - footsteps on a wooden floor, furniture scraping, an office chair being wheeled from room to room. A female voice describes the action.

The narrator tells us that the man in the room is looking out of his window. He goes through papers on his desk. He listens to his answering machine. He trundles his chair about, he sits and reads. We are told that the light is falling, day turning into night. The voice of the one who watches him sometimes overlays itself, incomprehensibly. The white of the wall where we watch is the same white as the walls in the room we cannot see. I hear the man in the room and I know that it is growing dark outside and that, as he looks through his window, he sees trees and a dog.

I see real light flaring painfully on the wall in front of me, burning on to my retina. I have to turn away after a while, and I see in my mind's eye the room he inhabits. I imagine his furniture and his solitary maunderings. This is, of course, a bit like listening to a radio play, with sound effects, but the work also does something to the physical space of the gallery, turning it into a space for the imaginary.

Finnish artists Tommi Grönlund have wired up the biggest space at Moma, with eight interconnected, wall-mounted parabolic reflectors. They look like satellite dishes. Cables snake into the centre of the room, plugged into two reel-to-reel tape recorders, each with a turning loop of tape. The effect is to turn the space into a whispering gallery. You hear yourself and others in the space relayed back, with a slight but perceptible delay. Stand near one of the reflectors and you hear the mutterings of people on the far side of the space, and their echoing, out-of-synch footfalls.

One annoying character insisted on playing the various ring options on his mobile phone into one of the reflectors while I was there, reminding me of Gerard Hoffnung's anarchic advice to tourists - to try the famous echo in the British Museum reading room. Walking around in the space, you come across pockets of reflected sound and dead spots. The gallery feels enlarged and the reflectors look kind of pretty.

I gather that Ann Veronica Janssens's installation Cyberlight is rather beautiful, too, but someone at the show's opening on Saturday night tampered with it, and it wasn't working on my visit. Janssens filled the Belgian pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale with a thick fog of dry ice, which created a minor stir. This new work is essentially a light installation, the only sound being the whirr of its "cyberlight" projector - included as aural accompaniment to the still images on Moma's PC-friendly Audible Light CD-Rom. It whirrs, helpfully.

Audible Light is at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (01865 722733), till March 19.

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