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Review of Cryptic Glasgow's Sonica Festival, Kings Place, London

Since 2012 Sonica has delivered a year round, international programme of sonic and visual art with over 400 events and 180 artists, culminating in a bi-annual festival in Glasgow. This year they brought four performances and two installations to London's Kings Place for two days of multifaceted and thought-provoking work and they will be doing so every second year from now on.

The first of the installations, Kathy Hinde's Tipping Point, also functioned as a performance by the artist. A series of water filled glass vessels were mechanically raised and lowered, changing the levels of water in each vessel and causing microphones within them to feed back at different pitches, creating complex, resonant textures of sound. The addition of responsive lights to each vessel made for a beautiful, meditative piece of work, while highlighting the tangible and physical properties of sound itself.

The main performances each night were opened by Mark Lyken, an artist, composer and filmmaker based in rural Dumfries & Galloway, Scotland. The first of these pieces, The Terrestrial Sea, traced tensions between organic and manmade forms – the natural and the industrial – in Cromarty Firth where Lyken was an artist in residence.

Projected to an ebbing and flowing electronic soundtrack was ultra high-definition footage of various environments, often subverted through split screens, strange angles, and mirroring effects. Amidst the clever extraction of vivid, quasi-abstract forms from seaweed and illuminated stone steps, lingering shots of accumulated rust and mould repeatedly posed the question: whose space is it anyway? Though both film and music were slow to develop, the imagery here was powerful, and some moments – foremost among them a bright, twisting shot of the sea reflected upon itself – were genuinely breathtaking.

Lyken's performance on the second night, however, was less gratifying. A reinterpretation of the seminal oscilloscope photographs created by mathematician Ben F. Laposky in the 1950s, these visuals, though pleasing to the eye, presumed more interest than they inspired. It became clear over the weekend that the Friday was intended for more substantive, expositive work, while Saturday's pieces were more purely aesthetic.

Similarly to Lyken in The Terrestrial Sea, artist North of X (Sisi Lu)'s Friday performance, The Age of Digital/Analogue, traced the lines between nature and industry. Accompanied by music sampled from his subject matter (a car factory, a 1960s printing press, box cameras, and more), Lu's live-mixed footage showcased an eye for the sublimity and energy of industry matching Walter Ruttmann in his modernist epic Berlin: Symphonie der Großstadt, making this performance, in spite of a brief technical mishap, a highlight of the weekend.

Constituting the second of the installations and the weekend's final performance were works by Robbie Thomson. The installation, *The New Alps*, was a configuration of spot-lit, rusted objects in a dark room: a desk with nothing on it, structures without clear function, and a ram's skull attached to an eerie robotic contraption all contributed to a sense of absence implying some post-apocalyptic world. Periodically the objects began to rattle of their own accord, their rhythmic, stormy effusions negating the artist's involvement to greater dystopian effect. The only object emitting no sound was the machine headed by the ram's skull: a silent conductor over a grim, automated orchestra.

Abrasive noise, it seems, is not exclusive to just one of Thomson's works. Closing the evening, and the festival, was *XFRMR* (Transformer), in which he explored the possibilities of the Tesla coil as a musical instrument to exhilarating effect. During what felt at times like a series of boundary-pushing experiments, Thomson and his instrument alternated between the dissonant and quasi-harmonic, the arrhythmic and beat-driven. At first recalling noise musicians like Merzbow or early HEALTH, he went on to emulate the rhythms and melodic styles of a variety of dance music, all accompanied by manic bursts of plasma from the device and framed by mesmeric geometric light projections.

Several people left early, some almost as soon as the performance had begun. Valid though their reasons may have been, they missed out on a performance bridging the technical and the spectacular, the popular and the arcane, and a fitting end to a fascinating festival.

by Ned Carter Miles