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Susan Philipsz, Profile

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Profile: Susan Philipsz

When listening intently to a sound the listener becomes, for a moment, unseeing. When that sound is unexpected that moment of concentration can transport the listener out of the present to a reflection of the past or toward a dream of the future. The experience becomes one that interrupts the flow of everyday life. Glasgow-born artist Susan Philipsz has developed just such an art of interruption. Selected for the upcoming Tate Triennial, Philipsz has, over the last few years, been busy interrupting everyday environments in cities all over the world. From Belfast to New York she has presented a practice that manages to engage with a specific social context and appeal to the individual, primarily through the medium of sound.

Let the wind blow through you heart
For wild is the wind, wild is the wind
(- Dimitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington)

Wild is the Wind, 2002, was a commission from the Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak, in San Sebastian. For this project, Philipsz sited four large trumpet speakers at the Comb of the Winds, a popular tourist attraction at the seafront of the city. She made recordings of herself singing the love-song of the same name and played it onto the spectacular sea vista. The reverie associated with gazing out to sea and the implied romantic cliché of a lone figure on the seafront are all part of the grammar of Philipsz' work. By placing a solo female voice in the face of the immense elemental force of the sea, she immediately evoked a reflection on the isolating nature of human longing. The singing voice drew the listener in, but was then lost to a vast open sea. In this, as in other works, Philipsz created the possibility of a private moment of reflection. Critical to her intention are the associative power of sound, the evocative nature of popular songs in particular and the often inarticulate tongue of memory and desire.

The apparent vulnerability of her own fallible singing voice has been a crucial instrument of Philipsz' expression. Since moving to Belfast in 1993, where she completed an MA in Fine Art, she has evolved a practice that provokes the tension between an individual's experience and social expectations. Belfast in the 90s was

notable for a lively and politically engaged art environment. In this climate, Philipsz became a director of the artist-run gallery Catalyst Arts and co-founded with Eoghan McTigue Grassy Knoll Productions, a mobile arts organization. In 1998 Grassy Knoll Productions organised 'Resonate', a group event comprising seven site-specific artworks around Belfast city. As part of this event Philipsz produced *Filter*, which she has since adapted to various contexts worldwide, including The Melbourne Biennial in 1999 and in 'LOOP' at PSI Contemporary Art Centre New York in 2001 (where she had previously completed a PSI Residency). A sound piece of recordings of herself singing a cappella versions of popular songs such as 'Airbag' by Radiohead, *Filter* was first played intermittently over the public address system at the bus station at Laganside. Its realisation engaged with the hustle and bustle of the station, by disrupting the customary sounds of the announcements and invited the transient audience to indulge in their own reverie. The chosen songs all possessed a common theme of longing and escapism, which emphasised the contingencies of travel and the desire to be elsewhere.

'Resonate' outlined an objective to raise questions relating to the profile of and possible function for contemporary art beyond the gallery space and ultimately to the role of the artist in the city. Both the broad intentions of 'Resonate' and the particular process of translation inherent in *Filter* are indicative of interests since sustained in Philipsz' practice. *Filter* presented an exploration to the relationship between sound and architecture, between listening and our understanding of place. In many of her works she has sought to counter our private perception of sound with our public negotiation of space. She is also interested in subverting socially coded expectations that are attendant to these concerns. For example in *Strip Tease*, 1999, she constructed a strip joint, replete with all the stereotypical trappings of the movie image of such a venue: glittering curtained stage, slinky music and tables and chairs for the expectant pundits. Over the duration of the work, the stripper never appeared. Instead a pink spotlight roved the entire joint and exposed the viewers to their own scrutiny. No longer simply looking, the audience were also being looked at and to this extent vulnerable. *Strip Tease* was ultimately about performance and time: a performance that never happened. By prolonging the 'waiting' Philipsz created a pause, a tentative caesura within the confines of a social expectation.

In Manifesta 3, 2000, in Ljubljana, Philipsz presented a work call *The Internationale*, 1999. Again using her own voice, she recorded 'The Internationale', a nineteenth century socialist anthem and played it in a pedestrian underpass in the city centre. As in *Filter*, the source of the singing was initially mysterious to the pedestrian and the surprise of hearing a solitary voice in an area of mass transience was a little disconcerting. As whole generations are readily entranced by the persuasion of popular song, previous ones were empowered by the sharing of communal aspirations put to music. By revisiting these songs, whether political or poetic, and further placing them in public spheres, Philipsz seemed to be interrupting the routine of both the city and the individual passer-by, asking them to stop for a moment and consider the music and all that it might suggest.

The Internationale was one of the works exhibited by Philipsz in The Glen Dimplex Artists Awards 2001 at the Irish Museum of Modern Art Dublin, for which she was short-listed. Here the piece was played on 7" vinyl: an adaptation that addressed the museum gallery space. Alongside this, she presented the sound and film installation, *The Dead*, 2000, also derived from an act of musical quotation. Taken from John Huston's film adaptation of James Joyce's 'The Dead', 'The Lass of Aughrim' was sung and recorded by Philipsz in all its unaccompanied glory. In the process of repossessing the song, she transposed it unto film, a blank projection that deteriorated over the duration of the singing. As the piece looped on its own frailty both visually and aurally, the reduction of the song lead to an opening up of its meaning. By isolating the vocal melody and re-engaging the song in a new context and in the recurring action of its realisation, *The Dead* became equally a reference to its cited source and a subjectively demanding experience for the viewer/listener.

Currently on a residency in Kunst-Werke Berlin, Philipsz has been exploring the utilization of sound other than her own voice. This summer in *Cast Together in 'C'*, she translated the sounds and sights of Cork city into a sound piece of horns and bells that called out to each other from bell towers across the city. The negotiation of city space that has brought her around the world will soon be met by its fundamental opposite: the desert of Texas. In early 2003, Philipsz participates in Art Pace at San Antonio and, no doubt, the proposed sound machine and its filmic translation will leave the desert and its guests somewhat more self-aware than they were before.

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