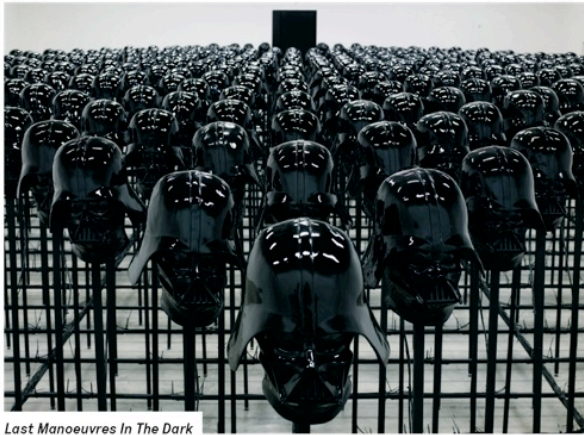


## On Site

Exhibitions, performance art, installations, etc



Last Manoeuvres In The Dark

### Fabien Giraud & Raphaël Siboni *Last Manoeuvres In The Dark*

Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France

The future of music is pitch black. This is what French artists Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni seem to say in their sound installation *Last Manoeuvres In The Dark*, which uses artificial intelligence to imagine the destiny of music.

Old master painters used vanitas or mortality symbols as moral guidelines. Objects like skulls and hourglasses were inserted in the picture to remind its viewers of death (*memento mori*) and to warn them against the sinful vanities of life. Giraud and Siboni updated and exaggerated this tradition by setting up over 300 Darth Vader masks on iron poles, facing the viewer. The masks are arranged on a diamond-shaped grid, in a similar fashion as the Xi'an Army, the 6000 life size warrior statues created in China around 200 BC. Like the Xi'an puppets, the Darth Vader heads are handmade in terracotta.

Two plugs, connected to power and network cables, are inserted into each mask. The countless cords are joined at a black monolith in the heart of the installation, a three metre high mainframe system. Closer enquiry reveals that each mask is equipped with a small computer, fed by the mainframe. The data which is passed throughout the army of computers consists of MIDI files extracted from effective pieces of 'dark' pop music selected by the artists, such as "A Forest" by The Cure, Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and soundtracks by John Williams and John Carpenter.

To process the data, the artists asked two composers from the renowned Paris

sound institute IRCAM to produce a system of 'musical cybernetics'. Robin Meier and Frédéric Voisin created a system that doesn't sample, but that analyses the sounds and learns to create new music. Each 20 minute cycle is different, taking musical traits like typical chords and intervals from the MIDI files. To create a sound reminiscent of all kinds of gloomy music, the artists collaborated with composer Olivier Pasquet and electro artist Franck Rivoire, aka Danger.

With the masks looming over them, spectators are bombarded with a sturdy rumble created by eight speakers hanging on the ceiling and a subwoofer installed in the middle of the installation. The 20 minute cycles of sound encompass every genre of dark music from the recent past. Each cycle starts with a wash of Dark Ambient, transforming into a pulsating, Gothic synthesizer groove. Then the rhythm speeds up into a mixture of Gabba thumps and Black Metal blasts, dying out in Merzbow-like noise and, finally, silence. The spectator is left with ringing ears and a slight headache.

*Last Manoeuvres In The Dark* comments on the possibility that pop producers will use increasingly advanced technology to create hits based on past chart successes. Like pop producers, Giraud and Siboni have deliberately and unapologetically exploited every well tested, cliché-ridden effect at their disposal. The 'dark side' that the artists ultimately point towards is the taking over of the human mind by artificial intelligence. In this sense *Last Manoeuvres In The Dark* is a powerful contemporary memento mori, scary and fascinating at the same time.

Marinus de Ruyter



Steven Stapleton at Wet Sounds

### Wet Sounds

London Fields Lido, London, UK

Wet Sounds starts with the scientific premise that the speed of sound is four times faster in water than in air. Four underwater speakers placed along one side of a swimming pool emit sound which can only be experienced by getting into the water. Breaking the surface doesn't put you through the looking glass, but it is an odd experience made even more so by one artist who presents the sound of birdsong (not usually encountered as you're holding your breath and completely submerged). In fact, it's these kinds of passages that often work the best, offering something completely familiar, such as an untreated piano melody or even the theme from *EastEnders*, which becomes utterly alien in a setting like this. The sound is surprisingly clear, although sometimes tinny, and also fizzes above the water for a good few inches before dissipating into the air. One particular bass-heavy piece sends currents of juddering water into listener's bodies as they swim close to a speaker. Less distinctive are the many pieces, all of which were collected especially for this event, which replicate and play on the kinds of sounds already generated by the pool itself.

After Wet Sounds toured the nation, spending a day each at nine pools around the country, London Fields's outdoor, temperature-controlled lido (the site of the exhibition's opening) hosted a live concert with open-air speakers in addition to the underwater ones. Nurse With Wound (Steven Stapleton with Andrew Liles and Matthew Waldron) performed, and the comparison between the two listening media is revealing. While all the sounds are clear, certain frequencies fare better than

others, and dunking your ears – floating on your back turns out to be the best position to adopt – brings different elements to the front. The water starkly exposes a rapid, steady percussion which in the air is obfuscated by other layers of sound. Mid-ranges and short, distinct sounds work especially well underwater; volume and fuller frequencies lose their emphasis when wet.

NWW make orchestrated creaks, tones, samples and contact mic-assisted manipulation; good to listen to even if you're not in the water, which is lucky, as at least half the audience don't dip in. In Britain, it takes a certain gameness to swim outdoors; even in heated water in summertime it requires near constant movement to stay warm (the weather is consistently tepid for both the opening and the finale events). This makes extended immersed listening a near impossibility, especially as the water conducts not only the music, but also the sounds of the pool: the lapping of the water against tile, the splashing of bodies around you and your own efforts to prevent a temperature drop. But the simple and relatively easily realised idea of an underwater sound gallery and concert succeeds in truly making the audience active participants – not only aware of all of the environmental sound, but eagerly anticipating and enjoying it.

Wet Sounds managed to bring a niche artform to a public space frequented by people usually ignorant or uninterested in that niche and display it in such a fashion as to make them interested; it also brought niche-arts types to a place that you wouldn't expect them to go. Exhibitions don't get much more successful than that. Lisa Blanning