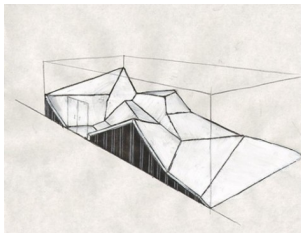


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Deborah Stratman's Sonic Warfare

Posted by Peter Margasak on 09.03.10 at 05:42 PM



"Topography": a sketch of Deborah Stratman's sound installation
"Tactical Uses of a Belief in the Unseen"

Deborah Stratman is probably my favorite filmmaker in Chicago—from the creepy *In Order Not to Be Here*, which looks at surveillance, fear, and violence, to the fascinating documentary *Kings of the Sky*, about a Chinese tightrope-walking troupe, her work fuses experimental narrative to compelling subjects and social interrogations. For her soundtracks she's regularly collaborated with fantastic composers and musicians, from Kevin Drumm to Maryanne Amacher. I was unaware that she also works directly with sound outside of a cinema context, but her new installation at the Gahlberg Gallery at the College of DuPage has

convinced me she's got a strong feel for that as well.

"Tactical Uses of a Belief in the Unseen" takes its inspiration from the use of sound as a tool of war and social control. The notes for the installation, written by artist and filmmaker Lucy Raven, discuss historical examples of sonic warfare, from the curdlers (aka "people repellers") deployed by the U.S. military in the Vietnam War—basic PA systems powered by huge amplifiers and mounted on helicopters, they create pyramids of sound 3.5 kilometers high that can be used to disperse crowds and terrorize enemy fighters at night—to Israel's use of sonic booms from low-flying fighter jets as a psychological weapon in the Gaza Strip.

Stratman's piece locates several subwoofers beneath a carpeted topography; they create harrowing subsonic frequencies that vibrate and pulse with physical force even when barely audible. Above the structure, which fills most of the room, is another, smaller speaker mounted on a mechanized device that constantly redirects a sound collage of martial brass, sirens, and bagpipes—a high-frequency layer that complements but can't possibly compete with the punishing low-end throb emanating from beneath the structure. Visitors are encouraged to walk, sit, and lie upon the installation, getting different physical perceptions of the sub-bass tones.

Stratman sent me the following description of the piece, which was originally a response to a question from a College of DuPage student. It does an excellent job laying out the ideas behind the work.

I've been interested for a while in the physicality of audio, in the fact that sounds require a medium or something physical to travel through in order for us to hear (or feel) them. Typically we think of that medium as air, but it can also be walls, earth, water, steel, wood . . . anything except a void. When we listen to sounds, what we're actually listening to is the space around the sound. Sound is always modified by the medium it travels through to get to

our ear, so it bears a very distinct signature of place. This is why audio is so good at informing us, or as the case may be, fooling us, about our surroundings.

Sound also has the distinctive quality of evoking the present. When we hear audio, it is always there, and then immediately changing, disappearing. It's not static the way, say, a chair is. When you look at the chair, it's there . . . and then it's still there, looking just like the chair. Sounds don't work that way. They are vectored in time. They dissipate. And so we instinctively ascribe to them a here-and-now-ness.

For these and other physiological reasons, we have a certain belief in our sonic surroundings, even though the sources generating the sounds may be unseen. Historically, people have taken advantage of our sonic gullibility (film sound designers for instance, or military psy-op units), in some ingeniously subversive and tactical ways.

This show came out of a few desires. I wanted to construct an homage to the histories of sonic deception and warfare; I wanted to build a landscape that was, at the same time, a speaker; and I wanted to work with very low frequencies that are sometimes more 'felt' than 'heard' and which are adept at evoking a kind of approaching dread.

There are other, more secondary concerns that factored into the piece, like the differences between audio that serves as a foundation or ground (the low frequencies we hear through the topography) vs. audio that serves as a figure or protagonist (the wandering beam audio which occasionally grazes the viewer). I was curious to see if the floor composition would operate via the cinematic production of suspense and the wandering beam via that of surprise. So you could say I was applying cinematic concepts to a sculpture. Though I don't think, in the end, they are translating that way.

"Tactical Uses of a Belief in the Unseen" runs through October 16.

Today's playlist:

Arthur Russell, First Thought Best Thought (Audika)

Various artists, Panama! 3: Calypso Panameño, Guajira Jazz & Cumbia Tipica on the Isthmus 1960-75 (Soundway)

Talking Heads, More Songs About Buildings and Food (Sire)

Lionel Marchetti and Emmanuel Petit, Docteur Kramer (You Are Not) (Musica Genera)

Matthew Bourne, Dave Kane, and Steven Davis, Lost Something (Edition)