

Elusive

Walking in the street, the faint sound of someone playing a piano comes down from a high window. In the early morning the sound, with no direction, of a lost kitten is urgent, acute but elusive. A door creaks somewhere; is it in my flat or the one upstairs? In spring, merles re-learn to sing, little-by-little. Brakes screech, a few blocks away.

Combining the constant sound of television with the roar of traffic and the repartee of daily commerce, we live inside an aural cacophony, an ocean of sound. But underneath this, and intervening at every half-opportunity, there is the aural poetry of the city. The sound of wine being poured into one glass, then another.

We have three artists presenting works which are partly sound. It is the kind of work that is the 'specialty' of none of the three. What they have in common, for me, is, first, active intelligence as the driving force of their separate practices, and, second, the discipline to carry ideas or concepts up and down the street.

Riccardo Benassi is (I should use capital letter) an artist of the city. His practice does often employ sound, but just as often architectural considerations. He is in the never-ending process of analyzing our collective life in the city, as a cosmopolitan who sees city life as something we make and re=make. That leads him to consider architecture from the inside out.

“Come circola l’aria in una stanza con la finestra aperta

Come circola l’aria in una stanza con la finestra chiusa

Che suono senti in una stanza con la finestra aperta

Che suono senti in una stanza con la finestra chiusa...”

He writes. He once turned a steam radiator into a refrigeration unit.

Benassi’s concern with architecture is always personal and social. He states that air conditioning, for example, modifies our concept of architecture just as sound modifies our concept of visual arts, and is invisible as much as they are underestimated.

His work here is titled, “The First Kiss (Bending a Building)”. The sound involved is his own voice versus, as he says, “the machine”. It begins rather benignly, rather quietly. The voice is in control; the machine is in the background. After a few minutes, however, ‘the machine’, which sounds like a distillation of many different noises of the city becomes steadily louder and more complex. The human voice tries to sing along or to argue. The sculptural elements of the work are like two shadows which have become solid. These two parts utilize the room perfectly. One enters through the window to steal a kiss from the room. It is the shadow of a building, perhaps.

Magnus Ottertun is from Sweden and lives in Malmoe, just across the bay from Copenhagen. He has a northern wry but courteous sense of humour. I know of no one who combines the private and the artistic sides of life so completely as he does. But he is peripatetic, with no direction and no goal, almost like a wandering Japanese poet.

Ottertun is highly sensitive to the way we live these days. What I imagine he might call our predicament. Some of his video work reminds me of Tati, or Cantinflas. Once, while still my student at the Malmoe Academy, he and another student secretly took a large portion of the grant we had been given to do a project about the new Copenhagen/Malmoe bridge. They used the money to treat themselves to the most expensive dinner in the most expensive restaurant in town. But they did video it.

Ottertun is a writer as well as a visual artist, and often combines the two by making diary-like narrative videos.

For this exhibit he has wired a room. Not like the covert government organizations; he wants the room to talk back to us. The sound part of his complicated-yet-simple installation involves the everyday objects in the room. They are meticulously wired and connected to audio speakers which broadcasts the sound of their movement.

This to me is much smarter than it might seem by reading my description; every object in the world has its own specific sound (always in relation to other objects, such as a glass upon a table.), but must await motion in most cases, and even then we are usually too busy to appreciate the charm.

Magnus Ottertun animates the room.

Elisa Strinna is a special case, in the sense that, as I write and as the exhibit opens, she is technically still a student at IUAV in Venice. She will present her final thesis at the end of March, with Angela Vetessi (and me, informally due to bureaucratic complexities) as mentor.

Maybe the prime motivation for Strinna as an artist is the quality of appreciation. We might call her a lover --- active love of phenomena and people.

This makes her works always dynamic. Her intelligence always leans toward the celebratory, towards generosity. For the past few years, she has been examining the myriad complexities of translation. This study combines languages, media (in the older sense of substances), time, and the visual arts.

She is willing to see the most ordinary man-made object as containing many texts and stories. The next step for her is always to bring these stories into other stories, to join things up.

If this sounds slightly soft or sentimental, it certainly is not. A recent work by Strinna is a machine like something medieval, like Leonardo, perhaps. It is modeled on the 'player piano', which has a cylinder or disc with a punched-out hole program to translate into music. Strinna's machine has tubes similar to those of an organ, powered, like an organ, by a bellows.

The sound which is translated into music is the graph of the machine which registers earthquakes. Her machine plays earthquakes. Beautiful but horrible.

How does a star fade, in our experience? With the coming of the light of dawn, of course; even though we do not normally think so.

In her completely relational world, Elisa Strinna makes this normal act speak to us about the demise of utopias. The utopia fades into light. (with appropriately soothing background music.)

Jimmie Durham