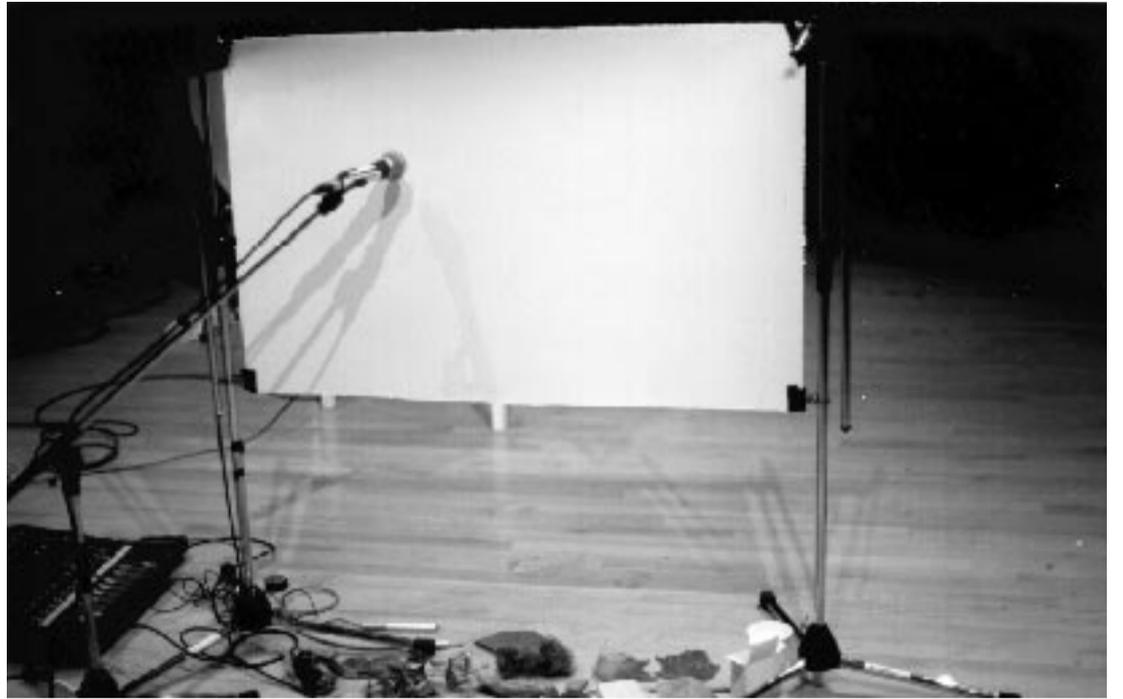


id battery

Alice Angus

Ripples in the vacuum

Experimental electronic music and audio arts at ISEA 98,
2—7 September, venues in Liverpool and Manchester

The annual symposium of the *Inter-Society of Electronic Arts, ISEA98*, was billed as a critical event integrating symposia and artists projects, spread over 6 days. It embodied the *Revolution Symposium* in Liverpool, the *Terror Symposium* in Manchester and *revolution98* artists projects, in venues from galleries to trains across both cities. The annual *ISEA* symposium, now in its ninth incarnation, is a locus for exploring innovation in the cultural use of electronic technology.

It is no mean feat to produce an event of this scale and some excellent presentations did arise from among the two hundred speakers (ranging from Coco Fusco to David Toop), and projects by over 100 international artists. Sensitive and creative programming was evident across the programme yet *ISEA98* tripped on the overall scale and focus of the event. The thrill of seeing such an event taking place in the UK soon waned. Too many disappointing presentations and projects confused by unfocused publicity and the overload of parallel presentations and events, left delegates exhausted.

This appeared to stem from little integration in the structure of the two conferences; the hosts, one came to wonder, might rather not have worked together at all. A problem which led to vast heaps of information and programmes that amalgamation would have simplified. Unfortunately the high costs of this kind of event, despite bursaries, and the combined time span of the two symposia, resulted in some delegates attending only one. Add to that the travelling between venues and the meetings and introductions that are an important part of international projects. Events such as this are a focal point, a meeting place for artists, curators, writers and researchers feeding into the local and national cultural environment, it is vital they are accessible both in terms of cost and location.

It is not uncommon for digital art (new media, or new technologies) survey exhibitions and festivals to suffer from both the overload and the appearance of ill conceived, hastily constructed work. Work that thinly packages a surface image of digital technology instead of utilising it as a medium or a tool, views it as an end rather than a means to an end. The overarching framework of digital art allowed projects at *ISEA* to slip into a tedious celebration of the digital,

leaving any notion of critical reflection on the practice outside the door.

The tendency to hang a festival beneath overarching themes and frameworks has become a common practice. It can provide a timely and constructive forum for discussion and focus on important issues; conversely it causes difficulties for artists and curators trying to shape themselves to the theme, resulting in weak and clumsily re-formed ideas. The apparent development of 'digital arts' as a practice should take it beyond the simple problems of a theme. It becomes a ghetto when it contributes to the rise of a situation where to gain funding and visibility artists and curators label themselves as digital artists, moulding their practice to the digital art framework. Artists whose practice involves only a nod to the digital are in danger of being overshadowed. The highlights of *revolution98* were cases where technology was appropriate to the work, where, simple as it sounds, the practice and the ideas had not been led by the technology.

It was a breath of fresh air, then, to find the audio programme attempting to embrace audio art/ experimental music that not only uses or is influenced by electronic technology but has itself been influential in the use and development of electronic technology. Thus we saw a programme that predictably included *Scanner* and *Audiorom*, but more surprisingly pioneer Keith Rowe and singer Diamandia Galas. Presentations and performances included artists, inventors, academics, broadcasters and pioneers in experimental electronic music. The programme investigated and celebrated innovation and revolutionary work over the last century.

Sonic Boom, the one day audio arts panel, curated by Colin Fallows, part of the Liverpool *Revolution Symposium*, consisted a series of short presentations thoughtfully programmed to allow ideas to resonate and develop from one speaker to the next. However, it suffered from trying to pack too much in back to back. Although engaging, the format of the day and quality of some of the presentations let interesting ideas slip by without the discussion they merited. Zina Kaye's research into articulating sound in the electronic vacuum, where real sound cannot exist without air and architecture in which to resonate, where it cannot reverberate through the existing land

and soundscape, was one such instance.

An intriguing relationship grew up between this and the explorations of Max Eastley's work. His creation of synthesised organic objects that interact with the shifting, changing environment, set up a symbiosis of natural and artificial. There is a rare delicacy, and focused intensity to Eastley's work and it was a disappointment and surprise to many that he was not performing at *ISEA98*. Eastley's work sweeps the edge of consciousness and recognition. Sounds flow in intricate patterns reminiscent of the rhythm of life and the sounds of empty spaces, the shuddering intensity of silence. His delicately constructed sculptures into which he breathes a voice, his use of the human body and electronic technology combine in a response to the existing, fluctuating environment. Concerns echoed in the work and writing of Brandon Labelle of California based *id Battery*. Labelle's talk unfolded with the same poetic elegance of his performances, which map a path through the sensual experience of listening. Labelle articulated sound-making as a dialogue replying to the soundscape of the physical world.

Performing with Loren Chasse as *id battery*, Labelle continued this exploration. *Id battery*'s instruments constitute a landscape of found objects (leaves, stones, bricks) collected electric and natural sounds, contact microphones and paper. Performing *Width* of a membrane, they kneel on either side of a white paper screen. Sounds are created from the collection as one traces on the screen while the other appears to ignore it, lost in his own activity. Their action indicates an urgent need to communicate to the other who cannot, or would rather not, hear it. The obvious danger the screen might tear and all be lost creates the same delicate balance at play in the sound, curling and uncurling, concealing and revealing another uncertain sound upon sound.

Unrecognised, yet utterly familiar, the sounds *id battery* weave vibrate against the membrane of recognition, never piercing the surface. The combination of sound sources seems to be reflecting, reacting to and reassessing the reverberating world that surrounds us. The contact microphones, placed on surfaces to excavate the inner sounds of rooms or objects, reveal sounds in the background of every day; the sounds

around us, behind us and underpinning silence. *Id battery* create sounds of such enduring resonance they nearly assume a biological, organic and evolving life and if left alone, you begin to wonder, might they just continue to unfurl, insinuating themselves into the existing soundscape.

Following *id battery*, in the evening programme at Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts, and with similar sensibility, was *In Between Noise*, Steve Roden, also California based, explored the resonant qualities of a combination of found objects in *helios flying (sound)*. His palette includes broken, found, and toy instruments mixed with field recordings, his voice and electronic manipulation. *In Between Noise* spins delicate strands of sound from air and holds them, expanding their complexity and volume as if teasing out some delicate invisible filament. An insane inventor on a quest to create life Roden seems increasingly frustrated, as if restraining himself from grinding the instrument to dust. Projecting, haunting and meandering narratives, at times tightly twisted and sharp then massaged by the deeply personal shadow of a human voice.

In a performance programme that ranged from Keith Rowe to *Audiorom* it was the two programmes at Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (LIPA), that proved the most inspiring. Except for the critically acclaimed *Skyray*, the majority of the programme was the listening revelation it set itself up to be. *Skyray's* inclusion in a programme of experimental electronic music was incongruous to begin with, without placing him after *id battery*, *In Between Noise* and Keith Rowe. Although it is a genuine pleasure to drift away on this music with its French ambient techno and funk flourishes reminiscent of *Air* and French musician/producer Etienne de Crecy, it is neither experimental sound nor is it experimental in terms of its own genre of electronic music. It would have made more sense in an evening devoted to the far reaching influence of electronic music and digital technology in contemporary culture and the club scene.

The second half of the programme at LIPA veered into the final frontier, the tractor beams, transformers

and dilithium crystals; yesterday's utopian vision of tomorrow's technology. At some point the words "The shields are useless against it captain" came to mind. These performances were as intense as they were witty and I hope the pun on the popular science fiction of the '60s and '70s was intentional. Janek Schaefer, in a luminous white suit, performed *Tri-phonic Revolutions*, amidst the flotsam and jetsam of another decade's technology and the Tri-phonic turntable, invented in his bedroom in 1997. He appeared so intensely involved in the performance, so oblivious to his surroundings that you'd have been forgiven for thinking he was mad. I almost felt a voyeur for watching the extremely private creation of this wonderful true cacophony that famously reverses Dr Who and stutters T S Eliot.

It eventually faded revealing the deeply disturbing, obsessive, concentration of *Data Rape 2000* by EAR (*Experimental Audio research*). EAR's Pete Kember uses a process called circuit bending which involved doctoring the circuitry of sound making toys and combining this with recorded sounds of the sonic vocabulary of human existence: from insects to humans. In contrast *Project Dark's Excited by Gramophones* featured Kirsten Reynold's and Ashley Davies' records made from steel, hair, vinyl, glass, sandpaper and pyrotechnics creating an explosive, shuddering, assault of sound and rhythm. Finally *Blast: Mount Vernon Arts Lab's* stretching and testing of Theramins, Turbine Generators, Random Analogue Sequencers purpose built and connected with interacting circuitry, finished a combustible evening. Fire alarms set off during the previous performance, resulted in the evacuation of the building and delayed *Blast*. It was an evening of performances, reminiscent of all those movies we grew up on. To hear the flickering sound of the future coming back from the past, through the performances, was to wonder again about the utopian dreams and nightmare visions of the technology of the future.

Why do we find performers like *id battery* and Max Eastley at a symposium on electronic art? What relevance has their work to innovation in digital arts; with

its unusual and minimal use of electronic technology, its physical relationship to the instruments and to the sound itself? It is precisely this relationship with the evidence of the human, the touch, the voice, the natural materials and the irreverent approach to technology that is necessary to explore and question our relationship with electronic technology. This innovative and radical work is not at the established forefront of technology development because it is radical in its approach which challenge assumptions and expectations. It deliberately blurs the boundaries that allow us to separate "artificial" from "real". Our approach to digital technology is built on our historical relationship with computers and video technology. Part of our understanding of computer technology is that of order, control and precise measurement. We are entrenched in material, architectural visions of digital space such as Robert Longo's 1995 visualisation of the *Internet 2021*, in the film of William Gibbon's book *Johnny Mnemonic*. Against this, many of the artists above push their use of technology into an area where control is lost, opening up space for natural phenomena and chance. Away from the screen and the visual, away from the linear, structured visions of digital space. Artists such as Max Eastley, *id battery*, Steve Roden and Pete Kember offer alternative approaches to understanding digital space and strategies for exploring digital technologies.

id battery cds are available from PO Box 931124, Los Angeles, CA 90093 and *In Between Noise* from Steve Roden Box 50261 Pasadena CA 91115.