

'ACTIVE CROSSOVER'
CRITICAL RESPONSE BY MEGAN SPENCER



“Active Crossover is a project that explores sound phenomena of a location, cultural exchange between artists and the act of listening. Simon Whetham is an artist from Bristol, UK, currently travelling the globe, presenting site-specific works.”

For this Seedpod residency Simon chose to collaborate with Trentham-based sound artist Lizzie Pogson (a star at last year’s Liquid Architecture!), Eamon Sprod (aka sound artist ‘Tarab’) & Jacques Soddell, founder of local sound experimentation outfit, Undue Noise.

The collaboration and ‘exchange’ between the four artists, directly informed Simon across the entirety of his Seedpod residency, from conception, gathering field recordings in the lead up to the performance, the performance itself, the ‘active listening’ workshops the weekend before, and everything in between.

This response however will focus on the work of the Seedpod applicant, that is, Simon Whetham’s sound ‘exhibition’ and performance at ICU on May 27, in which he worked directly with Lizzie Pogson, on the night.

The artistic agenda of Active Crossover was to produce a ‘sonic response’ to the physical ICU site, that concrete bunker buried beneath the now decommissioned Castlemaine Hospital.

The composition of this ‘response’ was made of field recordings sourced at the location, processed via software on Simon’s laptop, then replayed back to the audience - and mixed live - through 2 pairs of speakers placed strategically in the space to maximise the active listening experience.

Simon and his collaborators spent hours in the ICU space leading up to the performance, recording atmospheres and spot sounds ‘contained’ therein. Some of those Simon used in his piece with Lizzie included human sounds of people moving about above the floorboards, the sounds in and around concrete pipes and objects. (On the night of the performance, Lizzie’s composition mixed in horses whinnying and moving about in the street, immediately transporting me back in time to what might have been the sounds of the goldfields, just outside...)

Simon chose to add a live element to the performance, by ‘playing’ the space, or objects within it. eg. bottles ringing & clicking; dragging metal trays across the concrete floor, then playing a bow across that metal tray to make it screech like a distorted harmonica (then a cockie in distress!), above the bass atmosphere bubbling

away in the speakers. Generating those sounds live, he picked his way around and between audience members with his various 'instruments', to bring another spatial dimension to the soundtrack he was creating.

In particular the introductory low bass sounds worked well to set the tone of the piece, in that everything in the room – from the flesh participants to the concrete pillars – vibrated in cahoots with the sound, thus also becoming part of the 'site response' to the piece.

While the nature of the atmospheres and live diegetic sounds were designed to unnerve or startle us, interestingly the effect was opposite; a kind of comforting wash of sound was created, with the elements eventually seamlessly blending with each other. Dramatic volume shifts and contrasts were absent; instead the sounds naturally were more subtly moved into each other, no doubt in part due to the specific way they were mixed and placed within the composition. (Curious, given that some of those sounds were live in the space and not in the speakers – they stood out from the recorded sounds. You'd expect them to jar; they did not).

There was also much space around each sonic element; the composers didn't feel the need to go out of their way to highlight each; preferring instead to allow them to intertwine more naturally. The effect was an ocean of sound, instead of a more brutal assault – which is what it easily could have become in more obvious hands, given the types of sounds that were on offer in such a brutal, lifeless concrete space.

Happily Simon and Lizzie found the life within it; subsequently creating a piece that was surprisingly graceful and kinetic. It did bespeak of ghosts however; a thematic I find myself continually returning to, when experiencing works created inside ICU (See also Seedpod Response #2 to 'Anamnesis'). It is a ghostly environment with a 'low bass rumble' tantamount to a Pavlovian sonic haunting for me..!

Another achievement of Active Crossover was that Simon and Lizzie did indeed create a unique, site-specific response, thankfully unfettered by personal style. While this is part of an ongoing body of work for Whetham, I'm guessing (hoping!) this piece sounds unique from previous projects made under the same kind of conditions. His 'fail safe' – should the 'pull' towards trotting out previous 'templates' prove too strong – is the canny choice to work with local artists, who inevitably bring their own frame of reference and styles to the work.

Simon told me he felt it important to bring that exchange into the work, and, that while it was very much "a solo work", Active Crossover was just as actively a collaboration with peers.

As ghostly as his and Lizzie's soundtrack felt at times, there was no chill in the air in the ICU. Unlikely as it sounds (!), somehow that harsh, grey, foreboding space was warmed by the thousands of sounds that bounced around it that night, made with intensive care by Simon and his three collaborators. It was become a strange, shifting, sonic tribute to the past and the present.