Audible Imagery: Sound and Photography

October 26 - December 21, 2001

2. Chicago Reader 12. 7. 2001
3. Chicago Tribune 11. 4. 2001
4. Des Moines Register 10. 28. 2001
5. New Art Examiner
Ears of Experience

This past spring Chicagoan Casey Rice performed with legendary English guitarist Derek Bailey at the British music festival All Tomorrow’s Parties. The performance was collaboration free improvisation, but while Bailey sat on the stage, Rice was hunkered down behind a mixing board with several laptops, and signal-processing equipment in the back of the performance hall, manipulating the guitarist’s amplified distortions and injecting his own rapid-fire processing tones.

If you’ve never heard of Casey Rice, it’s probably because he’s been similarly obscured behind banks of equipment for most of the last decade. A professional engineer, his recent credits include work by Jeanne Avetto, Isamu Imai, 21st, the Eisbecher, the Nerves, Flat American, and A Bold Souls, and as Brad Wood’s guy Friday in the ’90s, he landed on a band-in-a-box by half of the “semitotal” rock bands in Chicago. He’s been behind the board for nearly every live show Terence has ever played, sometimes contributing film accompaniment, and recently he was recruited to do sound for Super Rice. He’s put out a handful of records as the electronic artist Drexel, but that’s a field where even the stars tend to be anonymous.

Rice had no intention of making a name in music when he moved to Chicago in the summer of 1998. "I came here to do visual art, not music. I’d just gotten out of my records," he’d studied political science and art and on and on for several years at Ohio State University, but spent some of his most gratifying time there playing guitar in a primitive punk-rock band called Control and the Voodoo-like art-punk outfit IDE, which also featured future Nerves drummer Elliot Dicks, future Austrvetics Record owner Kurt Kelliison, and Kelliison’s wife, filmmaker Paula Frankel. During his first year in Chicago, Rice mounted a show of paintings and several performance pieces. By the following year, however, he’d returned to music, forming a noisy punk band called Dog with fellow Columbia expats Dicko and Jean Paul de la Piere (who will use the name for various projects today).

Dog became the opening band of choice for other loud indie-rock acts. Rice befriended the movers and shakers of the early Wicker Park rock scene, including Precious Wax Drippings (with future Toe- naise drummer John Herndon and Friends)

At a festival, when Rice was the main act, Idiot, Lil’ John was recording Echo in Gauwville there. She had no band of her own, and since Rice could play guitar, he was drafted into service. When the record hit big, he became a regular collaborator, playing on Phair’s second album and sometimes backing her live. Wicker Park was thrust into the national spotlight, toasted as the “next Seattle,” and the music industry placed one of its biggest bets on young bands that recorded at Idiot, including Veracruz Salt. Rice didn’t like what he saw happening, and by 1996 he’d quit the studio.

“There’s this myth about record producers,” he says. “Here’s this magical guy who gets this magical sound with a magical formula, when it’s really about going to the right parties more than anything else. I didn’t really want to do engineering that much, and I didn’t want to play in a rock band. I was totally disgusted with all of the music industry horseshit after the Liz Phair thing. It made me feel like an ass. There were a ton of people hanging out all of the time, wanting to be your friend because you were the guy that played the second guitar part.”

His distance for the rock scene dissolved with a new obsession: the burgeoning English drum ’n’ bass movement. “I first heard it by accident, when I was in England with Touchline,” he says, “this original music that had never been made before coming out of these huge bass bins, Blade Runner-style. Going to those DJ gigs got me excited.” He began collecting the latest singles from England and sharing his discoveries with Chicago audiences as a participant in the Deadly Dragon Sound System, a DJ collective that for a time mixed dancehall, hop-hop, and drum’n’bass every Sunday night at the Empty Bottle.

At the same time Rice began experimenting with electronic music at home. He made a few unsuccessful and incomplete tracks at drum ’n’ bass, but the first singles he released as Drexel, although beat driven, were more abstract, as were the beat experiments he recorded in 1998 with Eternal’s singer Damon Lecks under the name Super F.S.P. That same year he contributed a brutal rhythm track to Play-Baby, a project organized by New York music writer and DJ bassist Sasha Fierce. Rice has collaborated recently with musicians, including Jim O’Rourke and Henry Kaiser, and gave them to Derek Bailey to improvise over.

When the recording was released, Bailey singled it out Rice’s work for praise in the British avant music magazine the Wire. “Fast as fuck and really shifting, he marveled. “The old jazzy reek that the one thing you can’t do with machines is make ‘em swing, but some got a make ‘em swing, and Casey Rice does.” Bailey and Rice were supposed to play together at the Empty Bottle in the summer of 1999, but scheduling conflicts arose, so when the guitarist learned that Rice would be at All Tomorrow’s Parties to do Terence’s sound, he suggested an attempt again there, “I was really surprised,” says Rice. “The guy remembered this one thing I did for the 800th record he made.”

In the last few years Rice hasn’t spent nearly as much time recording his own music as he has recording other people’s work, but he’s performed sets of beatless experimental electronics on tours with Terence, the Chicago Underground Disc, and Jean of Arc. He’s also working with his wife, Australian singer Tanna Brewer, on her forthcoming album for Chocolate Industries. Next Thursday, November 1, at 8 PM he’ll manipulate video and collaborate with Bailey in a show presented in conjunction with Audible Imagery: Sound and Photography, an exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College. The performance takes place in Columbia’s Gram Theater, 82 E. 11th. For more info call 312-663-5574.

Send gripes, lies, and love letters to Peter Marguriek at post@edgereader.com.
Noises Off

A discreet and pleasant surprise is the reception area at the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MCA). Instead of the usual "open cops to the entire space," the MCA has a cozy, intimate feel. A large, comfortable sofa is situated in the corner, providing a comfortable space for visitors to relax and enjoy the artwork. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a welcoming atmosphere.

COT Goes BAM

"Six years ago, no one would have dared to," says Michael Stavola, program director at BAM. "It's a testament to the city's growing coffers and the board's commitment to making the arts accessible to all." The museum, which opened in 2003, is located in the heart of the city's cultural district and has quickly become a destination for art lovers from all over the world.

Home for Strays

Stance of Chicago's skateboarding scene will get a taste of big-time promotion at the 2015 X Games. The competition, which is held in June, is produced by Thom Dunning, chief executive officer of the X Games. The event is expected to draw more than 50,000 spectators to the Adler Planetarium, where a large screen will be set up to show the live broadcasts of the competition.

Why was a sound installation by M.W. Burns inspired by Columbia College's Museum of Contemporary Photography?

By Deanna Isaac

December 7, 2001

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Cushman's Choice: "I'll be back, don't worry." She looked at him with a smile. "I have a lot of work to do before I can think about anything else."
Bailey's improvising gives music an air of uncertainty

By Bill Meyer
Special to the Tribune

Sometimes it seems that every iconoclastic musician, from Louis Armstrong to Dizzy Gillespie to Bob Dylan, is doomed to become a domesticated entertainment institution. But unlike those men, guitarist Derek Bailey was no longer young when he first sprang his radical ideas upon the world. And at age 71, he is still ready to take thrilling artistic risks.

Bailey grew up in Sheffield, England, enamored by the sounds of his uncle's guitar and American jazz on the radio. In the 1960s he worked as a professional guitarist in dance bands and recording studios, backing musicians as diverse as Paul Anka and Count Basie. But during the mid-60s he turned his back on commercial music and became one of the first musicians to play non-hierarchical, freely improvised music. Bailey eschewed pre-determined structures, time signatures or tunes in favor of startling leaps of pitch and timbre.

The guitarist thrives on uncertainty and requires those who play with him to do likewise — he is as likely to subvert as support a fellow musician's efforts. His remarkably disparate list of improvising partners includes Brazilian percussionist Cyro Baptista, jazz saxophonist Steve Lacy, guitarist Pat Metheny, Japanese prog-rocker The Ruins and Balinese dancer Min Tanaka. But in 1995 he shocked even longtime fans when he started using pre-programmed electronic beats.

One contributing programmer was the Chicago-based record producer, sound engineer and disc jockey Casey Rice. (Like Bailey, Rice has a commercial past — he once played guitar for singer Liz Phair.) The two men played their first US concert together on Thursday as part of Columbia College's exhibit "Audible Images: Sound And Photography" and took their collaboration into uncharted territory by adding improvised visuals to the mix.

The concert opened with a duet between drummer Chad Taylor and local jazz bassist/filmmaker Tatsu Aoki. Aoki often struck his instrument with a bow or slapped the strings, keeping a steady pulse that Taylor ornamented with fluid cymbal flourishes. They played before a screen that was partly obscured by white balloons that broke up the projected images into pale shifting lights; the effect was abstract, but not at all uncomfortable.

While their stage setup was being broken down, jagged guitar chords issued from the sound system. But where was the guitar player? The slim, gray-haired Bailey was seated at the back of the auditorium, next to the colorfully tattooed Rice, who split his attention between a computer monitor and the soundboard. In short order he projected images of Bailey's hands and guitar onto the screen, then used his computer to fracture those images into constantly shifting patterns.

Rice's electronics likewise distorted Bailey's guitar into subway train rumbles or faded it out altogether. He lobbed stabbing tones, bird-call whistles and disruptive explosions of rhythmic beats into the midst of Bailey's atonal chord progressions, but Rice's assaults only seemed to invigorate the guitarist.

His hands moved with unhurried grace up and down his instrument's neck, wringing out showers of ringing harmonics and twisted ribbons of feedback whose unpredictable progress only made them more compelling.
MUSIC REVIEW

Bailey’s improvising gives music an air of uncertainty

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Chicago Tribune, section 4, Sunday, Nov 4, 01
The Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College presents a series of discussions, musical performances, multimedia presentations and lectures in conjunction with the exhibit “Audible Imagery: Sound and Photography,” now through Dec. 21. The works of 10 artists, including Laurie Anderson, M.W. Burns, Jay LeFor and Christian Marclay, will be on display. Musical performances by Derek Bailey & Casey Rice, Tatsu Aoki & Chad Taylor will follow a round-table discussion Thursday. Call (312) 663-5554 or visit www.mocp.org.

Explore communication

- The Chicago Humanities Festival XII explores communication with the theme “Words & Pictures,” Friday through Nov. 11. About 250 writers, artists, novelists, historians, musicians, performers and poets will discuss, display, perform and debate their work and ideas at 38 different venues throughout the city, including the Art Institute of Chicago and the Chicago Cultural Center. A concurrent children’s festival brings music, art and children’s authors to young people. Call (312) 661-1020 or visit www.chihumanities.org.

- Chicago Shakespeare Theater on Navy Pier presents the Shakespearean play “Richard II” through Nov. 18. The Steven Sondheim and John Weidman musical “Pacific Overtures” is at the theater Upstairs at Chicago Shakespeare now through Dec. 2, and a Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chamber Concert is Nov. 6. Call (312) 595-5600.
ARRIVING AT A MOMENT when the art world is having one of its sporadically recurring affairs with audio, "Audible Imagery" collected ten artists to address various intersections of sound "and" photography, though most works could only attain an "or." Among the most striking works were pieces by Christian Marclay. White Noise, a large mass of snapshots pinned face to the wall, created a fluctuating beige field of photo backs that deftly combine with the air system hum, shuffling of viewers, and daily sounds of the space for what is in effect a sound/visual installation. The Sound of Silence, an image of a 45-rpm single of Simon and Garfunkel's The Sounds of Silence, has a nice dark humor to it, inadvertently reflecting and critiquing the entire exhibition.

The show suffered the usual pitfalls of media shows. On one visit Laurie Anderson's piece wasn't working and on two occasions Jay LeFer's Electronics of Mind subwoofer was silent. In LeFer's work, a subwoofer is covered with liquid that purportedly undulates from amplified brainwaves. Photographs of various patterns taken when the object was operational were also included. This type of "woofer" art is the low point of attempts to merge sound and image. Using the jumping of a speaker cone as a supposedly interesting way of examining the physical properties of sound is on par with displaying tubes of paint to showcase paint's material qualities.

Laurie Anderson's Handphone Table: Remembering Sound, an interactive piece that uses the viewer's arms to carry sound from the table to one's ears, proves that when she is good, few rivals this artist's ability to manipulate the psychological and physiological ways sound affects us. For In Another Room Ann Lislegaard used the slow, measured, immaterial voice perfected by Anderson in her recordings, a voice that is often unsuccessfully copied and has become the bane of much sound art. Lislegaard's combination of stereo sound pats and flickering light was ineffective at establishing or profoundly disturbing any mood.

Carsten Nicolai's photo series Milk also flirts with "woofer" art, displaying the rippled patterns created by broadcasting various tones in milk. The link to sound is the photographs' most interesting quality, but the shimmering steel-gray tones and slowly changing patterns gave a well-needed dose of serene beauty to the exhibition. The photos pale in comparison to the electronic soundtrack. Nicolai, a respected composer of computer music, created On the Way to the Peak of Normal II in collaboration with video artist Takehito Koganezawa. Nicolai is truly at home with sound, and it is unfortunate that Koganezawa's security-camera-style pans of a stark, white room were unable to offer video vignettes as conceptually rigorous and physically engaging. The third piece by Nicolai, Realistic, a tape recorder with its erase head removed to continually record a tape loop of the ambient sound in the surrounding room, is a fairly straightforward work that is conceptually engaging in its hermetically closed system. The proximity of Realistic to a computer monitor playing Gary Simmons's Wake—a nice, clean, and simple work about memory traces featuring fading images combined with a loop of mournful humming—means that after the show Nicolai's tape loop will be a recording of a tape loop. There is a gentle irony in that.

Also repeatedly engaging was Steina Vasulka's Treor, a simple video headshot of a man speaking that used the patterns and speed of his speech to affect directly the visual flow and distortion of the video image. The photographs in Gebhard Sengmüller's "Erasure Coils" series are beautiful, cold, austere, frontal, and still. But silent, somewhat generic photographs of the electromagnets that are used to erase video and audio tape don't offer a very meaningful statement on sound, or "forgetting" as the artist asserts.

Despite sidewalk-permit confusion that banned the piece from its originally intended site, M. W. Burns's Posing Phrases was still in the exhibition, even if it was neutered. Using the sidewalk outside of the Donald Young Gallery, about a mile away from the exhibition, motion-activated speakers project commands common to a fashion photo shoot. But the sidewalk outside of Donald Young is relatively barren, whereas the sidewalk outside Columbia College is forever filled with students—being seen, smoking, chatting, and above all looking like an impromptu fashion shoot. To say the work is the same despite the location change would be a lie, and it's too bad—the power and humor Burns's installation would have had in its intended location is entirely lacking from its actual environment.

Many of the works in "Audible Imagery" are competent if you don't look at them as attempts to reconcile sound and image. Only Vasulka's video and Marclay's work properly balanced the "and" which implies an equally complex treatment. Most of the pieces in this show were less effective at forging a complex sound/image relationship than works exhibited recently in the Whitney Museum's "Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964-1977," which wasn't even about sound. It's a shame that overall our investigations of sound in visual art haven't advanced much beyond the early '70s. "I will sit right down writing for the gift of sound and vision," David Bowie sang in 1977. I didn't realize then he'd still be sitting in 2002.

Anthony Ellis is an artist and editor of Whitewalls.

CARSTEN NICOLAI
Milk, 2000, from "Audible Imagery." Silver dye bleach print, 27" x 27."