

Text for Visual Artists Newsletter in the Summer of 2004

Earlier this year, I was in Carlow for the Eigse Festival standing in a disused chapel listening to Joao Penalva talk about his installation 'R.'. He described how he had never imagined it possible for it to exist anywhere other than Venice, where it had initially been sited for the 2001 Biennale. The work is a meditation on competition: a response to the idea of the Venice Biennale: artists competing with each other in confined space and time. It's a multi-layered piece that incorporates three films as well as a series of objects in display cabinets, all housed in a dark space clad in deep red material. The dimensions of the building in Carlow stood in stark contrast to the vastness of that Venetian Palace but as Penalva himself noted, somehow seemed more appropriate to the subject matter. At the opening, other stories emerged of the local community in Carlow helping out to ensure the piece was ready in time for the festival.

In April this year, Dr. Claudio Queiroz gave a lecture here in Dublin, about the work of Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Niemeyer is well known as the architect responsible for Brasilia, Brazil's Modernist capital. He also designed the pavilion at Ibirapuera Park, where the Sao Paulo Bienal is sited. Dr. Queiroz speaks two languages: Brazilian Portuguese and French, which he learned while working onsite for Niemeyer in Algeria in the late sixties. For this lecture, he was simultaneously translated by a native French speaker into English.

The format of the lecture was interesting: two carousel projectors displaying different images side by side onto a large screen behind his head. On his command (a mixture of pointing and shouting) both projectors were advanced to the next pair of images. Sometimes the relationship between them was obvious: same time period, same geographical location or same type of image e.g. sketch, architectural drawing or photograph. Sometimes there was more room for interpretation. If he found something of interest in the individual slides or their combination, Dr. Queiroz commented on it: if not, he gestured for the next images in the sequence. According to Dr. Queiroz, Niemeyer's architecture, which is seen as the epitome of a certain kind of Modernism, is steeped in local/national references. He clearly illustrated how Niemeyer has drawn inspiration from Brazilian architecture of all eras, from Amazonian huts to colonial ranches, as well as other Brazilian forms such as the hammock: curves instead of straight lines.

Mimeo [Music in Movement Electronic Orchestra] is a group of twelve improvising musicians who initially came together at the request of three European festival promoters in 1997. As the years have passed, their line-up has changed, with members being replaced or welcomed back into the fold as their busy schedules allow. They play a variety of instruments, mostly electric/electronic. Laptop computers figure prominently, alongside analogue, digital and homemade synthesisers, tape recorders, 'cracked electronics', audio test equipment and the prepared guitar of Keith Rowe. Other more conventional instruments such as piano and violin are also part of their sonic palette.

Towards the end of last Summer, I travelled to London to watch them perform in the Niemeyer-designed temporary pavilion in front of the Serpentine Gallery. For me, a highlight of the event was the duo of Cor Fuhler & Jerome Noetinger which took place in the semi-submerged basement of the structure. Fuhler coaxed massive drones from a grand piano using up to twenty 'e-bows' (small devices that make strings vibrate using magnetic resonance) placed on the strings inside the piano, while Noetinger applied 'musique concrete' techniques to the resulting sound, taking an audio feed from a contact microphone attached to the piano body and manipulating the sound of the piano using a massive tape loop running through an old Revox reel-to-reel tape recorder. A sound that completely filled the space: sound with mass and volume: late Summer magic-hour light streaming through the windows.