

A position between two curves

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Catalogue Essay by Andrew Wilson



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DAVID CUNNINGHAM

David Cunningham is perhaps best known as a musician and music producer. As composer, producer or performer Cunningham is driven by a strong impulse to collaborate which is directed in his artwork not only at the musicians or artists he has worked with but crucially to the audience as well.

It is tempting, if partially misguided, to connect Cunningham's work with the chance operations used in the work of John Cage and the New York Happenings and Fluxus artists of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Cage challenged definitions of artistic authorship and with works like *4'33"* 1952 he provided a structure for sounds provided by the audience. One of his students at New York's New School for Social Research in the late 1950s, George Brecht, held the view that music was not just what could be heard or listened to but was in fact everything else as well. Other members of Cage's class proceeded to further break down the barriers between the idea of audience and performers so that they became one and the same; one didn't listen or watch but instead took part.

For these artists the sounds found in the streets provided material for their presentation of a contemporary urban realism. Cunningham, in contrast, does not appropriate sound in this way but structures, often barely audible, sounds as a critical practice. There is no metaphorical dimension, his work is a presentation of fact. He relies on isolating sonic or other sensory elements from the conditions of their sources and through subtle framing makes us aware of that which would otherwise be disregarded. This hum that surrounds our lives, by being isolated, is also magnified and the dynamism and effect of everyday actions made clear. Like Brecht and other members of Cage's class at the New School more than 40 years ago, Cunningham joins together the work's perception and its production, but where they conceived their work as fragments of a larger narrative, Cunningham's work functions through the dynamics of the loop or the production of sound waves which articulate conditions of self-referentiality.

The Difference Room, a work proposed by Cunningham for the Tate Triennial, but not actually constructed, would have been an apparently empty module in the gallery. An air conditioning unit in the room would have heated the air to a temperature significantly hotter than the air elsewhere in the gallery. Temperature would have been felt by the viewer to be defined spatially as a volume of air markedly different to other volumes throughout the gallery building (or outside it). Similarly, *A position between two curves* 2003, a work which has been installed in the two interior alcoves of the Manton Street entrance presents the space not as temperature but as a cycling wave of sound that is affected as much by its solid architectural characteristics as it is by the transient nature of the audience's bodies passing through the space and disturbing the air between the two alcoves. This particular work is part of a series titled *The Listening Room* which Cunningham first presented as an installation at the Chisenhale Gallery in 1994. He has described the mechanics of the work in the following way 'The installation consists of a microphone connected to a noise gate, amplifier and speakers in a highly reverberant room. The system is arranged in such a way that when the microphone and loudspeaker begin to feed back the amplitude of the sound causes the noise gate to cut off the signal. The feedback notes resonate through the space accentuated by the long reverberation time of the gallery. As the sound falls below the threshold of the noise gate

the system switches back on and the process continues.'

With this work Cunningham has initiated a structural process, the actual outcome of which he has little control over as people or things cause the air to move and so alter the acoustic space which is being inhabited and framed by the work's operation. The work is not just about listening to space but embodies a critical function that is inherently social; it provides the conditions and equipment for understanding how the sound of an architecturally bounded volume of air can be altered by moving through it. Karl Marx's visionary declaration of modernity seems remarkably apt to the facts embodied by Cunningham's *Listening Room*: 'All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face ... the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.'

There are no objects as such in this work other than changing volumes of air. Something has been set in train and left to fulfil its processes. On the face of it, the appearance of his computer monitor work *colour 0.8* 1996 refutes this judgement concerning a lack of objects. A randomly occurring series of colour rectangles appear on a group of four computer monitors. Each computer runs the same computer program generating the coloured rectangles but out of phase with each other. The colours, green, yellow, red, magenta, orange, dark blue and light blue. are basic computer screen colours. Although a connection can be made to similar work such as Tim Head's *Tragic Dawn* 2002, in which two computer monitors cycle randomly through the over 16.7 million portrayable screen colours over a three month period, Simon Patterson's '*Colour Match*', 1997-2001, in which Pantone colours are matched up with football teams (first as an audio work and then a projection work and a screensaver), or David Batchelor's coloured lightbox sculptures, this is a mistake. *Colour 0.8* is not an endurance test like Head's, or concerned with creating a structural narrative like Patterson's, nor is the material object important as it is for Batchelor. With this work Cunningham attempts a deconstruction of the computer whereby the computer code is both the work and its situational aspect.

Andrew Wilson

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