

BORDERCROSSINGS

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C R O S S O V E R S

VISUAL ART

Ondulation

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We are living in a period in which many people have changed their mind about what the use of music is or could be for them. Something that doesn't speak or talk like a human being, that doesn't know its definition in the dictionary or its theory in the schools, that expresses itself simply by the fact of its vibrations. People paying attention to vibratory activity, not in reaction to a fixed ideal performance, but each time attentively to how it happens to be this time, not necessarily two times the same.

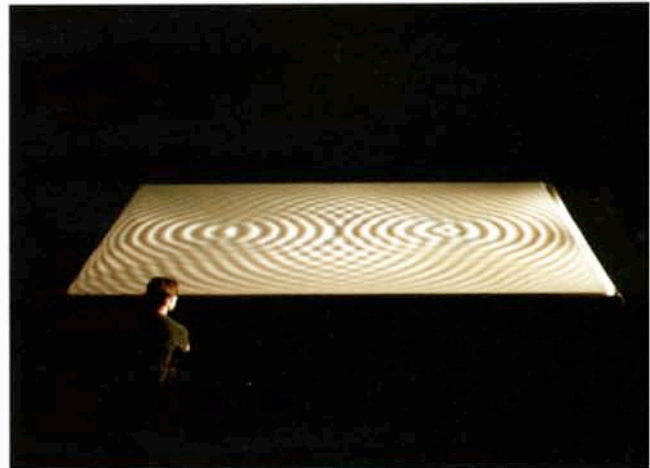
—John Cage

Ondulation is a temporal sculpture: a three-dimensional composition for water, sound and light that evolves in time. Created by Thomas McIntosh, with Mikko Hynninen and Emmanuel Madan, it rests on the supposition that while sound may be invisible and ephemeral, it is also physical and solid. The installation consists of a two-ton pool of water, with three loudspeakers submerged beneath its surface. The liquid, illuminated with theatre lights, is set into motion by the sound and

modulates the light on its surface, producing reflections on the walls surrounding the basin. The description of *Ondulation* may sound prosaic, but don't let this fool you; the results are pure poetry. The audio material causes the water to ripple and jump, producing extraordinary reflections that I can only attempt to describe with terms like spinning butterflies, pulsing grills and dancing topographical maps.

Motivated to get away from "laptop music" in which the audience watches performers clicking the mouse, McIntosh designed *Ondulation* so that the performance relies not on what occurs behind the computer, but on what takes place as a result. What is actually important in this work is the sensory experience that arises from what is happening to a concrete set of objects. In this manner, he has allowed the piece itself, as opposed to its performers, to interact directly with its audience and environment. McIntosh, Hynninen and Madan have progressed technically to the point where they could invite musical improvisers, using traditional instruments, to "play" *Ondulation*. There is no reason why a guitarist or a drummer couldn't create a new composition for *Ondulation*, using their instrument as an "interface."

There are particular tones and kinds of sounds that have more interesting effects on the water, but once a musician uncovers the way *Ondulation* responds, a physical connection to it is established.



Ondulation is the third in a line of works by McIntosh that revolves around instruments, instrumentality and space. Working with Madan under the collective name [The User], they turned grain elevator #5 in Montreal's Old Port into *Silophone*: a project that brought together music, architecture and net art. The grain storage silos inside the building, which is closed to the public, are accessible only with the use of climbing equipment. The cylindrical silos, which are 110 feet high and 24 feet in diameter, have exceptional

Ondulation, Thomas McIntosh with Mikko Hynninen & Emmanuel Madan. Photograph: Diana Shearwood. Courtesy Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal.



acoustic properties, including a reverberation time of over 20 seconds. Through the use of technology, McIntosh and Madan allow the spectator to experience this unique environment *remotely*. Anyone, anywhere, has access to hear and broadcast sounds inside the *Silophone* via the telephone and the Internet or from an installation outside the building. Yet, in the end, no matter how beautiful and otherworldly the sonic results are, a lingering frustration for the creators remained because the digitally represented experience could never measure up to the awe-inspiring experience of actually being inside that space.

With *Ondulation*, instead of trying to bring the public to a place via technology, McIntosh uses technology to craft an event that can only be experienced physically and in person. The projects are different approaches to the same ideas. *Symphony for Dot-Matrix Printers*, another of [The User]'s past works, touches on similar preoccupations through its exploration of generic office spaces and the ambient noises found therein. And though all these projects take something and turn it into an instrument for

musical expression, each of them also opens doors to more complex ruminations concerning progress, obsolescence and our societal dependency on technology.

Watching the elemental materials interact in *Ondulation* makes me think of other natural phenomena: like staring into a fire or watching a sunset. The visual reflections are hypnotic, but it was never the group's intention to make some sort of psychedelic, trance-inducing, Zen space. *Ondulation* is, in part, a reaction to what has happened since the invention of recording: the total divorce of sound and image from their actual sources, as exemplified by the audio and visual "sampling" of DJs and vJs. *Ondulation's* direct connection to physical reality is closer to the concrete gesture of a violin player than to the abstract click of a mouse. The principal concerns behind *Ondulation*, according to McIntosh, are the way the piece is made and how it is experienced, not what it means. ■

Ondulation by Thomas McIntosh with Mikko Hynninen and Emmanuel Madan was at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal from February 11 to March 6, 2005.

Christine Redfern is a Montreal-based video artist and writer who is particularly interested in art that moves.