

DETLEVA VERENS: TOMOGRAPHY, ECHOLOCATION, CONTAINMENT

Irish Sound Artist crosses Channels

By JOSEFINA TERMAGENT

Sound is something personal, something unique to each of us. This is part of the wonder of music as aesthetic, that we each individually participate in a communal experience, and though it is easy to remember that some ears are more sophisticated than others, it is more difficult to keep in mind the total subjectivity of our experience.

The Irish-Romanian composer/sound-artist Detleva Verens has recently created a series of sound installations that bring together many themes, one of the most striking of which is the subjectivity of sound. Despite the fact that she rigorously eschews conceptual explanation, claiming that “whatever ideas are there, are there in the piece, in the sound,” her pieces spark and shimmer with the electricity of her thoughts. She says “I don’t need to write some gobblydegook to make it work. Just listen,” and this is as good a place to begin as any.

For example, her rooftop installation at the Tallaght Community Arts Center, *Made LOVE Not WAR tuba*, features a swiveling array of listening horns that are maneuvered by various cranks and wheels. Inspired by the military use of listening horns during World War 2, Verens’ installation, which can only accommodate one participant at a time, creates the strange experience of a sonic telescope, bringing the sounds around Tallaght into high relief. It is striking merely to move the horn around and listen to the city, but Verens has more in mind: at four specific points around Tallaght, unmarked but hinted at on a plaque beneath the horns, focused speakers play unheard until they are found with the horn. Each speaker plays a recording of one instrument playing its part in a string quartet also written by Verens. Never can we hear the whole quartet at once. Never can more than one person hear any part of her installation. As I listened to each instrument in turn, I found myself trying to remember each previous instrument, attempting to construct the quartet in my own memory, and when I had finished, I spoke with another listener, and each of us were forced to reconstruct the entire experience in order to communicate it, in order even to make it real. The extreme subjectivity of *Made*

LOVE Not WAR tuba was precisely what forced our impromptu communal formation.

Another recent piece of hers, also centering on her hometown of Tallaght, brings to the fore issues of information, understanding and familiarity. The piece, *You May Wish To Linger*, is simple: an audio tour guide to Tallaght, recorded on CD. The strange and interesting aspect is that the tour is recorded in Silbo Gomero, a language native to the Canary Islands comprised entirely of whistling. Verens worked with Silbador Juan Trujillo to learn the language and to translate her guided walk into Silbo, and the listening experience provides a startling and remarkable engagement with the traditional sights of Tallaght, such as St. Maelruain’s Church, St. Mary’s Priory, and the Katharine Tynan Memorial Plot. The Silbo, without a listening fluency, creates something between music and language, repetitive and familiar while at the same time otherworldly and strange.

Her work *Six (in)*, recently installed at Parochialkirche Klosterstraße in Berlin, more directly addresses composition itself and the creative process, while at the same time maintaining Verens’ signature approach to subjective listening. Six sets of headphones are arranged at a circular listening table, with six copies of a graphic score. The score was developed using found papers and forms and an idiosyncratic style of notation that Verens’ cites as being inspired by the work of Hannah Darboven. Verens then worked individually with five different musicians in a sort of musical game of telephone: the first piece, for piano, is a direct response to the score. Once recorded it was sent to the cellist Anton Lukoszevieve, who recorded his own version of the score while listening to the piano piece. The cello piece was sent to the next musician, and so on. On the final set of headphones Verens’ herself adds her own voice to an edited, mixed recording which uses portions of the other five. *Six (in)* is a provocative and engaging piece, which comes together in the last listening station with surprising felicity.

Verens’ own subjectivity is a fascinating skewing of ours, and she continues to suggest that the way we hear things is all too contingent. Her works provoke us to create a new community of listeners, they provoke us to remember and engage, they provoke us ourselves to a sort of creation. More than mere aesthetic reflection, Detleva Verens inspires excitement.