

A midsummer festival in a former bell factory with **Musarc** reveals spirits of the material world. By **Adam Harper**



Musarc performing Greta Eacott's *Gestalt Minimal*

Le Marteau Sans Maître: Musarc Folk Meet On A Midsummer Day Until Dusk III

The Bell Foundry, London, UK

Where did it all go wrong? Well yes, it was the phones, obviously, but there's an even bigger picture here. Somewhere along the line, humans lost touch with the authentic essence of life when they abstracted knowledge from their bodies, their environments and materiality itself, losing who and where they really were in their phantasmagoric make-believe of symbols and machines.

Or those are, caricaturing slightly, the Romantic fumes that sometimes rise from the loose collection of theoretical work, often called New Materialism, that has been influential in the art world recently. And vocal collective Musarc are carrying an open flame for it – indeed, their pursuit of a pre-semiotic Eden takes them into outright primitivism. “For millions of years,” says the text accompanying their latest event describing the ideas composers were invited to respond to, “human culture and technology evolved without complex language, rational planning or abstract ‘thinking at a distance.’” Instead, it progressed in a poetic state, animated by rhythmic performances of embodied minds in dialogue with the material affordances of their environment.”

While New Materialism has often served as a timely reminder, in an age of climate breakdown, of the continuity between humanity and its environments, it has also been misunderstood as encouraging an abandonment of modernity and the overcorrecting sense that some activities are more essentially materialist than others. The poetic state Musarc describe above could rightly apply to any human music-making context, since synths and laptops are no less a product of environmental interactions than banging stones together. Conversely, banging stones together is no less an exercise in meaning and technology than an Autechre show.

At the third of Musarc's evening length Folk Meet On A Midsummer Day Until Dusk concerts, two of the pieces most attuned to the brief feature stones banged together. In Natasha Zielazinski's *murmuration* the performers assemble into ad hoc tribes, imitating or diverging from each other as they mine the concrete floor with pebbles or hoot as they swing their arms with rocks aloft, like the apes at the opening of *2001*:

A Space Odyssey but without the subsequent space station. Rūta Vitkauskaitė's *Azykhanthorpean Tunes*, named after a pre-Neanderthal specimen, begins with a stone age pulse but expands as performers are sown throughout the audience, humming polyphonic fragments and blowing bubbles into glasses of water until the entire hall becomes a hot spring.

Given the post-industrial venue, the evening takes on the sense of a post-apocalyptic religious observance. Amina Abbas-Nazari's *What You Will Watch And Hear* invites audience members to orbit around a corpse of quivering, howling foliage in increasingly complex layers of environmental consciousness, with the final layer, ‘the samplers’, calling for us to film it all on our phones, thus recognising that apples and Apples are part of the same cosmos.

Performers in Lin Chi-Wei's *Calligraph* sing from a continuously unfurling scroll as if engaged in pre or post-verbal cantillation, while in Heleen van Haegenborgh's *Material Affordance* the ensemble plays drones on recorders while simultaneously singing something chorale-like, with fascinating tonal results. Greta Eacott's *Gestalt Minimal* is both formally and dramatically compelling in a single gesture: the ensemble starts out bunched and tied together with rope, vocalising within the sliver of a single semitone, then expands outward both tonally and spatially until each singer becomes a node in a web.

The venue slowly becomes dark and candles are distributed among the audience, heightening the holiness. In this way we hear James Luff's meditatively minimal *Plain Ten*, constantly redealing and reshuffling both its foundational chord and the positions of the performers, and William Byrd's *Mass For 4 Voices*, composed in secret in 1592, its Catholic floridity in defiance of Protestant demystification.

It is not so much the spiritual primitivism and vulgar materialism that make Musarc an interesting prospect, but their humanity, and everything that means: voices and bodies as a social technology, an apt political symbol for new forms of interactivity. Steve Potter's *Council System*, explores these possibilities by explicitly breaking the choir up into revolutionary councils and elected representatives (and is, I think, the only piece this evening to use electricity), though

its effect is lost somewhat amid a wryness that had crept in at some level of its composition, performance, or reception. In all pieces, though, Musarc – and the audience they carry with them – are most inspiring not as cavemen but as a community engaged in meaningful activity for mutual sensual and social benefit.

But material history has its revenge. The evening takes place in a concrete shed at the back of a bell foundry that had operated since 1769, in the spring flush of British industrial capitalism, and closed in 2017, leaving some equipment still dotted around. The ghosts of this place are not just spirits at a distance but creatures of flesh, iron, steam and electricity. As the final notes of Byrd's *Agnus Dei* sound, I imagine the shed begins to rumble and groan, pulleys spin and the dormant machinery comes back into life. Cyborg workers from every layer of modernity seem to invade and reclaim the concert hall, their huge arms of steel, hydraulics and muscle scooping up great handfuls of people, not differentiating between performer and audience. Over the screams rises a voice like a city-sized vocoder: “*You extended your minds into us, and you denied us*”.

Not quite. What actually happens is that Byrd's *Mass* is followed by a screening of Sam Belinfante's film *To The Tintinnabulation That So Musically Wells*, its jovial title a line from an Edgar Allan Poe poem that has a gothic twist. Echoing the concert venue, Belinfante's film consists of oblique shots of the restoration of Loughborough's carillon and the (different) bell foundry that maintained it. Here were the material ecologies of human musical life revealed: women in cramped conditions laboriously cleaning and polishing, present and visible as rarely before, yes, but voiceless, gazed at.

And what is planned to actually happen next is that the Whitechapel Bell Foundry site, having been bought upon its closure by US private equity and venture capital investment firm Raycliff Capital, will become a “landmark creative hub”. The concrete shed that houses Musarc's concert will be demolished and, in its place, will be a hotel and an office/residential scheme. You can down tools and hoot and bang stones together in pursuit of prehistoric poetry, but material modernity is there, behind it all, and it rolls on. □

Yiannis Katsaris