Music of the pods: 
Garth Paine's
Reeds

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The cygnets on the ornamental lake at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne were somewhat bemused. When not being enlisted by their long necked parents to drum up a little business from people throwing bread at the water’s edge, they poked about the curious floating objects which have temporarily invaded their space. These objects, which sang and chirruped exquisitely as the cygnets cavorted around them, were part of Garth Paine’s installation Reeds, for the Melbourne International Festival.

Reeds was a site-specific installation consisting of a series of reed pod sculptures (artfully designed by Christopher Langton) which transmitted and broadcast computer-generated music. The music was produced in response to data gathered by the pods on the basis of variations in the weather, light, wind speed and direction and solar activity. In this sense, the music was conducted by the natural environment with the aid of interpretive and generative software programs hooked up to the reed pods. The data collected by the pods was transmitted to a land-based computer which analysed and fed it into a sound synthesis software program designed to generate music in real time, producing 8 channels of digital audio. These channels were then broadcast back to the reed pods where Sennheiser EK300 stereo receivers, installed in 6 of the pods, received the broadcast signal. These signals were then separated into 2 mono components, fed into 2 adjacent pods and broadcast using amplifiers attached to the reed stems.

The reed pods were designed to blend almost seamlessly with the surrounding environment. Similarly, the music generated by the pods subtly
mimicked the kinds of sounds you would expect to hear in this environment. You needed to constantly remind yourself that what you were seeing and hearing was, in fact, artificially constructed. The Botanic Gardens, an artificially constructed “experience” of the natural, are an apt setting for the work, highlighting an important theme of Paine’s work. Reeds allowed the viewer to negotiate a number of tenuous oppositions, such as the distinctions between the natural and the real, the artificial and the virtual.

Reeds, positioned as neither for nature nor against technology, enabled the viewer to experience the symbiosis between the two. The processes enacted by the reed pods were akin to the photosynthetic responses triggered in the surrounding plant-life when they are exposed to the same stimulus. At a time when popular representations of technology tend toward hysterical denunciation and generate fears about its dehumanising properties, Reeds reminds us that the nature/technology dichotomy is itself entirely artificial as is the concept of nature.

The question of where the sound performance of the installation takes place also highlights this blurring of boundaries between the artificial and the real. As Paine points out in the Reeds catalogue, sound literally penetrates the body. In this sense, the presence of the human audience is as necessary a condition for the performance as all of the technologies that drive the installation. We can’t separate the human from the technological—technology is, in fact, a necessary condition of humanity.

Reeds continues Paine’s explorations of the responsive, activated space that began with such works as Ghost in the Machine, Footfall and Map 1. Like these, Reeds is thoughtful, eloquent, evocative and ingeniously executed. The only disappointing aspect of the installation is that it could not remain in the Botanic Gardens permanently. I’m quite sure the swans wouldn’t mind.


For other Melbourne Festival works see

Phillipa Rothfield on Lucy Guerin’s The Ends of Things
Richard Murphet on El Periférico De Objetos's Màquina Hamlet

Suzanne Spunner on Meat Party

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