This catalogue has been produced as part of the inaugural Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Art & Australia Emerging Writers Program.

The Emerging Writers Program pairs four young writers with an experienced mentor each, culminating in the production of a catalogue essay for GCAS's Studio 12 exhibition program and a review to be published in Art & Australia magazine.

Matthew Shannon

Infinity of wind muskets

2008

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Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces

200 Gertrude Street Fitzroy VIC 3065

T +61 3 9419 3406 F +61 3 9419 2519

E info@gertrude.org.au  www.gertrude.org.au

This catalogue has been produced as a part of Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Express Media’s Emerging Writers Program, and is the fifteenth in the series.

The Emerging Writers Program pairs four young writers each with an experienced mentor, and culminates in the production of a catalogue essay for GCAS’s Studio 12 exhibition program, and an independent exhibition review for Art and Australia magazine.

Text: Anusha Kenny

Mentor: Zara Stanhope

Catalogue Design: Danny Lacy

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Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Art & Australia Emerging Writers Program

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Matthew Shannon

Infinity of wind muskets

In The Passion According to G. H. Clarice Lispector uses the metaphor of cutting meat into small pieces to produce form. This image suggests that in order to organize, there must initially be something formless that can be given a positive value. In Infinity of wind muskets, Matthew Shannon takes as his positive matter both the sonic vibrations produced by an electric guitar and the vibrations and sounds produced by activity in the exhibition space. For a steak knife Shannon substitutes a custom-written computer program that translates the slightest reverberation of a guitar string into data that feeds a pulsing lighting system.

The sound-to-light converter doesn’t simply direct the impact made on a particular guitar string to a corresponding light. The information is sorted according to frequency, complicating the relationship between sound and the light patterns generated. The German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen postulated that since everything alive vibrates (built as we are from cells and nerve-endings communicating with each other through tiny movements), acoustical vibrations must have the ability to alter the rhythm of living organisms.1 Shannon recognizes his audience-as-vibration, but reverses the direction of the flow of information, allowing the audience’s slightest breath to penetrate the electrical system of the art-work, and to generate a concrete visual output. Like Karlheinz Stockhausen, Towards a cosmic music, trans. by Tim Nevill, Longmead: Shaftesbury, Dorset: Elements, 1989.

What is the significance of these ‘gaps’? Neurophysiology has established that what we see is not a direct coding of light patterns focused on the retina, but that between the retina and the visual cortex ‘the inflowing signals are modified to provide information that is already linked to a learned response’.2 This suggests that unbeknownst to us, our brain tampers with inputted visual data to render it more palpable (to confuse senses). To extend the analogy, it could be said that Shannon has displaced the burden of interpretation from the human on to a machine. We supply the data, and the sound-to-light converter tells the lights to turn on. Teaching us by kinesthetic analogy, Shannon has set up an interpreting system that exempts the human from work and leaves them free to play.

Yet, it is the machine that ‘plays’ the body, soaking up its reverberations and writing them large. The guitarist still has fun strumming the guitar, but the fun derives from the idea of controlling what is formless. If what reaches the visual cortex is not exactly what exists in the external world, then there is a dimension of reality that lies beyond our comprehension. Shannon’s Infinity of wind muskets highlights these ‘just-beyond-our-reach’ spaces in the attempt to reach them.

Anusha Kenny

All images: Matthew Shannon, Infinity of wind muskets, 2008, audio shot, various materials