

Inverleith House is delighted to present the first solo exhibition in the UK by legendary American artist, Tony Conrad (b. 1940, Concord, New Hampshire). The exhibition explores Conrad's contribution to improvised music, and his enduring relationship with free invention as it relates to his film and performance work, through a comprehensive presentation of the artist's invented acoustical tools – self-developed musical instruments made from everyday materials and adapted instruments. The exhibition also presents two new sound works in addition to Conrad's seminal film *The Flicker* (1966) screened here in 16mm and a feature-length documentary of the artist playing the acoustical tools, made in 2012.

As an artist, composer, musician, filmmaker and performer, Tony Conrad has pioneered both drone-based minimal music and avant-garde film for almost five decades. A central figure within a burgeoning group of experimental filmmakers, artists, musicians, writers and poets who comprised the so-called 'underground' scene of 1960s New York, his earliest works – instructional scores – were influenced by Fluxus and the ideologies of John Cage. He collaborated with the radical filmmaker Jack Smith for whom he composed the soundtrack for the notorious film *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and with *Beverly Grant* (who was dubbed 'Queen of the Underground') on film works such as *Straight and Narrow* (1970).

Conrad is perhaps best known for his ground-breaking ultra-minimal stroboscopic film *The Flicker* (1966), widely considered to be the seminal work of structural film, and for his early involvement with the experimental music group *The Theatre of Eternal Music* (also known as *The Dream Syndicate*) alongside La Monte Young, Angus MacLise, Marion Zazeela and John Cale (a founding member of the Velvet Underground). During his activity with Theatre of Eternal Music from 1962-66, the group developed what they described as 'dream music' – durational performances with minimal content, long sustained notes, harmonic series-based chords, discordant sounds, and pure noise that would become known as 'minimal' or 'drone music.'

This unfettered, liberated approach to music would completely expand the boundaries of production with the intention of dismantling Western musical traditions and apprehending the supposed authority of serious composition. Through fiercely restricted content, this minimal approach to sound was meant to cause 'pure sensory disruption' in the listener, and an essential component to this expansion into the free terrain of improvised sound for Conrad was the invention of new instruments upon which to play 'drones' and explore the further reaches of music.

Assembled from discarded everyday materials, domestic items, scraps of wood, canvases, album covers, children's toys and of course film stock, the Invented Acoustical Tools embody a spirit of

improvisation within their very construction and can be understood as ‘meta-compositional interventions.’ Over the last forty years, Conrad has effectively built up what could be considered as an orchestral ensemble of strings, brass, wind, percussion and electronic instruments from such unlikely materials: violins with strings hanging loose or substituted by metal beads, or else attached to simple wall brackets or rudimentary lengths of wood; wind instruments made from juice and milk cartons, a reclaimed fairground horn or even a supermarket carrier bag; whilst the rhythm section is formed of various drums whose skins have been pierced and cut through the middle, allowing them to be bowed rather than struck.

The sounds generated by these instruments range from the barely audible – exemplified by the *Grommet Horns*, which through rubberized grommets expel rushes of air, or the *Ear Bow* (ca. 2000) which resonates for the player alone – to the more resounding *Two Violin Players*’ (1998) motorized, automatic drone-generating mechanism or *Bowstring’s* (2005) juddering structure. Two compositions, one for strings and another for grommet horns can be heard playing in room one, taken from performances recorded by Conrad earlier this year – however the sound of other instruments such as *Band Aid Box Stereo Oscillator* and *Plastic Oscillator* (both ca.1969), whose mechanisms have failed over time, can only be imagined.

Despite their conception as practical instruments to be played, the ‘tools’ can be equally appreciated as sculptural objects and this immediately resonates with Conrad’s approach to art and especially film. He sees it not as a tool for conveying narrative but as a self-reflexive medium and physical material worthy of investigation in itself. During the 1960s Conrad declared his intention to ‘kill film’ and just as his approach to music broke with Western institutionalized traditions, his film works subverted all cinematic conventions.

Works such as the *Pickled Films* in which Conrad ‘processed’ film stock in jars of vinegar, rendering it unwatchable or the *Yellow Movies* (1973) large paintings covered with household paint which have been slowly changing and discolouring over time, and the film performance *Bowed Film* (1974) in which the film is played using a bow rather than being projected.

Through such films and of course, *The Flicker* (shown in room seven) Conrad demonstrated that film could exist beyond conventional storytelling and explore the medium itself. *The Flicker* is perhaps the ultimate in ‘minimal’ film, comprising only black and white frames which flash rapidly into view: its restricted, monochromatic content creating a rhythmical strobe which gives the film a dizzying sense of motion and can elicit a tremendous physical response in the viewer. Audiences have experienced a range of alarming optical effects including imagined colours, patterns and

shapes as well as powerful visceral reactions during screenings.

The exhibition is presented on all three floors of Inverleith House. Tony Conrad lives and works in Buffalo, New York. We are deeply grateful to Tony Conrad, Galerie Buchholz, Greene Naftali Gallery and to the Tony Conrad Exhibition Circle for their support.

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