



So Dadson uses the vehicles and products of vision and hearing as tangible proof of being, so securing his work as an embodied practice. And he asks his audience to trust their senses. This is why so much of his work records the simple facts of living: the rhythms of a physical workout (*Physical*, 1976); the momentous occasion of birth, and the slow exhalations that accompany dying (*Earth*, 1976). Physical movements – breathing, rowing, foot-tapping, stamping, stroking, clapping – set up rhythms that connect exterior form to the inner workings of the body, as sounds coordinate with the pulse and rhythm of heart and lungs. They also bring humans into line with the larger motions of time, whereby the body's beat can literally map time, breaking it into component parts, establishing the *longeurs* of duration. Or it can interrupt the flow, challenge the silence, show how dumbness gives way to meaning.

This last point is worth exploring. Despite the fact that Dadson uses raw sound, and finds his footage rather than composes it, he understands that matter always conveys meaning, once it is perceived and presented. So he brings sound and image, body and site into conjunction with language and therefore into the realm of culture. *Echo-Logo* (2003/4) is a case in point. Here Dadson had members of a science team based in the Dry Valley region of Antarctica use their voices to create a tableau of sounds that bounced off the icy walls of the Canada Glacier. They were filmed moving gradually into and out of frame, their voices caught as a random series of staccato calls and shouts. As these sounds rebounded in the echoing silence shape was given to the landscape, its dimensions aurally marked and charted. But as the title suggests, in the play between voice and echo Dadson was able to capture the transference of sound to sign, using his camera to embody this as an indexical trace. He suggests a way in which we can make sense of such a place, but not as these scientists normally might.

Dadson uses film and video to render sight and sound tangible. The effect is experientially affecting, but also conceptual. Let me leave you with one work, a piece called *Ho* from the *Conundrum Quartet* (1999). Here a large bass drum is suspended in a darkened space. Projected on both faces of the drum are images of human ears, which change in time to the slow rhythm set by a virtual hand beating the drum with a drumstick. We see both a depicted body fragment (the image of the ear) and the actual object: the drum. The hand that strikes the drum is also filmed, but being the right scale in relation to the drum, it appears real. Though our eyes might be deceived, we mentally bring together material object and immaterial image to produce a third term, the conjoined 'ear' + 'drum'. And in that process, bodily membrane and percussive instrument are revealed as conceptually one, at least in the intertextual zone of language. So the visual and the material intersect, even as their 'truth' is tested. But then the senses are further challenged, for this piece is entirely silent. Vision serves where the ear fails and the mind supplies what we see but do not hear: it makes the sound and so secures meaning. In teasing fulfilment of Dadson's project, this piece proves that mind and body, image and object, sight and sound, language and thought are indeed connected.

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# Camera Actions

Film and video in the work of Philip Dadson

*...to be as a slowly revolving search light of constant motion & beam, bringing data in range, in & out of definition.*

Philip Dadson, 1974



Philip Dadson

Philip Dadson uses moving images but he is neither a filmmaker nor a video artist, or not primarily.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he is possibly better known for his innovative use of sound, either as a solo artist or with From Scratch, the performance group he founded in 1974. Rather, Dadson uses camera-generated imagery and exploits the character and effects of film and video as components of his intermedia art practice. This practice ranges from one-off performance works to gallery-specific installations that have been undertaken in various sites in New Zealand, Australia, Asia and the Pacific, the USA and Europe. In these, Dadson utilises a wealth of natural and technological, handmade and found, immaterial and sculptural components. He leaves in his wake a rich archive of visual and sound recordings, instructions, notations and instruments that he can reuse in new and different situations. In such a practice film and video play but a part: as documentation of or visual feedback in a performance, as material components in a sculptural situation, or as works whose form is determined purely by their mode of presentation. They are shaped, that is, by the dimensions of cinema screen, projection space, or monitor. These media also have their afterlife as tapes and discs that can be copied, and are easy to store and circulate.

1. While my principal focus in this essay is the role of film and video in his artistic practice, it should be noted that Philip Dadson played an important role in the New Zealand film industry, particularly in the 1970s. Between 1973 and 1976 he worked on a number of film projects, including doing sound for *Te Matakite ō Aotearoa*, 1975 and *Test Pictures*, 1976, both of which were produced by SeeHear Films, the company he formed with Geoff Steven. He was instrumental in the establishment of Alternative Cinema, the Auckland-based cooperative designed to support experimental and independent filmmakers. His work in film reduced after 1977, however, due to his appointment to a permanent position in the sculpture department at Elam School of Fine Arts. Here Dadson went on to establish New Zealand's first intermedia programme, which is still a vital forum for the development of multi-media and time-based arts.



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'Ho' from Conundrum Quartet (1999)

Dadson's use of film and video is neither casual nor unreflective, however; these media do not merely provide visual spectacle or technical variety. Instead, they play an integral role, both for their visual possibilities and, more importantly, because of the very nature of the filmic medium. As a temporal mode that can instantaneously and directly capture its subjects, one that is immaterial and utterly dependent on its viewing contexts, a medium that has a synergistic relation to sound and which can be readily disseminated, the moving image is essential to Dadson's practice. It is a mode that meshes with and manifests his attitude to artmaking; its very nature serving as a mechanism for meaning.

For Dadson's prime concern is to tap into material existence to find its rhythm and pulse, to explore a sensory realm in order to connect with the world in both its concrete and disembodied dimensions. This entails harnessing the body to physical reality via its senses, movements, and sound-generating potential, in ways that enable the individual to connect with the wider systems (visible and invisible, natural and social) within which humans operate. This is a phenomenological inquiry seeking knowledge of the world and of the self within it that is at once selfless and profoundly fulfilling. Dadson is not only motivated by his own impulses and desires, but sees the potential in what he does for connecting people to each other and to their environment, so his is a socially motivated project. It is for these reasons that Dadson is drawn to the three mechanisms – sound, moving image and performance – which allow the body to function as an active medium for registering the material and hidden facts of existence.

Dadson was exposed early in his career to the technologies of film and video. On his return from England in 1970 (where he had joined the experimental music group established by Cornelius Cardew and others at Morley College in London, which later became Scratch Orchestra), he enrolled to complete his diploma in the sculpture department at Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland. Here, in an atmosphere where students were encouraged to use any and every medium to record their responses to the world around them, he developed his interest in sound and performance. He also made use of film and video equipment as a means to more directly access his surroundings and because the medium allowed him to integrate and pay attention to the temporal dimensions of sound and image.

*Earthworks* (1971) is perhaps Dadson's first major achievement, and a work that underpins much of his subsequent practice. What we see today is the 16mm film Dadson produced as a consequence of the simultaneous film/audio event he orchestrated for participants in 15 sites around the world at 1800 hours GMT on 23/24 September, the spring/autumn equinox. It is a montage of images and sounds put together by Dadson from recordings made at seven of these locations. In a single work we see flashes and hear fragments of a diverse set of actual places: Rarotonga, Uppsala (Sweden), San Diego, Greenwich (London), Ross Island (Antarctica), Bourke (Australia), Canada, and the central plateau of New Zealand's North Island. The film serves as a record of a moment in time as it is experienced simultaneously at different points around the world. It is at once utterly particular and yet global in its reach, a conceptual and visual materialisation akin to but subversive of the mapping process. For Dadson it was the first occasion where he could "extend the idea of performance beyond the confines of a single space", yet the aim was still to make manifest a sense of lived time and conceptualise and connect real places.<sup>2</sup>

For his own component Dadson travelled to the centre of the North Island with Leon Narbey, Geoff Steven, Jim Allen and others. At the appointed time they turned on the cameras and tape recorder and in a slow 360° pan literally took in their surroundings. Here, then, the camera was used as a positioning device, marking the spot where this group of individuals stood, but also collecting a host of radiating viewpoints which met and meshed with recordings of the aural landscape. Between the "here" and "there" of the cameras' actions a line was drawn, a circle made from images and sound.

We can trace such delineations in many of Dadson's film and video pieces, whether they take the form of a performer gently moving a length of wire through his fingers across a space caught perfectly within the frame of a monitor (*Triad I*, 1977/8); or as the prow of a dinghy cutting its way through water (*Mangrove*, 1989, and *Uncharted Crossing*, 1989); or in the images filmed from a speeding car as it travels through the South Island



'Flutter' from Polar Projects (2004)

(*South*, 1985/2005); even in the concert of footsteps of marchers as they make their way from Te Hapua in Northland to Wellington's Parliament grounds (*Te Matakite ō Aotearoa The Māori Land March*, 1975, a documentary made with Geoff Steven and Leon Narbey for South Pacific Television).

*Flutter* (2004) one of Dadson's *Polar Projects*, brings this gesture of drawing with sound and film up to the moment. Here a red cloth flag is filmed against a backdrop of land, sea and sky in such a way that the pole on which it flies forms a perfect line that bisects the screen. We hear and see this pennant vibrating violently, the flapping sound amounting to a vigorous, incessant rhythm. This pole captures and focuses the elements. They, in turn, transform inherently mute matter into a noisy instrument. Typically, vast and unseen forces are captured and contained in the most simple of objects. And, if the flag serves as a found device to capture the elements – an accidentally expressive medium for the artist – so the camera, in its capacity as a recording mechanism, becomes an instrument for capturing the world seemingly without the aid of human intervention.

Dadson redirects the expressive aims of art, presenting us with actual sounds and sights rather than transforming them into representations. By concentrating them as graphic trajectories he grants the work its philosophical dimension. I have an idea that Dadson's project might be a terrestrial equivalent to what Douglas Kahn has described as the "Pythagorean monochord", the line the classical philosopher believed vibrated in accord with the cosmos. For Pythagoras, music, the audible manifestation of number, was the vehicle by which humans could grasp the motion of the spheres and thus give form to the order that underlay physical reality. Dadson brings the philosopher's line back down to earth, using it to capture the extra-musical dimensions of sound, those that belong to the world and not to the intellectual ambitions of 'man'. Even so, his line performs, as Kahn would have it, as a reservoir and a residue, the place where myriad forces coalesce at the point where "audio ("I hear") and video ("I see")" meet.<sup>3</sup>

2. See Philip Dadson interview in *Cantrill Filmnotes*, nos 23-24, July 1976, p.74

3. See Douglas Kahn, *Noise, water, meat: a history of sound in the arts*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 2001, especially pp 72-79.