

A quiet revolution: towards ecological and egalitarian listening

Can you imagine a landscape with no trees, no flowering plants, no insects of any visible sort, no animals, no birds, no history of human occupation aside from visiting explorers, scientists, surveyors and artists in the 20th/21st centuries; in essence a prehistoric primitive condition, synonymous with the origins of organic life. In these Dry Valleys, the living communities consist of stone and ice. The sound continuum is silence, broken into by the birth of a rock onto a surface littered with jutting boulders, rocks, stones, gravel and sand.¹

Throughout his career Philip Dadson has engaged in a playfully investigative exploration of the environment through sound and image. With an acute sensitivity for the landscape, his simple gestures create a world of wonder and wit. He has paired stones from across oceans, swept beaches and, with his group **From Scratch**, invoked the shifting of tectonic plates.

In January 2003 Dadson's explorations took him to the remote and extreme region of the Antarctic dry valleys. Rather than returning to present us with grandiose generalisations typical of portrayals of sublime experiences, he leaves us to ponder the details as if evoking more graspable experience through haiku rather than epic portrayal. Neither does he impose his work onto the environment. Acting as a conduit, Dadson offers his eyes and ears to viewers to mediate fragments of his experience, resulting in a take-only-photos-and-leave-only-footprints process.

The tools and strategies that Dadson employed in Antarctica are typical of both his practice and that of the post-object art-making era he participated in during the 1960s and

[notes]

¹ Philip Dadson, extract from diary written while in Garwood Dry Valley, Antarctica, January 2003.

IMAGES

Cover: **Echo-Logo**, video still, 2004
Inside top: **Echo-Logo**, video still, 2004 (detail)
Inside bottom: **Stone Map**, video still, 2004
This page: **Aerial Farm**, video still, 2004

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The artist wishes to thank his family, Antarctica NZ, Creative NZ, Sony (NZ) Ltd, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Nicola Borota, George Chang, Andrew Clifford, Laurie Greenfield, Herwig Hoffmann, Intermedia/Elam, Kitt McGregor, Yvonne Powley, Richard Shaw and Ashley Sparrow.

Philip Dadson is represented by Starkwhite

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PHILIP DADSON POLAR PROJECTS

29 September - 13 November 2004





1970s; a practice characterised by performance-based, task-oriented activities, preserved through film or video footage, sound recordings, photographs and text. Emerging portable recording technology allowed artists to venture outdoors, escaping the boundaries and framing of traditional institutions to negotiate a place within more social environments.² Documentation played a vital role, often providing the sole remaining traces of a work, and newer media gave art a fresh language, common to everyday applications and able to provide an objective, scientific record.³

Dadson's **Polar Projects** are consistent with this tradition, negotiating their temporality and gallery incarnations through indexical traces – an ephemeral modus operandi that is particularly apt in Antarctica's fragile environs. Resembling miniature landscapes or scientific specimens, the **Rock Records** especially reference Antarctica's ecological importance. They have been produced by taking rubbings directly from stones in the dry valleys onto A5 diary pages and circular Dobson spectrophotometer wax recording discs normally used to measure ozone depletion. In turn, the indexed rocks are testament to the environmental forces that have shaped them into the mysterious sculptural forms seen in **Stone Map**.

Rather than introducing instruments or elements of his own making, Dadson has created performances and instruments from structures already present to fulfill a vital role in Antarctica's scientific activities. Every element of **Polar Projects** is a natural, functioning part of the Antarctic ecology, including the pragmatic, man-made additions. The wind-generated tones of an aerial farm become an enormous Aeolian wind-harp producing a wide band of frequencies

activated by a 50km/h wind. The circular installation of frame and wires appear in a shifting and illusory graphic outline, much like an animated drawing against a background of white-ice and intermittent snow-drift. Similarly, a flag, usually a symbol of colonial conquest, becomes a compelling image of elemental kinetics.

These strategies possibly hark back to Dadson's formative experiences of an experimental music class at Morley College, London during 1968 and 1969 with composer/musician Cornelius Cardew and the foundation group for the London Scratch Orchestra. Espousing egalitarian ideas of open participation irrespective of musical proficiency,⁴ the Scratch Orchestra engaged in improvisational tasks and rituals proposed by individual members. It was here that Dadson's passion for improvised performance was really sparked and he particularly recalls engaging in tasks based on musical journeys, including an early version of Michael Parsons' **Expedition to the North Pole**.

On returning to Auckland in 1970, Dadson established a New Zealand chapter of the Scratch Orchestra, which later evolved into From Scratch. The works he produced at this time were testament to his growing interest in geography.⁵ These include **Solar Plexus** (1970), a dawn-to-dusk drumming event in Maungawhau (Mt Eden) crater each Winter solstice; **From Auckland to Anglesea By Air** (1971), a radio-linked performance with the London Scratch Orchestra and **Beachsweep, Purposeless Work #1** (1971). Dadson describes the latter as "celebrating task actions that have no other function other than being in the moment for the task alone."⁶ Not only are any aesthetic associations with music removed from this activity, the task's existence within its moment is

reinforced by the temporal and ephemeral impact of its gestures. For a performance on Karekare Beach, some ten participants were required to sweep the length of the beach with large brooms according to a text score including the following instructions:

Begin at one 'end' all together
roughly span the sand's breadth
brush towards the other 'end'
Follow your nose
at your own pace
as a current
there is no obligation to finish
the distance ...
end instead when you have
finished with sweeping...

For **Echo Logo**, another of the **Polar Projects**, an actual team of Antarctic scientists are recruited for a ritual-like performance staged beneath a 30 metre high glacial ice-face. In exploring the sonic qualities of this setting, their awareness of this environment is evident. The scientists pursue their tasks in a purely functional manner on a continent that is primarily populated by workers who are there to pursue pragmatic and ecological activities. As lichen and algae specialists, Dadson's companions tread warily in a curious dance, observing the protocols of their profession to preserve the environment. Not only does this continue the egalitarian philosophies of the Scratch Orchestra, it utilises components and participants in their natural setting.

Another subtle resonance exists between the **Polar Projects** and an earlier series of works. In **Triad 1 – 7**, polar opposites are reconciled in often witty or ironic ways. In **Triad #3** (1979), Dadson uses an image of a polar

bear pacing in a repetitive loop pattern, kicking a leg at the right and left extremes of the walk to trigger images of body gestures that reference pairs of opposites. In **Polar Projects**, Dadson himself mediates between literal polar extremes, pacing to and fro and producing surprisingly sonic ways of seeing.

As always, it is Dadson's play on polarities that amplifies our awareness of a kinetic world. He recontextualises environments by combining opposing forces with whimsical juxtapositions of sight and sound. **Polar Projects** engages the environment and its workers as active participants to transform the simplest experiences into unique possibilities.

Andrew Clifford 2004.

[Notes contd...]

² Jennifer Hay, "Trans-Marginal: New Zealand Performance Art 1970-1985" **Intervention**, Robert McDougall Art Gallery & Annex, Christchurch, 2000.

³ Christina Barton explores the significance of post-object documentation, particularly photography, in "What Was Directly Lived has Moved Away Into Representation" **Action Replay Post-Script**, Artspace, Auckland and Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Zealand, 2002.

⁴ See Cornelius Cardew, **Stockhausen Serves Imperialism**. Originally published by Latimer New Dimensions Limited, London, 1974. Republished by ubuclassics, www.ubu.com, 2004. Cardew gives a revisionist assessment of the egalitarian ideals of the London Scratch Orchestra and critiques other avant-garde composers through the eyes of his growing interest in socialist theory.

⁵ James Hutchinson, **Philip Dadson: Location (Site-specific), Rhythm (pulse) and Simultaneous Time**, unpublished research paper, Unitec, 1997.

⁶ Philip Dadson in conversation with the author, August 19 2004.