



Incantation, 2006. Video still. Courtesy the artist.

NEW RHYTHMS FROM A PRIVATE UNIVERSE

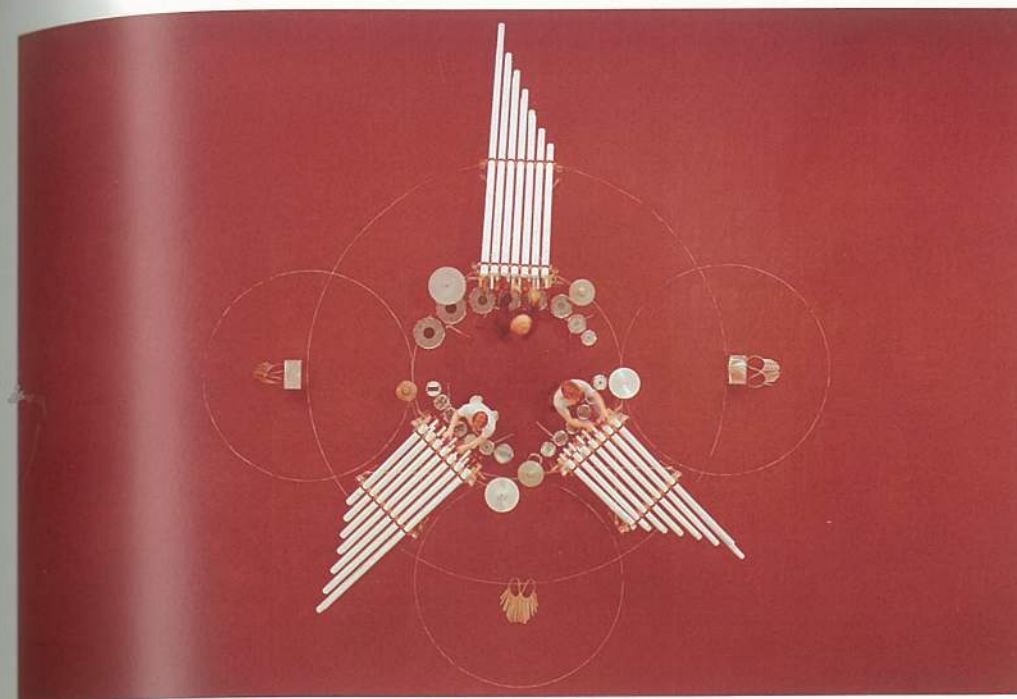
PHILIP DADSON
ANDREW CLIFFORD

As artists settle into senior career, the oft-repeated stories of their formative experiences begin to gloss into a series of mythological moments. The career of New Zealand intermedia pioneer, Philip Dadson, is no exception, with a well-trodden narrative having been established that takes him from childhood and first jobs in earthquake-prone Napier, to art school in Auckland, and then a trip to London, France, Spain and New York, including encounters with Nam Jun Paik and Charlotte Moorman, Elvin Jones, and Gordon Mumma, but most significantly, with British composer Cornelius Cardew. Although there have been distinct evolutions in Dadson's practice since his return to New Zealand in 1970, his personal interest in global rhythms and the methodologies developed with Cardew remain prominent in Dadson's latest work.

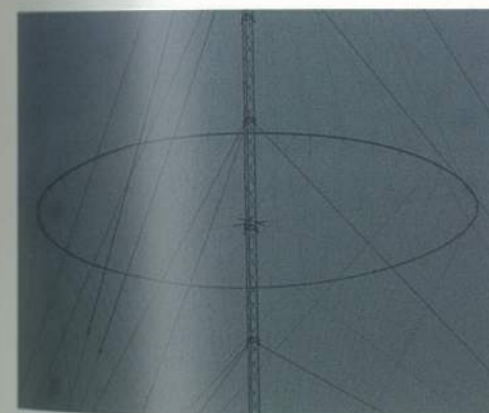
It is less common that an artist's later years are quite as closely observed, but the last decade has been particularly dynamic for Dadson. In 1999 his solo exhibition 'Conundrum Quartet', part of the SOUNDCULTURE'99 festival held at Auckland, demonstrated a growing confidence with moving beyond performance and video into a more installation-based practice. The following year his performance group From Scratch staged their last performance, and at the end of that year he retired from full-time teaching, allowing him to focus fully on his own work. Since then he has travelled extensively to perform at festivals, released his first solo CD, organised events, built his first outdoor sound-sculptures, ventured into the world of dealer galleries, and won awards.

The most notable of Dadson's recent activities is 'Polar Projects', a body of work resulting from an Antarctic residency in January 2003. Equipped with cameras and recording equipment, he flew to Scott Base and, at the invitation of a scientific team there, spent a week camping in Antarctica's Taylor and Garwood Dry Valleys.

This was not Dadson's first encounter with the great white continent. In 1971, he produced *Earthworks*, a fluxus-style mail-art project in which he solicited assistance from fifteen locations around the globe, including Antarctica. Like the task-based activities explored at Morley College with Cardew, this simultaneous recording event required the participants to follow instructions, photographing their surroundings and recording audio observations of time, altitude, longitude, latitude, weather,



Presented together, videos of wind-formed rocks, a trembling flagpole and a whistling aerial-mast give a more detailed insight of the complex ecosystems and chaotic forces at play than the sublime emptiness usually equated with Antarctica.



clockwise from top: *Pacific 321 Zero*, 1982. Camera: Wally Floyd. Courtesy the artist and St Paul St Gallery, Auckland; *Echo-Logo*, 2003, from *Polar Projects*. DVD/video, 7 minutes; *Aerial Farm*, 2004. DVD, 7 minutes loop. Courtesy the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland.

surroundings, and so on. The performance took place at 1800hrs, 23 September (GMT), coinciding with the autumn-spring equinoxes; a seasonal moment of planetary alignment when day and night are of equal length. Dadson's contribution was to lead a team to document, with 16mm film, New Zealand's part in the global scheme, capturing the sunrise (6am, 24 September, New Zealand time) from a stark, volcanic plateau in the central North Island.

Dadson has said that it was *Earthworks* that initially sparked his interest in the remote region of Antarctica and it is easy to imagine his geophysical reportage from the half-lit, barren terrain of the central plateau, which caused his 16mm camera to freeze, as a precursor to his observational recordings of an extra-terrestrial Polar landscape.¹

Another early outlet of his interest in the 'continuum of universal ebb and flow'² is *Solar Plexus*, the annual endurance event he initiated in June 1970, which would take place every winter solstice (continuing without his involvement until quite recently) with drumming from dawn to dusk in the naturally parabolic arena of Maungawhau (Mount Eden) crater—a dormant volcano in inner city Auckland.

A more direct reflection on the cycles, patterns and rituals of human existence can be found in Dadson's video installation *Breath* 1976, a two monitor piece that juxtaposes footage of a childbirth alongside a continuous shot of an old woman nearing death, asleep in a rest-home.

Given Dadson's interest in exploring the choreography of time, he seemed a natural candidate for inclusion in the year 2000 'millennium' celebrations. Commissioned by the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra for a Millennial concert series, Dadson describes his composition *MAYA* as a counter-millennial fanfare. This piece challenges the global dominance of the Gregorian system, in favour of a more diverse and subjective view of the cycles of reality, by acknowledging the larger patterns of other calendars. The seven minute fanfare also placed the orchestra around the perimeter of the venue, dispersing the typically singular audience-stage vantage point to create a more spatial and personal experience for each audience member.³

Antarctica provides Dadson with a setting shaped over eons by natural forces, and relatively unspoiled by humans. Through his staging and choices of location for his geographical works, he demonstrates a knack for transforming natural settings into strange, almost extra-terrestrial environments; environments that warrant interpretation and beg a closer examination. By providing a degree of other-ness, they offer a backdrop against which to consider the human condition and the ways we perceive the world. But *Polar Projects* also avoids the obvious clichés of vast, unblemished vistas, opting for a series of studies rather than a grand portrayal. Presented together, videos of wind-formed rocks, a trembling flagpole and a whistling aerial mast give a more detailed insight of the complex ecosystems and chaotic forces at play than the sublime emptiness usually equated with Antarctica.

The work most resembling the classic Antarctic panorama is the sheer ice-face of the Canada Glacier, which provides a backdrop for the performance video *Echo-Logo*. Structured around a slow zoom-out, *Echo-Logo* plays with the ambiguity of scale, progressively revealing the enormity of the setting. As the shot widens, a figure is revealed, hopping from rock to rock and shouting into the reflective wall that gives the piece its title. More figures appear, each engaged in their own activity and seemingly meandering randomly, periodically interjecting to note the acoustics of their location. These performers are scientists, working in their accustomed setting but co-opted from their usual activities by Dadson to follow his instructions.

After several decades of increasingly virtuosic performance with his percussion group From Scratch, *Echo-Logo* marks a return to the artist's earlier interest in working with untrained groups to execute task-based performances that are 'simple, practical and spontaneous'.⁴ From Scratch was established in 1974 as a small group that could have more focus than the looser New Zealand Scratch Orchestra, which Dadson had established after working in the formative stages of Cardew's Scratch Orchestra in London. From Scratch performances increasingly used a sense of spectacle, performing on large arrangements of invented instruments, incorporating a strong sense of choreography and developing a highly refined percussive language, a methodology that Dadson eventually began to find limiting and laboured.⁵

The artist's solo album *Sound Travels* 2004 proclaims this shift in focus, from composition to improvisation around the sonic potential of his built instruments.

Whereas From Scratch's trademark racks of PVC pipes provided a theatrical mode of presentation, Dadson's newer instruments are more subtle, requiring a more intimate exploration of nuance. The result is a more internalised mode of performance with Dadson often partially obscured by his instrument.

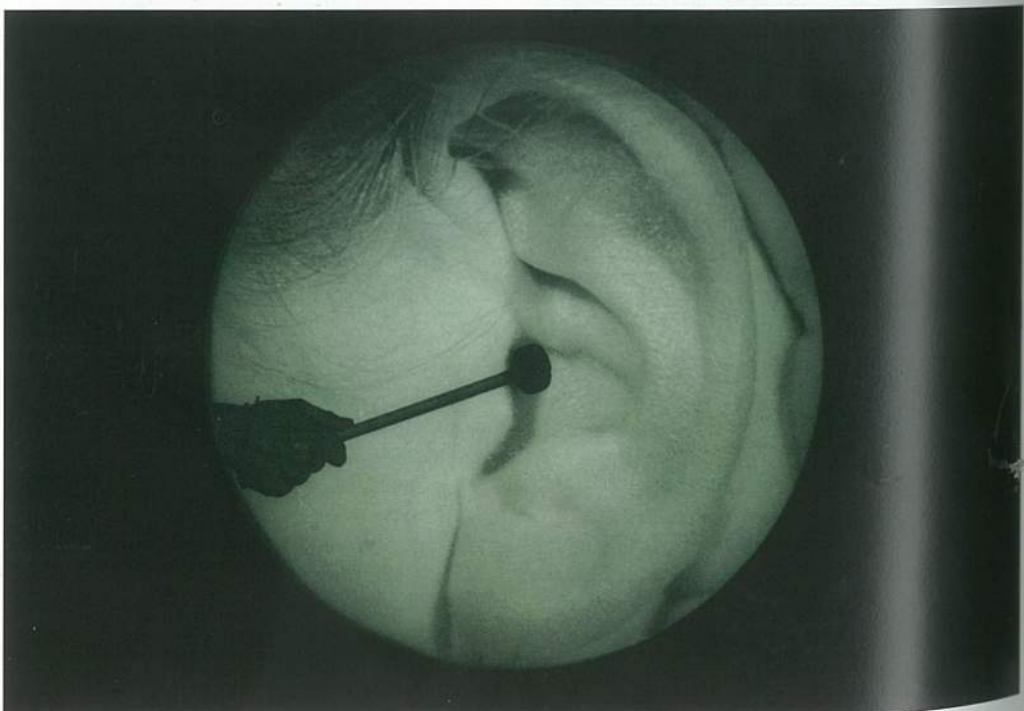
Typifying these strategies, he recently staged a performance at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (July, 2006) in which the participants/audience were blindfolded and made to hold a piece of string to their ears, through which they listened to themselves dragging, banging and rubbing dangling metal rods through the surrounding cityscape. Dadson was seated at the centre of the activity, quietly intoning vocal drones into a resonant drum head, audible only in the immediate vicinity of the performance, a subjective rather than didactic experience.

In the broadcast industry there is a technique known as the 'silent interviewer', in which the interviewee is required to make self-contained responses. This allows the interviewer to be edited out, as if the subject was talking directly to the audience in an unmediated monologue. Dadson frequently takes an opposite strategy, making his presence clear in order to indicate the eyes and ears through which the experiences have been related. In the Polar Projects video *Terra Incognita*, a tracking shot leads into icy terrain. The artist remains in the frame through the loud scrunching of his footsteps and the presence of his shadow, which dominates the centre of the shot to relate the experience of traversing the environment that is being depicted. His *7 Airports* radio composition of 2003 uses a similar tactic. Presenting recordings of the ambience from different airports around the world, Dadson adds vocal improvisations in response to the soundscape. Rather than capturing simple geographical snapshots, he also has recorded his experience of and interaction with these places. Having shifted the focus from the interviewee or interviewer, he highlights the conversations they have together.

This increasing internalisation of performances is also evidenced in the two-monitor video work, *Incantation* 2006, which features Dadson playing two new instrumental performing devices. There is also his latest sculptural installation, *Tenantennae* 2005, one of four large, outdoor works he has completed for private commissions since 2000, commissions resulting from his growing reputation as an instrument builder.

Tenantennae is a large tubular structure, resembling ten 'fingers' on two outstretched hands, which can be used as both a listening and performance device. At both ends of each tube is a parabolic dish, which acts as both sender and receiver. By listening at the lower end of the tube, the top dish funnels sounds of the environment, including the whistling of the wind and the sloshing of waves, like a giant aural periscope. If viewers transmit sound into the tube, then the upper bowl also acts like the horn of a trumpet to project sounds back into the ether.

Each tube is also fitted with a different interface of wires and rods, allowing the viewer to 'play' the sculpture, although the result is so discreet that it can only be heard by the performer listening through the supplied port, even with other people using the sculpture's other fingers. Unlike the earlier outdoor commissions, the nature of *Tenantennae*'s interface is such that it does not require any instrumental



Purposeless work #1, 1971. Film still. Courtesy the artist and St Paul St Gallery, Auckland; *Earthworks*, 1971. Film still; *HO* from *Conundrum Quartet*, 1983-1999. Installation detail, ArtSpace, Auckland; *Terra Incognita*, 2004, from *Polar Projects*. DVD, 10 minutes loop. Courtesy the artist and Starkwhite, Auckland.



clockwise from top: *Harmonicar*, 1985; *Tenantennae*, 2005. Sound sculpture, Connells Bay Sculpture Park, New Zealand. Photography Andrew Clifford; *Breath*, 1976. Stills from 2 monitor video installation; *Incantation*, 2006. Video still. Courtesy the artist.

proficiency from the viewer. It can also work as an entirely passive wind-sculpture for listening, with some of the more delicate interfaces being triggered by the breeze. This allows the participant to explore privately the sculpture's range of sounds with no expectations of performing for an audience and it provides a range of private conversations with the surrounding environment. By presenting personal experiences of places, Dadson acknowledges the layers of subjective narrative associated with a site. Even the geographical explorations of his earliest works bear a strong resemblance to the current discourse of 'locative media' using technology (especially GPS) to explore multi-layered spatial situations, triggered by locations and movement.

It is probably no coincidence that the springy, strips of metal providing the interface for these giant instruments recall the kinetic sculptures of Len Lye. Lye sometimes spoke of playing sense games, challenging himself to recall early experiences through the filter of a particular sense, such as early childhood smells. In a similar way, a recurring strategy of Dadson's is to invite his audience to explore the world in a multi-sensory way, capturing Antarctica through the crunching of snow, the echoing of cliffs, or the very Lye-like vibrations of a bamboo flagpole. Dadson also has written a series of *Sound Stories* (published in 1999) which gather a set of anecdotes shaped by sound, using the senses to capture fleeting moments of his own history; the echoing of engines in underground tunnels, buzzing mosquitos, and broken pianos. These are the minutiae of existence, mediated by sound as an indicator of larger forces in action; these are subjective experiences and personal rituals that contribute to the rhythms within the grand cycles of existence. Dadson's role as an artist, like the media interviewer, is to facilitate and guide a conversation on behalf of an audience, drawing our attention to the natural forces that surround us and encouraging a fresh, multi-sensory appreciation of that environment. ■

notes

1. Artist lecture, 28 September, 2006.
2. Notes from promotional material for the exhibition *TAPPING THE PULSE: Works from 1971-2005*, New Zealand Film Archive, 2005.
3. Artist statement at www.sonicsfromscratch.co.nz/dadsonics.php?page_id=6
4. Interview with Dadson, 2 October, 2006.
5. Ibid.

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