

ON STATIC + SILENCE

‘We may conjecture that somewhere in the cosmos, beyond the border of all human trace, a zone of silence awaits...a great sea of stillness unperturbed by the animate, an utterly quiet virgin territory. But our imagination misleads us.’
John Biguenet, *silence* (2015), p. 3

Ludwig Van Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 premiered on a balmy Viennese evening on May 7, 1824. It was Beethoven’s first appearance as a conductor in twelve years, and with only ten months left to live, it would also be his last.

The rehearsals had been shambolic. The piece called for the largest number of musicians ever assembled by Beethoven, who was by this time almost completely deaf. And yet the performance was by all accounts rapturously received: there were standing ovations, waves of spontaneous applause, stomping and cheering. Many in the audience waved brightly coloured handkerchiefs and lifted their hats; worried that Beethoven would not be able to hear their cries.

But in the final movement of the symphony, right at the very end, when the violinists had finished with a strong down-bow and the timpanist had signalled the dramatic conclusion, Beethoven kept conducting. He had his back to the audience, his baton still swiftly moving through the air. The poet Suzanne Buffam writes of this moment, of the embarrassment that rippled through the room, ‘but not through Beethoven [who was] by then light years away.’¹

I like to think of him holding his eyes above the musicians, ignoring the gaping mouths of the singers and the crowd behind, furiously beating out his tempo, because for him in that moment there was no silence, just the electricity in the air and the notes resonating in his mind.



Nothing is static or silent.

The words themselves are misleading. On the one hand, ‘static’ could suggest a lack of movement, something steady and unchanging. But then again, it might also refer to the crackle of an electrical charge, the snow on the screen of an old TV. In physics the term ‘static’ refers to bodies at rest, a way of measuring forces in equilibrium.

What we perceive as ‘silence’ is in itself a form of static, a steady stream of white noise forever teetering on the threshold of audible sound. In writing about silence, John Biguenet has to acknowledge that it’s a point at which we can never truly arrive: there is no ‘silent reality’ waiting for us, only a plethora of sound waves our ears can’t pick up. ‘Silence’, writes Biguenet, ‘is a measure of human limitation’: it reminds us of the boundaries of our perception, of the tension that always exists between that which is heard and unheard, seen and unseen.²

This exhibition considers the elusive nature of these terms. Yet the works that occupy The Lock-Up are less concerned with the impossibility of ever reaching complete stasis and silence, but rather with moments that are caught between. All of these works pivot on thresholds, contemplating points that exist just above or below the boundaries of static and silence.

At the entrance a small speaker rests on a plinth. When you approach it you’ll notice that it’s visibly pulsing, vibrating a tone that you can’t seem to hear. You lean in, try and get a little closer, but still, no noise. Tim Bruniges’ *OSCILLATOR* (2013) is making a sound, albeit one that is throbbing at 16 hertz, a frequency below the level of human hearing. But, unlike us, the microphone can pick up these waves, and in doing so carries the tone back into the speaker, setting up a feedback loop of infinite duration. Here Bruniges presents forces that seem to be in equilibrium – there’s a tense balance between microphone, speaker and the faint circle on the wall behind, which is modulated by the sound.

And yet everything seems completely still, immobile, because just as the title suggests, it oscillates around and around, pulsing just underneath the limits of perceivable sound.

The drone emitting from *DRUM ROOM* (2013) appears similarly snagged, like a piece of thread caught on a nail. However, as opposed to *OSCILLATOR*, *DRUM ROOM* is awash with sound. The sonic qualities of the cymbals and orchestral bass drum have been activated to create a perpetual hum, a continuous shimmering tone. The choice of instrument is significant, Bruniges having chosen to sound out percussion instruments that traditionally *maintain* rather than disrupt strict markers of tempo. At first the tone appears to be static, but then you begin to notice subtle changes as you move around the room, with your ears gradually pairing together different and sometimes imagined harmonics. *DRUM ROOM* reveals the inherent slipperiness of fixed sound, prompting us to reconcile change in what appears to be an unchanging situation.

For Biguenet, it is the camera that is the great silencer, as a ‘photograph is a glimpse of the world with all the sound leached out.’³ The still image captures a moment, freezing it in time, but in doing so renders it mute. Jack Lanagan Dunbar’s *Vase #03, #06 and Kinetic Profile #03, #06* from the body of work ‘Studies in Light, Movement and Time’ (2015) give a little sound, a little motion, back to the image.

Two sculptures inhabit the enclosing space of the cell to the right of *DRUM ROOM*, and initially they appear as fragmented partial forms. It is the photographs behind that complete the shape: they are the result of capturing these kinetic sculptures in motion, and it’s only in recording an entire revolution of the sculptures that the shape turns into the vase presented in the image. But these spectral vases exist somewhere between the static two-dimensional image and the three-dimensional sculpture. Their movement exists elsewhere and they become objects whose physical presence is repeatedly deferred.

Daniel Crooks’ *Imaginary Object #1* (2007) sets up a similar overlap between object, image and motion, as a white spiral curves down the centre of the screen. The imaginary object that you’re looking at is a crumpled piece of paper, but Crooks has applied a time splicing technique, displacing pixel material in order to create the elongated structure. Time becomes lazy and long, and the moving image looks like a marble column or a thick and heavy serving of soft-serve ice cream. For Crooks, all movement is made up of a series of minute static gestures, and here he slows down and draws our attention to these gestures, splitting them and shifting them around.⁴

What you come across when peering through the peephole of the closed cell door on the left-hand side of the gallery is akin to Crooks’ imaginary object. At the end of the cell you can make out a wavering blue sphere. The soft sound emanating from the cell seems to be continuously falling away, travelling downward but never quite coming to rest. Bruniges’ *Continuum* (2012) plays with the fallibility of human senses: the colour and depth of the circle will change, but your eyes are deceiving you; the tone will continue to fall, but your ears are betraying you – both sound and image are fixed, it’s the movement that is the illusion.

Situated alongside *Continuum*, Brendan Van Hek’s *Horizon (midnight blue, aquamarine)* (2016) parallels this kind of sensorial dislocation. As the title of the work suggests, Van Hek is concerned with the ambiguous line of the horizon: a line that represents the limits of sight, but a line that’s always mysteriously pulling away. There’s a neon horizon lurking between the two tones of white and blue, but because of the nature of the colours and their opposition to each other, your eye won’t ever comfortably rest on the point at which they meet. As the eye repeatedly flicks between the two colours, your senses give mobility to a static object.

The piano in Angelica Mesiti’s *Prepared Piano for Movers (Hausmann)* (2012) is an object on the move. The instrument has been ‘prepared’ so that items concealed within the timber frame hit against the hammers and strings as it’s lifted, creating jangling and percussive sounds.⁵ The sounds themselves mimic the piano’s tenuous journey and the physical difficulty in moving it. But even though the piano is always in motion, it’s also somewhat stationary: the movers are never at rest, the instrument never positioned upright. If the tone of *Continuum* is forever on the way down, Mesiti’s piano is rising up and up without end – like *Imaginary Object #1* and the staircase on the screen, it spirals around on itself.

Sitting at the opposite end of the gallery, the resonant sounds emanating from Bruniges’ *PIANO* (2014) are quite different to Mesiti’s discordant vibrations. Here the piano is not prepared but rather activated by electromagnets, creating an autonomous sonorous object. These activated strings play out a chord, a chord that also gestures to the history of the instrument, a time when these notes may have previously been struck. Although it’s a static chord, knowing the chord is fixed and still hearing changes in pitch are different things entirely. Like the drone of *DRUM ROOM*, shifts do occur, directed by your proximity to the instrument in relation to the room. But all the while the tone remains suspended.

There’s a similar feeling of suspension as you stand in front of *HORSES* (2015). The work invites hesitation, as it’s unclear whether it is a still or moving image. It seems impossible to tell where each frame ends and where the next begins, but it is moving, as bodies merge, separate and merge again. *HORSES* is a kind of visual drone but its effect is the opposite of Crooks’ twirling column: instead of drawing attention to minute static gestures, *HORSES* contemplates the tiny movements contained *within* gestures, in the arc of a horse turning its head, in the flick of a tail.

The final work in the exhibition, *YARD* (2016), sees the former prison yard repurposed into an immersive sonic environment. The sound you can hear is live, is active, as the microphone suspended from the ceiling picks up sound, reconstructs it and then returns it back outward. A prison yard offers movement, but always a movement that is controlled, and Bruniges plays with this notion of restriction and freedom. That is, despite the fluctuating sounds that the microphone absorbs, the volume of the output is consistently regulated; creating a wall of sound that is simultaneously expansive and contained.

In Don DeLillo’s *Running Dog* (1978), the character of Lightborne contemplates a collection of sculptures and proclaims that what is most important is ‘movement, action, frames per second...this is the era we’re in, for better or worse. It seems a little ineffectual, what’s here. It just sits. It’s all mass and body weight.’⁶ The works across STATIC+SILENCE challenge this binary; they slow down motion and activity, draw out changes in position, they add weight, mass and stillness. This collection lingers on dual moments that are both moving and not, as if it were possible to hesitate on that time at sunrise or sunset when the first or final thin band of light appears to tremble, when ‘the day is scaled to the pure tones of being and sense’, when the sun hasn’t fully risen, or is yet to drop below the distant line of the horizon.⁷

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¹ Suzanne Buffam, ‘On Oblivion’ in *The Irrationalist*, (Canarium Books: Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2010), p. 38

² John Biguenet, *silence*, (Bloomsbury: London and New York, 2015), p. 3

³ Biguenet, p. 77

⁴ Amanda Slack-Smith, ‘Daniel Crooks: Life In Motion’, (QAGOMA Blog, 2015), <<http://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/daniel-crooks-life-in-motion/>>

⁵ A ‘prepared piano’ was used extensively by the composer John Cage, and refers to a piano that has had objects placed on or between the strings. <http://facweb.cs.depaul.edu/sgrais/prepared_piano.htm>

⁶ Don DeLillo, *Running Dog*, (Vintage Contemporaries Edition: New York, 1985), p. 15

⁷ DeLillo, p. 244

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1. Tim Bruniges, OSCILLATOR (2013)
Speaker, microphone, feedback, projection, infinite duration
2. Tim Bruniges, DRUM ROOM (2013)
Orchestral bass drum, cymbals, 5.1 sound, infinite duration
3. Daniel Crooks, Imaginary Object #1 (2007)
Single-channel digital video, colour, silent, 6 minutes 48 seconds
Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery
4. Jack Lanagan Dunbar, Vase #03, #06, Kinetic Profile #03, #06
From the body of work 'Studies in Light, Movement and Time' (2015)
Inkjet print, steel, paint, rust, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist
5. Angelica Mesiti, Prepared Piano for Movers (Hausmann) (2012)
Single-channel high definition video, colour, stereo sound,
5 minutes 32 seconds
Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery
6. Tim Bruniges, Continuum (2012)
Sound, light, infinite duration
7. Brendan Van Hek, Horizon (midnight blue, aquamarine) (2016)
110 x 150cm, neon
Courtesy Sarah Cottier Gallery
8. Tim Bruniges, PIANO (2014)
Upright piano, electromagnets, dimensions variable, infinite duration
9. Tim Bruniges, HORSES (2015)
Single-channel high definition video, colour, silent
10. Tim Bruniges, YARD (2016)
Site specific installation, microphone, laptop, sound, infinite duration

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The Lock-Up | 90 Hunter Street, Newcastle | thelockup.org.au