



Temporal Architectures: On Tim Bruniges’ MIRRORS

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*The past is present. Something has happened and the echoes are still resonating in my head. They are not becoming more difficult to discern; in fact the echoes are becoming increasingly loud and impossible to escape. The past lingers on, yesterday reverberates in today.*¹

A grey monolith emerging unexpectedly along the sight lines of an isolated coast: the past is present; the past is alive in objects. No longer fixed by their original function, the objects become monumental sculpture –surprising, stubborn. Historical forms in a “realm of temporal architectures”:² reconstructed in a spare white space, they enact what they were meant to do many years ago.² They reflect sound into a vast field – with a concentrated center – in infinite, regenerative loops. They reinterpret their failure. The sound – time – is cyclical, keeps moving.

Tim Bruniges’ MIRRORS (2014) is composed of two large concrete structures with a microphone in the center of each, positioned opposite one another at extreme ends of the gallery space at Signal Gallery. These structures are sound mirrors or, more technically, parabolic reflectors: the concave curve on the inward-facing side of each amplifies and focuses all the sound around it. They are modeled on historical sound mirrors – in particular, the sound mirror of Abbot’s Cliff, in Kent – built along the coast of England in the interwar period as a means of amplifying the sound of approaching enemy fighter planes. Like their historical precedents, Bruniges’ structures reflect the noises around them into a field of sound, amplified and encompassing.

Each 9 feet by 9 feet, the two opposing sound mirrors create a highly concentrated acoustic field. The moment Bruniges’ system (microphone, computer, speakers) is activated, it begins picking up sound in the gallery and feeding it into infinite loops of varying length: all the sound produced over the course of the show remains in these cycles, circulating through the work, recurring at uncertain intervals throughout the entirety of its exhibition. The work begins to regenerate itself, creating a continuous system of constantly accumulating sounds. Bruniges treats this aspect of MIRRORS almost as a musical composition, rooted in process, which builds over time into an encompassing soundscape.

Yet within this “molasses of sound” flowing through space, the sound mirrors also create two distinct loci (in front of each concavity, slightly

below ear-level) at which the sound coheres, amplified and precise. Conversations emerge from the dense frequencies of sound. The crux of the work is in contrasts or tensions like this: sound which is simultaneously immersive and specific; the original purpose of sound mirrors – as well as the sonic evidence they hoped to amplify – was so subtle and fragile, yet produced by these bulky, permanent objects. The installation, seemingly static and tangible, is actually in flux, constantly layering and (re)producing itself, its stasis undermined by sound as a medium which – like time – is invisible and fluid.

The regenerative, active nature of Bruniges’ sonic system contrasts markedly with the form and physicality of the work. Modeled on the sound mirror at Abbot’s Cliff, near Folkestone in Kent, England – one of the most formally spare examples – Bruniges’ large concrete structures allude directly to the historical sound mirrors dotting the southeast and northern English coasts. These huge objects were constructed on coastal sites in the decades between world wars, as an advance warning system: they amplified the sounds of oncoming aircraft, making them audible from far greater distances. A guard would stand sentry, often on a platform at the sonic focal point of the sound mirror, listening for the approach of an enemy plane.³ In the period of their construction, between the two world wars, this enemy was somewhat vaguely defined.

Bruniges’ engagement with English sound mirrors reflects an interest in historical periods, in the objects’ connection to a very specific place and time – the very compressed period of time in which they were functional. By the late 1930s, faster jets and the advent of radar had made sound mirrors obsolete. Yet they remain along the English coast: still, stubborn, failed objects. As documents of military experimentation – and failure – they are anomalies, rebukes to the usual covertness and rigidity of military plans and operations. Rendered useless by the constant forward motion of historical time, these large-scale modernist concrete structures along the English coast look almost alien, in a way, or like a relic from a distant, pagan past.

In its engagement with the strange detritus of war and its relationship to historical memory, MIRRORS recalls the work of novelist W.G. Sebald, in which reflections on the traumas of war and modernity evoke a sense of being abandoned or cast off by history. The semi-autobiographical narrator of Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* wanders

the English coast and countryside, “confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place.”⁴ The novel is constructed of his constant thoughts, which flow seamlessly between centuries, from personal recollection to historical narrative, encompassing both individual and collective tragedy. Among the ruins of the former military site at Orfordness, he offers an elegiac reflection on the strange extra-historical afterlife of the detritus of past wars: “The closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe.”⁵ As in Bruniges’ MIRRORS, these objects – once signifiers of war and defense – become dissociated from their original context or meaning, suggesting a collapse of historical time as it is generally conceived.

Yet Bruniges’ MIRRORS are concerned not just with the history of sound mirrors, but with the relationship of their form to that history. Immense, immobile concrete structures, the sound mirrors visually recall minimalist sculpture; in England, the remaining ones have an effect similar to certain 1970s earthworks. Like those art historical precedents, the work is an immediate presence – a phenomenological thing in space. Like much of Bruniges’ practice, moreover, MIRRORS evinces a concern with form and a spare, minimal approach – the most basic shapes, the most pared-down systems of sonic and visual exchange. As with *OSCILLATOR* (2013), though on a much larger scale, the sound mirrors engage simple circular forms and an infinite sound loop in an incredibly subtle installation, drawing out the interplay between the visual or physical elements and the invisible sonic information coursing through the work, creating it.

Though this sonic information is produced by people and things in the gallery – including a program of performances and happenings at the show’s opening – MIRRORS is not an explicitly interactive work. Rather, it is absorptive. Over time, the work accumulates a mass of information – sonic, visual, technological – and processes it to enable a very simple, spare form of communication. Bruniges maintains, moreover, that the work is not about surveillance in a contemporary sense, that it was not motivated by recent revelations of the NSA’s far-overreaching surveillance of US citizens and others. Contemporary surveillance centers around tracking the particular movements of individuals – the details of a person’s phone calls, online metadata, etc.

– whereas sound mirrors are meant to surveil a generalized “enemy”, to receive and amplify an entire field of distant, non-individual sound. This distinction is crucial to Bruniges’ practice, which tends to suggest a step back from the individual self, and a movement toward a general field of sound or light or space. The input sound in MIRRORS is decontextualized – depersonalized – as it enters the system of the work.

These simultaneous processes – decontextualization and regeneration – at work in MIRRORS suggest an attempt to conceptualize time through sound. With its infinite, perpetual loops of sound, the work creates a multi-layered circularity – the circle being one (of many) “metaphors” for time (since we have no way of understanding time except metaphorically).⁶ This circularity recalls Nietzsche’s theory of Eternal Return, which Birnbaum describes as such: “Everything that happens in the universe has happened before and is destined to happen again, preceded and followed every time by exactly the same events.”⁷ Because time is infinite, and the universe is not, everything must cycle back at some point, much as the particular sonic moments of MIRRORS do. Yet Birnbaum clarifies that “perhaps it’s not so much the physical forms that must return – historical events, life forms... – but that difference which is chronos, or time, itself. Difference as such returns: the cleft or fissure that is the Now, the syncopation that is ‘presence’ thought to an end.”⁸ Something is always returning, but that something is difference, the present, a moment simultaneously affirmed and dissolved in time. This is stillness with motion around it: these immovable objects sit in the gallery space, simultaneously within history and out of it, as activity occurs and time – in whatever form we imagine it – passes around them.

1. Daniel Bimbaum, *Chronology* (New York: Lukas & Stenberg, 2005), p.33.

2. Bimbaum, *Chronology*, p.30-31.

3. Lise Autogena, et. al., *The Sound Mirrors Project*, www.soundmirrors.org, p.3.

4. W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999), p.3.

5. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p.237.

6. Bimbaum, *Chronology*, p.29.

7. Bimbaum, *Chronology*, p.11.

8. Bimbaum, *Chronology*, p.17.