

On Site Exhibitions, performance art, installations, etc

Robosonic Eclectic: Live Music By Robots And Humans

3-LEGGED DOG ART AND TECHNOLOGY CENTRE
NEW YORK, USA

A concert built around musical robots might sound frivolous, but Robosonic Eclectic's formidable roster dispelled any sense of gimmickry. It's a testament to the strength of the featured composers – Morton Subotnick, George Lewis, JG Thirlwell (aka cinematic soundscapist Foetus) and quirky pop duo They Might Be Giants – that the robots at times seemed almost marginal, though they did provide a useful reference point. Each musician employed the same core gadgets, all fashioned by Brooklyn's League of Electronic Musical Urban Robots, but utilised them to diverse ends.

Subotnick and percussionist Tom Beyer were the first to venture into the menagerie of electronics, which included a large xylophone-like structure, heavily wired drums hanging from the ceiling and an imposing four-stringed device known as GuitarBot. In Subotnick's *With a Little Help From...*, the composer used a touchpad to set off tiny bongo plinks in one corner of the room and loud bass-drum thumps in another. Beyer mimicked the events, then took the lead by bowing a tiny metal bowl; a series of motors auto-bowed similar

receptacles, creating a chorus of shimmering tones. Goaded by the robotic chatter, the musicians leapt up and began a vigorous tapdance, which yielded a deserved ovation.

George Lewis has a long history of teaching computers to improvise, so it came as no surprise that his *First Lemurian Étude* demonstrated a powerful man-machine rapport. The robots twittered as the trombonist waded in with sparse figures. When he ceased after a garrulous climax, his accompanists too silenced, seeming to wait for his next move; when he made it, GuitarBot echoed the line verbatim. Lewis then laid out, nodding intently to the interplay between his electronic companions.

Defying the highbrow template of the evening, They Might Be Giants simply performed three typically charming new ditties, using the bots like a ramshackle orchestra. As the machines clattered to life, the duo's set took on the feel of a surreal carnival act.

Thirlwell's *Prosopagnosia* made for a brilliant finale. It pitted the robots against an exacting live string quartet to yield a foreboding, sci-fi-style march. While Lewis's work humanised the machines, Thirlwell mechanised his musicians, leading them through a relentless 16th-note pulse with jagged syncopation. Nattily decked out in a lounge-lizard suit and white shoes, the composer conducted with



Jim Thirlwell with Electronic Musical Urban Robots

gusto, revelling in the futuristic implications of his cyborg ensemble.

Each of the pieces was concise and potent, and for all their diversity they functioned remarkably well as a set. (Two brief humanless works, by Brendan Adamson and R Luke DuBois, served as palate cleansers between the main items.) Factions were occasionally detectable in the audience: Some TMBG fans

checked their watches during the Thirlwell piece, just as a few among the Lewis/Subotnick contingent seemed put off by TMBG's geeky pop. But ultimately, the works were complementary rather than competitive. Despite the explicit presence of the mechanical, each composer's indelible personality prevailed.

HANK SHTEAMER

Panic Attack! Art In The Punk Years

BARBICAN ART GALLERY
LONDON, UK

Was it really punk? asked one woman after considering the Barbican's archival relics of COUM Transmissions' notorious 1976 ICA show, *Prostitution*. This, concluded her companion, was the echt horror show: mid-70s misogyny in full spate, artists vilified by the popular press and a Tory MP who called COUM "wreckers of civilisation". In a way, that train of thought was precisely what Panic Attack! sets out to incite. It argues that the most provocative art of the period existed in fraught consort with a mood of cultural, economic and moral panic. At its best, the show questions

the notion that 'punk' constituted a discrete entity or in-crowd that was simply at odds with its historical moment. Much of the art countered the popular heritage views of punk as either year-zero proposition or mere rock 'n' roll by other means, and demonstrates its historical dispersal among conceptualists, body artists, omnivorous collagists and dragged-up theorists of 'revolt into style'.

The argument is aptly illustrated, for example, by the choice of photographers. For sure, Robert Mapplethorpe's famous photograph of a rake-thin and ravishing Patti Smith deserves a place in any mapping of the art/punk nexus, as much for the associations of literary decadence her attitude conjures as for any documentary appeal. There's a case to be

made, too, that Mapplethorpe's wider oeuvre – as also that of Nan Goldin, or David Wojnarowicz's series *Arthur Rimbaud In New York* (1978–79) – is of a certain punk moment. But Victor Burgin, a photo-conceptualist whose austere conjunctions of advertising texts and documentary images seem far removed from punk as imagined by TV compilation shows, is also a rigorous guide to the cultural-political stakes of the era. And David LaMelas's 'photo-roman' *The Violent Tapes Of 1975* is a Ballardian storyboard for the dystopian futurism lived out by at least one strand of punk and post-punk culture.

And yet, and yet. It's hard not to conclude that this is mostly a reverent survey show of conceptual and performance art of the 1970s, with appliqué punk references layered on lest anyone should get the idea that art happens according to more complex processes than can be compassed by terminology that is, after all, endemic to the mainstream history of pop culture. How else to explain the persistently odd and limiting curatorial use of 'punk' as an adjective? The intensely unsettling films and videos of Hannah Wilke, in which the naked artist rehearsed familiar female poses at once craven and sinister, were "essentially punk". Raymond Pettibon's scabrous drawings were "ultimately very punk". The very notion of mid-70s social crisis was "also extremely punk". The suspicion, faced with such nomenclatural facility, is that the exhibition's central problematic has been rendered self-evident: that it was all, as ageing punks are wont to say, just 'an attitude'.

Selective catalogue-quoting is, of course, easy and invidious. But this vagueness seems

to have carried over, ruinously, into the whole organisation of the exhibition. It is unclear, for instance, why body art was in any way inherently punk: one could just as easily argue that punk consisted in an implacable *denial* of the body or an urge, faced with the slack celebrations of the 1960s, to retool it as inhuman or machinelike. An artist like Wilke thus seems stranded here, as does Paul McCarthy's hilarious *Rocky*, wherein the artist smears his genitals with tomato ketchup and proceeds to beat himself up, Stallone-style. The montagists fare no better: John Stezaker's luminous and eerie superimpositions of film stills are set adrift from his postcard works, and Linder (maybe the only real punk in the whole show) tucked in a corner, labelled something to do with the body (again) and effectively sidelined in favour of over-familiar contemporaries like Cindy Sherman.

I have to say I wanted to give in to Panic Attack!, to let its uneasy, bristling and chaotic sense of what a historical instant might mean steal up on me, unsettle alike my views of art history, music and cultural politics – to be able to say, with Jenny Holzer: "Rejoice! Our times are intolerable". In an exhibition filled with great art in the wrong place, I think it happens once. It is in front of Cerith Wyn Evans's film *Epiphany* (1984): a gorgeous layering of angelic creatures, memento mori and a blue-faced Leigh Bowery, where I have at last a vision of an artist having swallowed whole the history of the 60s (Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger) and 70s (glam, punk, Derek Jarman) in order to imagine his present decade, and much else beyond. 'Very' punk. BRIAN DILLON

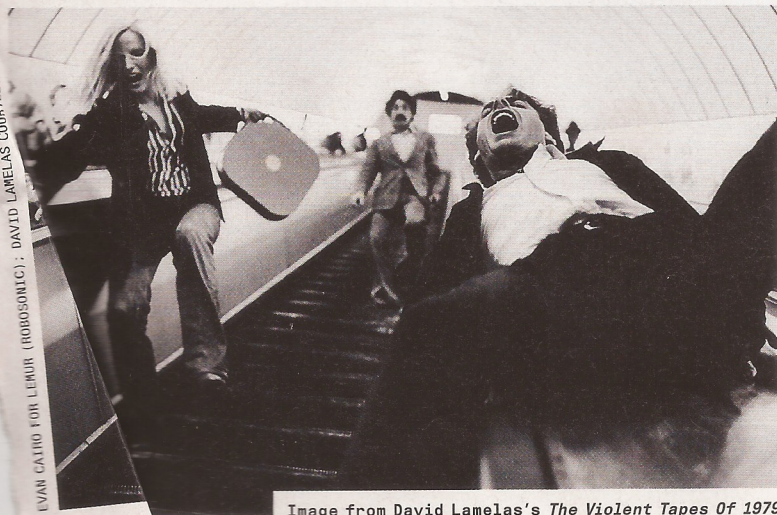


Image from David LaMelas's *The Violent Tapes Of 1975*