

## Sound Art China

West Bund, Shanghai, China

Dajun Yao, the curator of Shanghai's Sound Art China festival, has talked of the "inexplicable acoustic energy" that the city possesses, something that permeates contemporary China. Most metropolises generate a level of ground noise, but Shanghai, still in the midst of a construction boom and with many inhabitants seemingly oblivious to the mute buttons on their smartphones, emits noise at an above average level. China's first festival celebrating contemporary sound art, which was held in a former industrial area of the city during its contemporary art and architecture biennial, provided a welcome respite from the compressed audio of LCD-screen adverts that penetrates daily life here, and sought to channel this energy.

Having had its artistic slate wiped clean by the country's cultural revolution, contemporary Chinese music has instead taken centuries of foreign creativity as its inspiration. However, while this cultural absorption is plainly evident in most mainstream Chinese electronic music, a more autonomous imagination has thrived elsewhere. Ten years after Yao released

the first collection of Chinese underground electronic music, *China – The Sonic Avant-Garde*, his festival demonstrated that this level of creativity is still high, although the music produced is not without its failings.

Even though Sound Art China showcased music from both China and much further afield, it was predominantly invite-only. This meant that expanses of the vast industrial setting were unused, though this nevertheless encouraged comfortable strolling from the mega structure in the former coal-loading bay that housed architectural exhibits to the four immense oil tanks containing a collection of installations, and the main stage area overlooking the cargo ships that regularly pass along the Huangpu river.

Wang Changcun opened the festival with a high-bpm performance of breakcore and acid. In recent years Wang has moved away from feedback based compositions such as 2002's *Unhearable* and towards ground more recognisable as dance music. The humour present in his early works has remained, though now manifests itself in the Fisher Price frequencies of the sounds he employs, rather than sampled cartoon chuckles as before.

## Steve Gunn & Band

Cafe Oto, London, UK

Steve Gunn appears a slight and almost elfin presence as he stands alone in the spotlight of Cafe Oto's low stage. His slide playing introduces "Mr Franklin", taken from his solo 2009 album *Boerum Palace*. Dressed in jeans and blue shirt, it's clear he's here to play, not to put on a show. His guitar is direct and raw, rough edges of steel giving an air of spontaneity into his skilful playing, the sound soulful not studied. Where his earlier recordings, like *Boerum Palace*, showcased a virtuosity that proved he was every bit the student of Fahey, Basho, Kottke, et al as every other fingerpicker on the circuit,

last year's remarkable *Time Off* album, with a three-piece unit including regular collaborator John Truscinski, marked a shift into a more mature and direct sound, as he found a voice stronger than the influences he had absorbed.

That shift is heard in his playing tonight and in a new song and second solo number "Wildwood". Drawing on his childhood experiences of growing up in Philadelphia and exploring the Jersey Shore, its warm ragtime guitar part accompanies a lyric about a "private river" whose "flow will help you listen". It's a fitting image for Gunn's music, where the cycling riffs build a self-sustaining momentum, immersing the

The next performance, by Italian artist Marco Donnarumma, used a new, self-developed piece of motion sensing technology. Although inspiring speculation in the audience as to how the music related to his convulsive movements, the novelty of live performances of this kind can wear off swiftly, especially if the sonic result isn't completely engaging. The impeccably crafted beats of Jiang Zhuyun followed and were the highlight of the first day, reminiscent of the industrial sounds that used to inhabit the space. An audio-visual performance by student collective RMBit was based on social media, bombarding the audience with on-screen tickers of tweets as a soundtrack skipped across global musical styles. While perhaps attempting to highlight how culture can be distilled to a mass of data, the innumerable permutations of image and sound presented eventually felt more like a memory dump than a coherent artwork. The festival was keen to emphasise the importance of technology in developing sound art, but it was not until an extended performance by Carsten Nicolai, as *alva noto*, that technology was used in a focused way. Nicolai dispensed with the superfluous features of the preceding performances,

such as unnecessary visuals and attempts to traverse a number of genres, and instead focused on the clean electronic clicks and pulses he has perfected over the years.

The less accessible but more impressive second day highlighted the breadth of what can be considered sound art. Jaap Blonk used just his voice to transmit some of the festival's most unusual sounds, and Chinese noise act Torturing Nurse went as far as tying unsuspecting audience members to the stage railings during a brutal auditory barrage. The highlight of the whole festival was a synapse-shredding noise improvisation by Yan Jun. Behind a bank of hardware and directional microphones, Yan generated feedback sounds which somehow disrupted the audience's spatial awareness. After a visually stunning laser show by Dutch artist Edwin van der Heide, a performance by many of the artists' undoubted main influence followed: Merzbow, the loudest artist in the world playing in the quietest corner of the busiest city in the world. The Japanese noise pioneer's performance proved too much for many people and triggered an ear-covered flight, essentially and impressively ending the festival. Andrew Sprou

listener in a private river of sound.

The performance shifts up a gear when he's joined by his group for this tour, bassist Tommy De Nys and drummer Erik Heestermans, both from Belgium. Together they play through all bar one song from *Time Off*, starting with the rotating and revolving riffs of "Water Wheel". Neither De Nys nor Heestermans played on the studio recordings and they bring a looser and more stripped down feel to Gunn's compositions.

This suits both songs and performance. Gunn is blessed with a voice as warm and rich as Tim Buckley or a young Van Morrison. Indeed, his relaxed East Coast asides even sound like the Washington, DC

born Buckley's speaking voice. However, he eschews Buckley's acrobatics and histrionics, instead letting his voice flow into the overlapping patterns of the songs. "Street Keeper" rises and falls with Gunn's hand patrolling the neck of his guitar in precise circles. The bluesy "New Decline" is moody and sexy, Gunn switching to electric guitar to play prowling slide lines. The group close out with "Congoese Song", where Gunn adds a rippling tremolo to his electric guitar that slithers and slides with hypnotic effect through the trademark repeating riffs. As Gunn's songs and sound develop, it seems his river will continue to flow and flow. Nick Southgate

Blazing: Steve Gunn



David Laskowski