

Cross Platform

Sound in other media

Involving speaker-stack monuments, concealed pianolas and sirens, the installations and filmwork of

John Wynne

have sounded alarms across Europe.

By Clive Bell



John Wynne's work in progress

Arriving at London's Beaconsfield Gallery, a stone's throw from the Thames, I'm greeted by a flashmob of loudspeakers: 300 different shapes and sizes spread across the floor of a large, high room. In the corner, an immense pyramid stack of speakers rises to the ceiling, like a roadie's vision of Manhattan. Sound artist John Wynne and his assistant Antoine Bertin are hard at work preparing for his new site-specific installation. Wynne makes me a cup of tea and then disappears as the building's fire alarm erupts for several minutes.

"John knows a lot about alarms," says Bertin. It's true; in the past Wynne has made several controversial pieces about what he has called "auditory warnings". Made up of 25 speakers hidden under the paving stones of Copenhagen's Town Hall Square, his *Sound Of Sirens* was banned by the city council for scaring the public. *Orange Alert* was a short film satirising the US government's colour coded threat levels; when a selection of Wynne's work was screened on the BBC's Big Screen in Hull's Victoria Square in 2005, the broadcasting corporation refused to show the piece.

Likewise, Wynne's ever-expanding collection of discarded speakers, found on the street or in recycling centres, has starred in galleries before. He fills a gallery floor with speakers, so they look like some ambiguous social gathering, then suspends one extra-large speaker from the ceiling above. "You come away thinking about... the nature of adoration – why one speaker might be lifted above and worshipped by the rest of the speaker society," said *Hull Daily Mail*.

The alarm now silent, Wynne considers his speakers: "They all have personalities and histories, because of what people have done to them, even the smell. Each time I've done something with them I haven't put any metaphorical meaning into it, but people bring their own, which is fantastic. In Germany people saw references to 9/11 or the Jewish Memorial. But this piece is more about the architecture. Now we're exploring the acoustics of the place, building structures and taking them

down for three weeks. We have 32 channels of sound, so the sound will go off in different directions, moving around."

Concealed behind a wall of speakers – so the public will discover it by walking through the installation – will be a pianola, the miracle of 1920s pneumatics and paper rolls technology so popular in the parlours of our grandparents. You can power the pianola by foot-peddalling, but Wynne will most likely be driving it from a small vacuum cleaner (also reclaimed from the streets). So what's the role of these pianola rolls? "I'm not yet 100 per cent sure myself, that's the great thing about having a three week residency in this space. My original idea was to take an existing piano roll and block off all the notes except the ones that excite the resonant frequencies of the space. One of our favourites is "Gypsy Love", a series of popular songs. I could take this and play it extremely slowly, and it would probably last all day," explains Wynne.

Bertin demonstrates the pianola – "He's more musical than I am," says Wynne – adding expression to the playing by speed of pedalling and manipulation of speed levers, rather like a 1920s DJ might. Wynne was helped in buying and repairing this particular instrument by Rex Lawson, a pianola expert with a superb long white beard, who collaborated with composer Conlon Nancarrow on his player piano pieces, experimenting in musical areas beyond human capability.

"When I started researching I could see pianolas going on eBay for £1.99, so I thought surely for £100 I can get a good one. But those were badly neglected instruments. Rex knew this one was a good piano because he had done work for the previous owner. I've suggested that Beaconsfield eventually keep it here and maybe commission sound artists and composers to make pieces for it," says Wynne.

Wynne is planning to synthesize sounds that refer to train and traffic noises audible from inside the room, and then diffuse them across the space by means of a 32 channel system, employing special speaker-mapping software designed for use in large

theatres. "The way I work," says Wynne, "is not to make a piece and then figure out how it's going to be diffused around the space, the diffusion is very much part of the composition."

It's all about the acoustic properties of the room itself, and despite the colossal numbers of speakers, the results will most likely be subtle. Wynne's previous work includes *Hearing Voices*, in which large photographs (by Denise Hawrycio) showed speakers of endangered "click-languages" from the Kalahari Desert; Wynne's sound score was a stunning re-composition of sounds taken from those languages. Another show was a three-year collaboration with photographer Tim Wainwright: portraits of heart and lung transplant patients from Harefield Hospital. Again, the soundtrack was composed from patients' voices and hospital machinery, gently drawing you inside the potentially alarming hospital experience. In both cases, the visual and the sonic are inseparable.

Whether working with such documentary-type projects, or with the more purely sonic exploration of his Beaconsfield piece, Wynne believes that sound art has subtle effects on the listener. "Good sound art encourages people to listen differently, hopefully not in a didactic way. You leave a piece of sound art and you notice things in the environment that you didn't notice before. It happens to me, particularly in the case of the alarm work. I went around the city and I was constantly hearing my piece!

"This morning I was reading a section in a book [*Spaces Speak: Are You Listening?* by Barry Blesser & Linda-Ruth Salter, MIT Press 2007] about people singing in the shower and using resonant tones. We live in a Victorian block near a school, and there was one kid down there singing a note over and over again. It was driving me crazy! Then I realised he was doing exactly what I was reading about at that moment. He'd discovered the resonant tone of the playground area and he was amazed at how loud he could be." □ John Wynne's Beaconsfield residency culminates with the installation *Soundtrap IV: Bouncing Off The Walls*, 8 September–18 October. sensitivebrigade.com