

KEN HOLLINGS

THE SPIRIT HORNS STUDIO

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RMEDL | METASOUND - MetaCuratorial Practice Platform, its a inner organization of RM-ED/L, constituted for the experimentation of conceptual/projectual methodologies for the production, communication and development of contemporary art events connected to the art of listening/sound art, through the construction of meta-curatorial artistic practices focused on extreme, transgressive, unorthodox, experimental and avantgardistic music researches, linked to many fields of human expressions and media art involved in new kinds of languages and settings of the communication. A freelancer based organisation conceived as a meta-curatorial platform that deals in design of independent ways of practice of curating, based on the development of conceptual sound art researches, environmental music, audio-visual installations and extra-acoustic experiences, close to visual and performing arts, joined to unconventional and "extended" techniques of production for multidisciplinary projects, conceived as special programmatic events and collectable art editions, to promote cultural acknowledgements for artistic practices.

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A couple of weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting the amazing studio of composer Aleksander Kolkowski in the company of EVP researcher and recording artist Michael Esposito. During the course of the afternoon I recorded a short reading from *Welcome to Mars* onto an Edison phonograph under Aleksander's supervision, then Michael ran an EVP session in the studio immediately afterwards with some fascinating results. You can read a full account of what happened by [clicking here](#) and [here](#). I thought Found Objects regulars might be interested in some views of the studio, and the collection of mechanical sound reproduction devices, horns and wax cylinders that Aleks has created there, so here you go. The bottom image of the four shows Michael holding his MP3 machine up one of the phonograph horns suspended from the ceiling in a gesture that is as evocative as it is symbolic.

I recently had the pleasure of spending an intriguing afternoon with EVP researcher and recording artist Michael Esposito at the amazing studio of the composer Aleksander Kolkowski. Regular readers of this blog may recall that Michael was responsible with Carl Michael von Hausswolff for issuing *The Ghosts of Effingham*: a set of EVP recordings inscribed onto an Edison wax cylinder which also glowed in the dark. An enthused researcher of the machine's ability to reproduce sound, Aleksander's creations include *Mechanical Landscape with Bird* – an extraordinary work for canaries, 'serinette', cylinder players and string quartet playing Stroh violins, Stroh viola and Stroh 'Japanese Fiddle'. His work has also been featured in *The Wire*.

On a visit to London from his home in Chicago, Michael had already made an arrangement with Aleks to run an EVP recording session at the studio, which is an Aladdin's cave of working cylinder players, amplifying horns for gramophones and radios, antique musical instruments, sheet music, pictures and shelves full of books and old recordings. You can get some idea of the fabulous clutter in the photographs above – although I will be posting some more detailed glimpses of the studio contents on the Found Objects blog in the next day or so. The reason for my presence was a standing invitation from Aleks to make a wax cylinder of a reading from *Welcome to Mars* as part of his continuing archive of such recordings. This seemed like the perfect opportunity, especially since Michael and I had been in contact at the end of last year while I was writing my piece of Edison and ghosts for the January 2011 issue of *The Wire*. Michael was particularly intrigued by the presence of so many gramophone horns in the room, especially some of the larger, more elaborate ones hanging from the ceiling. 'They remind me of the spirit horns that mediums would use at séances in the early part of the twentieth century,' he observed. Once we had regained some of our composure after first entering this modernist wunderkammer, Michael and I tried to work out with Aleks what was the best way to proceed. I offered to step aside so they could get on with making EVP recordings. 'Actually it would be better if you went first,' Michael replied. 'Your reading will

warm the room up a bit and make it more responsive.’

But first the Edison machine itself had to be warmed up: I practised my short reading while Aleks switched on a lamp over the cylinder, set it spinning and waited for the wax to soften before a recording could take place. It had never occurred to me that the voice was inscribed into a soft substance – I always had an idea of it being carved out of something brittle and hard. My second misconception was over how to approach a horn rather than a microphone. Working with mikes, you want to keep your face back from it in order to avoid popping and paper rustling – and after two days of recording my recent Essay series for Radio 3, I was more aware of that than ever. Instead Aleks was constantly instructing to get my face as far into the horn as possible while still being able to read from the copy of *Welcome to Mars* I had brought with me – images of Jean Cocteau leaning forward reciting poetry into the elaborate horn megaphone in production stills for *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* filled my head as I struggled to keep the page in focus out of the corner of my right eye and read out loud at the same time.

Aleksander had also stipulated that I would have to speak very slowly and very clearly and enunciate every last syllable. The device, it turns out, really does have formality built into it: you find yourself addressing it, rather than some unseen audience. We recorded a two-minute cylinder, waited for it to cool down and then played it back on a separate machine mounted with a massive horn. I have never heard my voice sounding like that before – normally I cannot bear to hear it, but the grain that a cylinder recording brings introduces to your words makes them sound completely different – ‘other’. It does not copy, simulate or even echo you; it is a separate entity – something that comes from the machine and only from the machine. The clicks and pops formed an unexpected accompaniment to my delivery – I was enthralled by the whole thing.

Michael had been taking photographs all the way through my reading and added the occasional encouraging smile and thumbs-up sign as it unfolded. Aleksander was also pleased with the way the reading came out – and at some point it’s going to form part of an online archive of recordings featuring many different composers, writers and musicians. There will, of course, be more on this project posted here as and when information becomes available. Right now, however, it was time for Michael to prepare the room for his extraordinary EVP session. What happened next, however, really deserves a post of its own – and I shall be only too happy to supply you with it ... soon.

The story so far: EVP researcher and recording artist Michael Esposito and I are on a visit to the studio of composer Aleksander Kolkowski, which is packed with the most remarkable collection of antique sound production equipment. Now that I have recorded a text onto one of Aleksander’s vintage Edison phonographs, the room is now ready for Michael to conduct an EVP session.

Michael had brought a small MP3 recorder with him, and there followed a deep discussion between him and Aleksander over what software platforms to use in order to process the EVP files he was about to make. As I still regard ProTools with a respect verging on religious awe, having witnessed it clean up and shape too many recorded interviews in the past to think of it in any other way, I refrained from taking part in this part of the proceedings. After a break for tea and a chance for Michael to smoke a quick cigarette out on the balcony above the studio, we went back inside to find the mood in the room had changed appreciably. Michael had used the MP3 recorder only a couple of days before at the home of Mike Harding, cofounder of the ParaPsychic Acoustic Research Cooperative (PARC), as part of an EVP session, and the device had started running wild: the signal kept switching back and forth across the left and right channels during the recording. Michael played it back to us, and the air seemed to vibrate and pulse around the little handheld machine. This was going to be interesting, I thought. For the first part of the session Michael asked Aleksander to switch on

two of his Edison phonograms, one set to record and the other to play back, and leave the cylinders spinning for the duration, not playing or recording anything but just set in motion. The result was an eerie seething sound, made all the more churning and oppressive by the fact that the three of us conducted the entire session standing in silence. Edison never intended these machines to record silence – the last words and final breath of the dying perhaps, but never silence. The phonographs' smooth grinding continued as Michael would ask an occasional question of the room. 'Who are you?' Pause. 'Is there anything you want?' Pause. 'Is there anything you recognize?' He shifted the recorder around from machine to machine – 'Use the spirit horns if you have something to say,' he politely suggested, indicating some of the equipment assembled about us.

I remain completely open-minded on the subject of EVP; although an aunt, of whom I was very fond, had been a practising clairaudient for much of her life. Even so, looking around Aleksander's studio, I really wanted these machines to offer up their voices. We played the five-minute recording back, Michael listening intently, picking out phrases, boosting the signal and playing them that. He made a note of the statement 'I'm Jacob' and suggested we focus on that for the second part of the session. I could not always make out the phrases and statements Michael stopped at and replayed and was prepared to say so – the experience was enough, however, to see that the best recording artists are the ones who, however instinctively, treat their equipment as if it were a living organism rather than a mere assemblage of parts. 'Wow. Did you hear that?' Michael suddenly asked, bringing us back to the present. No – play it again. 'That time?' No sorry – again. And then, on the third replay I heard it – a dry phantom voice emerging from the background hiss of the room, stating very slowly and deliberately: 'I want... the machine...to work.'

After that we really needed to take another short break, just to get out of the room and clear our heads and breathe some air that was a little less charged. 'If you ran sessions in this place on a regular basis, 'Michael pointed out as we sat together in the kitchen 'this whole space would get much hotter. You'd get more and better messages the more often you recorded here.' It's clear that this has become a regular discipline for him – a kind of training of the sensibilities that connects him to spaces and machines in a very subtle way, sometimes even taking over his personality. He spoke a little about getting 'jumped' when a session can suddenly take you over, altering your behaviour and even your appearance. He said it had happened one or two times over the past eight years or so. The experience did not sound pleasant.

Back in Aleksander's studio, the second session took place in silence with all the devices switched off. Aleks and I tried taking a few photographs of Michael in action, working with the room, placing the machine inside the phonograph horns suspended from the ceiling, but we soon stopped. The stillness of a room in which three relative strangers are standing together in silence is already a very moving thing. It seems to grow around you. Michael asked some questions of Jacob – to see what kind of response he might get. The apparently one-sided exchange with the room in which answers only emerge afterwards – in 'machine time', as it were – was solemn and disturbing all at the same time. 'Did you die in this room?' Michael asked at one point, making me feel happy for the first time that it wasn't my room he was recording in. But then we rarely know about the rooms that strangers have died in – any building in existence can have witnessed the deaths of many people before you ever come to it.

This was a shorter and far more intense session – I was amazed however when I checked my watch to discover that several hours had already passed. By then Michael and Aleksander were already hunched over a Mac, running the two recordings through different software to clean up and clarify the recordings. Voices were slowly emerging from the amplified hiss and background hum of the room. 'They hide in the cracks,' Michael commented as Aleksander highlighted and amplified a wave form, stretching it out. 'They hide right down inside the

sound itself.' That humans and machines interact with each other to produce some form of alien – or other – consciousness remains an intriguing proposition. To me, it opens up the possibility that a new kind of audiovisual poetry might emerge – or at the very least be better understood. I watched and listened at a respectful distance as Aleks and Michael worked together – the results were fascinating, but it was soon time for me to go. I said my goodbyes during one of Michael's cigarette breaks. By then it was nightfall and growing quite cold. Aleksander and I joined Michael out of the balcony one last time, watching the landing lights of passenger planes cut through the dark clouds on their way to Heathrow.

Michael and Aleksander are currently still at work on the recordings – Aleks having in the meantime run then through his Edison phonographs. The process is still continuing, so look out for further posts on the session in due course.











Pictured above:

Ken Hollings recording an extract from '1947: Rebuilding Lemuria', the first chapter of Welcome to Mars, pp 4-5, with Aleksander Kolkowski busy at the Edison phonograph: all photos taken by Michael Esposito.

Michael Esposito and Aleksander Kolkowski prepare the room for the EVP session; Michael playing back the first recording; Michael and Aleksander listening in; Michael with one of the phonograph horns during the second recording (photo by Aleksander).

For more pictures of Aleksander's wonderful studio on the Found Objects blog, please click here. <http://found0bjects.blogspot.com/2011/04/spirit-horn-studio.html>

Note: Ken Hollings is a writer based in London. This article was originally published in his own blog:
KEN HOLLINGS – INFORMATION AS ART FORM | <http://kenhollings.blogspot.it>