

Colour Out Of Space Festival
SALLIS BENNEY THEATRE
BRIGHTON, UK

With a name borrowed from an H. P. Lovecraft story in which a meteorite crashes to earth, bringing with it a toxic substance of an indescribable colour, no doubt we were intended to assume that the content of Brighton's second Colour Out Of Space festival came direct from the outermost limits, and that, at the very least, our ears were going to hurt. The truth was not nearly so extreme, and all the better for it: whilst there was certainly noise aplenty, the schedule also offered a generous variety of vocal hijinks from the avant garde (anti)establishment, along with a host of sounds from newer outfits mixing analogue instrumentation and electronics to interesting effect.

The festival was largely programmed in 25 minute slots, and within this structure most acts chose to present a single piece that focused upon an idea rather than pursuing its development. In certain cases this focus was definitely warranted: repetition lay at the heart of Family Underground's glorious industrial psychedelia and Jazzfinger's primitive, bowed drones. However, perhaps because lo-fi electronic manipulation can result in the repetition of sounds of a certain texture, and noise or skronk without nuances of form can become blurred, it is the exceptions that lodge in the memory. The Vitamin B12 eschewed the stage and gleefully ran amok throughout the theatre, bar and garden, taking the crowd by surprise, as they got to work on a peculiar range of instruments and found objects. Meanwhile, the entirely opposite approach was adopted in Orphan Fairytale's solo set, which was an exemplary demonstration of structured improvisation. Having something of the fairground about it, it began with the brightly-clad Eva van Deuren's backwards flip into a crab form, and developed purposively from a joyful intensity that seemingly morphed mynah birds and space invaders, to something altogether slower and darker, and finally evolved via a clumsy lurch into a sound reminiscent of an off-kilter choir.

As is the norm at such events, perhaps with their conscious refusal of rock's posturing, many 'performers' had their backs to the audience, or allowed long hair to shield them from our gaze. Although we have come to expect this, it results in a curious anti-performance: we watch when, in fact, there is nothing to see. Edinburgh duo Usurper seemed alert to this: they settled themselves in front of the stage and produced an intimate set that allowed us to view the unfolding dynamics of their improvisation as they played (in both senses of the word) with stones and balloons, and even incorporated the squeak of their sneakers on the wooden flooring. Berlin's Raionbashi and Kutzkelina also attended to the performative, beginning with some self-conscious on-stage delay in which he drank vodka from a plastic cup whilst she plaited her long blonde hair and then wound it carefully around her head. Finally, stepping up to the spot-lit mic, Kutzkelina placed her hands on her hips and let rip with some perfectly astonishing yodelling; delayed, looped and treated by Raionbashi, it built powerfully into a siren wail.

Ultimately, it was the vocalists who provided the festival highlights. A visibly frail Henry Chopin, now 85, struggled upright from his wheelchair to deliver a plosive verbal performance, at times probing his clothing with the mic, whilst seemingly conducting his own efforts with a preternaturally extended forefinger. On another occasion, the stage was massed with Phil Minton's Feral Choir. The name suggests those half-wild urban creatures – canny urban foxes, aggressive seagulls or the scabby pigeons under railway bridges – and the group, who had come together during an afternoon workshop, seemed wholly animal as they murmured, shrieked and ululated to each other, with Minton acting as pack leader to their motley colony. Later, Dutch composer/sound poet Jaap Blonk, having begun with a thoughtful text on the very act of listening went on to put his gymnastic vocals through their paces, culminating in an engaging work for 'cheek synthesiser'. His spirited performance appeared to leave most of the audience grinning with delight, an image that summed up this good-humoured festival.

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