

Heart & Soul

Is it art or is it noise?
Marina Galperina
gets lost in sound.



Pharmakon's scream melted the speaker. It growled out of her chest, ripped through the listeners and crashed to the ceiling of Basilica Hudson, a giant 19th-century glue factory-turned-music venue. To feel this violent ecstasy, most of the attendant crowd of several hundred had travelled two hours north by train out of New York City to Hudson. To them, 'noise music' and 'sound art' were just labels. No one cared that the world-famous artist Matthew Barney was quietly eating noodles by the bar. They just wanted to hear his piece.

The speaker was replaced, and Barney's composer, Jonathan Bepler, took to the floor. He conducted four different acts, all playing simultaneously from the opposite corners of the factory: a grindcore band, a singer with a violinist, a dark electronic DJ and Pharmakon. All very loud.

Brandon Stosuy, an organizer of Basilica SoundScape art and music festival and Barney and Bepler's collaborator on this piece, has been friends with Barney for a decade, since the artist was scuttling up the Vaseline-covered walls of New York's Guggenheim Museum for his video epic *The Cremaster Cycle*. Barney's *Cremaster* props now go for tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars at auctions; he is as big-time as they come. 'We recently turned down doing something in a museum because he felt like it wasn't respecting the music,' Stosuy says.

A month before Basilica SoundScape, at the opening night of the 'Soundings' exhibition at MoMA, the noise was different. Guests schmoozed over wine. It was great to see so much hype over an under-represented art genre. I had been especially waiting to see

A/ON (2006) by Berlin-based Danish sound artist Jacob Kirkegaard. *A/ON* uses field recordings of abandoned rooms in Chernobyl, played back into the room, the accumulating sound re-recorded and played back, again and again, until the subtle hum grows thick and tense with the spatial frequency of the dead room. But I couldn't hear it over the party chatter.

'I am not sure if noise as art is really something that works in a museum setting,' Pharmakon's younger sister, artist Jane Chardiet says. She's referring to another piece, American artist Tristan Perich's *Microtonal Wall* (2011) in which 1,500 calibrated speakers producing a heavily textured wall of white noise. 'I saw people whizzing past the speakers, just laughing and talking and not even attempting to really absorb the piece,' she recalls, horrified.

SO HARSH, SO PRETTY

Jane Chardiet has been booking noise shows in New York for four years, the kind of shows outsiders don't go to. She's a regular at Fitness in Brooklyn ('Where else?'), a basement under a makeshift art gallery, where she recently had a few friends booked for a show. Saran Man, wrapped in cellophane, played rhythmic tape loops. Shannon Kennedy, half of the experimental music duo Pedestrian Deposit, hung a miked string across the room. 'She played the string with her body while the band manipulated the sounds. The set was so harsh, so pretty.'

Noise is hard. Not 'difficult' in the way critics like to refer to conceptual art pieces – noise is literally hard to tolerate. It twists your bones around, a purely visceral thing, alive and frantic.

Noise simply doesn't want to go to the museum. Most of the show curators I talked to recall the time Yellow Tears tore up the Whitney Museum in 2010, assaulting the museum with violent soundscapes and pissing in blacklit miked bowls. That's a lot less polite than Marina Abramović sitting quietly at MoMA for a few months.

NOISE DAD SAYS NO

'Yellow Tears was pretty heavy stuff. A lot of extreme things can happen when you get permission,' experimental musician Bob Bellerue tells me. 'Chris Burden is now a huge name in the art world, but when he was getting started, he was an outsider doing the freakiest thing anyone has ever seen.' In 1971, Burden had himself shot in the arm inside a gallery but today there's a retrospective of his work at the New Museum

in New York: 'Now, he can do anything he wants.'

They call Bellerue 'Noise Dad' at Silent Barn, a Brooklyn venue where he and his son's mother, choreographer Wanda Gala, have an artist residency. A few years ago, they operated out of a squat in Los Angeles where I saw my first noise shows. 'That conceptual critical dialogue thing involves using a lot of big words to legitimize something that could be created by a lot of other people in a lot of other environments,' Bellerue says. He doesn't go out much to 'hoity-toity' art events. 'There's experimentation in the art world, but behind it all is a capitalist money structure. In the noise world, there isn't that. People do things for the joy of creation.'

Noise Dad may disagree but the noise community and the art scene do mix sometimes. Quietly. At the Silent Barn show organized in conjunction with the MoMA exhibition, Jacob Kirkegaard performed with recordings of Icelandic volcanoes, and Lesley Flanigan played a glass sculpture, cutting apart the sounds of melting icebergs. 'The "scene" is very supportive here,' Stosuy tells me.

'I feed off community,' Chardiet admits. 'I think a lot of artists do, that's why "non-venues" are so important and it sucks that New York doesn't have more.' So what's beyond the Brooklyn basement?

'In Carrboro, North Carolina, there's a cluster of 15 people who host one of the best noise festivals in the country,' Chardiet tells me. 'There are insanely talented performers like Visk, who produces sounds by sewing and piercing her own flesh and playing with the audience's spit... in a coffee shop. Because that is possible there.'

'New York isn't the centre of every world,' Chardiet continues. 'It is actually really hard for me to book noise shows here.' Soaring rent is a distracting pressure. Cops shut down squatting noise shows, real venues don't want to host them, and no one makes money. But noise isn't big art and it isn't supposed to make big money. It's about the joy of creation. As much as we can give. As long as we can take it. ❧

