

The Ruse.

In 1913 the first performance of Erik Satie's *Le piège de Méduse* ('The Ruse of Medusa') took place in a private salon somewhere in Paris. The absurdist play is a collection of nine comical scenes acted out as a series of short dances. Satie, who played the music for this intimate debut, shoved pieces of paper between the piano strings to give the music a more 'mechanical' sound. Satie's performance would precede John Cage's more famous employment of the technique of 'prepared piano' by more than 25 years. *Le piège de Méduse* is said to have been written as an 'absurdist spoof' on the popular historic genre of melodrama. Its most famous public incantation took place at Black Mountain College in 1948, almost 25 years after Satie's death, Cage played the piano.<sup>i</sup>

Melodrama is not a word that echoes lightly in the hallowed white cube.<sup>ii</sup> We trust in our pious institution to purge itself of spectacles of sentimental theatricality that give way to moral conservatism and to instead allow 'the artworks, like religious verities [...] to appear untouched by time and its vicissitudes.' When the histrionics of theatre are permitted to enter the gallery, it is to expose their felicitous theft of 'spectator' agency. We rage on from 'Inside the White Cube' (1976!),<sup>iii</sup> fighting for our collective elevation from spectator to participant. Is this the call to which Dylan Sheridan responds with an exhibition —his first in the white cube context— exploring misophonia? Is Sheridan riotous at the fuzzy static of the contemporary artspace, that in an attempt to muscle in on the disastrous success of 'fake news' must propose itself 'a transformative threshold addressing ideas of truth and fiction, perception and abstraction...'? Or is it the re, re, re, relentless consideration of 'the role of the spectator as an active agent in a world in which we are all actors...'<sup>iv</sup> another wall-washer-white-light interrogation in search of the 'real' that routinely relegates the contemporary art space's black box neighbour a repository of spectacular deceit...?

Walking the distinct path that Sheridan has scripted through the cube of artistic agency I am ready for the exhibition that promises to expose the 'theatrical facade of Sheridan's oeuvre to reveal the 'nuts and bolts' (real?) of his creations under the omnipresent scrutiny of the 'white-cube.'<sup>v</sup> I take up my rights as participant and step methodically through my most practiced and thoughtful gallery exploration, more aware of myself than ever before. I am surrounded by an almost symmetrical orchestral configuration of surrealist characters; one ticks, one turns, one rings, one frantically seizes smashing itself to pieces at seemingly random intervals. I am immersed in a cacophony of mechanical sounds as a host of robot musicians, pinned to the walls like twitching insects for my examination, at a comfortable viewing height of 1.6 metres, tune up in anticipation. Sheridan has autopsied his theatre musicians. Defying melodrama's clumsy romance he has opened the orchestra up so that we might better understand the complexity of its characters.

### **What I Am**

Everyone will tell you that I am not a musician. That is correct.

From the very beginning of my career I classed myself as a phonometrographer. My work is completely phonometrical. Take my *Fils des Étoiles* [this evening's program], or my

Morceaux en Forme de Poire [program of August 23 and 24], my En habit de Cheval [August 23 and 24] or my Sarabandes [this evening's program] — it is evident that musical ideas played no part whatsoever in their composition. Science is the dominating factor.

Besides, I enjoy measuring a sound much more than hearing it. With my phonometer in my hand, I work happily and with confidence.

What haven't I weighed or measured? I've done all Beethoven, all Verdi, etc. It's fascinating.

The first time I used a phonoscope, I examined a B flat of medium size. I can assure you that I have never seen anything so revolting. I called in my man to show it to him.

On my phono-scales a common or garden F sharp registered 93 kilos. It came out of a fat tenor whom I also weighed.

Do you know how to clean sounds? It's a filthy business. Stretching them out is cleaner; indexing them is a meticulous task and needs good eyesight. Here, we are in the realm of phonotechnique.

...

Erik Satie, excerpt from 'What I Am' (1912)<sup>vi</sup>

'What I Am' is a series of poems-as-mock-scientific-articles that Satie published as *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*. The poems promise an examination of music that is 'scientific' only to unravel in absurdity. The set-up is beautiful, even as we know are being played, the idea of weighing a fat b-flat is so evocative of a droning, flatulent b-flat sound, that we read with more seriousness than is, in retrospect, warranted. What does Sheridan expose in the splicing and lighting of his musicians? Perhaps he finds, exactly as his title suggests, that his orchestra is empty.

Sheridan's orchestration is impeccable. His programmed musicians respond accordingly to his signals, I respond accordingly to his musicians and the artist responds accordingly to his context. Sheridan's lies are safe and so is the theatre. The pinning of cords and the thinning of players is a delicately constructed ruse and it is the farce of the omnipresence of the white cube that is scrutinised. Sheridan —his performance meticulous as always— composes an absurdist play on contemporary art and its churches. Reminiscent of Satie's short dances, the punctuating details that burst forth from the musicians —a fork dragged across the surface of a ceramic plate, the clicking of a rotary telephone dial, the sliding of a metal coat hanger on a rail— 'combined into a sonic choreography of non-linear counterpoint' assume a tongue-in-cheek formality designed to excite the emboldened spectator. Behind the curtain —behind these sounds, misophonia, non-linear counterpoint— remains Np423's rhythmic structure. This structure offers what is truly ubiquitous, the master-creator-conductor-controller: Sheridan.

Sheridan's lucid imagination, his romantic inclination and his captivating performance presence are not 'nuts-and-bolts' to be revealed. His creations are not wires and screws and switches and circuit boards. His creations are the nights he spends in the gallery, tinkering, repairing, reprogramming. In and out of the storeroom with pliers and cables and tape. His creation is an audience that wonders if the robot musicians are in fact responding to their bodies in the gallery space? An audience poised for the next burst of frenetic smashing, of splattering paint, of ticking

and banging and chiming. Sheridan's creation is a participant turned spectator who revels in the opportunity to be wondrous and delighted.

<sup>i</sup> Satie's spoof, *Le piège de Méduse*, is playing in Chicago at the same time as Sheridan's *Np423: empty orchestra* is playing for the first time in the gallery. Josh Flanders begins the Chicago Reader's, Arts and Culture review, writing: 'When you enter the Chopin Theatre for *The Ruse of Medusa*, it may sound like a half-dozen wild monkeys are performing a musical cacophony on piano, strings, and horns because they are. Settle in for an hour of wild antics, visual and aural stimulation, screaming (both human and monkey), and total silliness. Written by Erik Satie in 1913, this lyrical comedy is one of the first plays to contain absurdist and surreal elements predating the start of dadaism.'

[ARTS & CULTURE | THEATER REVIEW, March 08, 2019, https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/ruse-of-medusa-facility-theatre/Content?oid=68834821](https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/ruse-of-medusa-facility-theatre/Content?oid=68834821)

<sup>ii</sup>

The logic of melodrama that Satie so reviled is what Peter Brooks has described as 'the logic of the excluded middle.' This logic demands the extraction of complexity to make way for the assertion of an individually ascribed moral ethics where the sacred has been lost. Tracing the origins of Melodrama to the epistemological moment of the French revolution, '...the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch),' Brooks locates melodrama as mired, along with the rest of us, in the romantic sensibility. Brooks understands romanticism as signaling the beginning of a modernist art that tried and failed to bridge the void left by the shattering of the hierarchical social cohesion of the revolution. Peter Brooks, 'The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess.' New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976

<sup>iii</sup>

Brian O'Doherty, 'Inside the White cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space', Santa Monica and San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1976

<sup>iv</sup>

These quotes are from the e-flux online write up of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's (ACCA) recent Macfarlane Commissions, 'The Theatre is Lying' December 15, 2018–March 24, 2019. ACCA is housed next door to the Malthouse Theatre. <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/228636/the-theatre-is-lying/>

<sup>v</sup>

Contemporary Art Tasmania - room sheet for Dylan Sheridan's *Np423: empty orchestra*, 2019

<sup>vi</sup>

Paul Zukofsky 'Satie Notes', June 2011, <http://www.musicalobservations.com/publications/satie.html>

These 'Satie Notes' are a revised version of a program booklet that Zukofsky created for the 1991 'Summergarden Concert Series' for the Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Caroline Potter, 'Erik Satie: Music, Art and Literature', Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013

'Documents of Dada and Surrealism: Dada and Surrealist Journals' in the Mary Reynolds Collection at the IRENE E. HOFMANN. Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150212081937/http://www.artic.edu/reynolds/essays/hofmann2.php#>

Erik Satie, 'The Individual' on the *Pianonoise* website: <https://www.pianonoise.com/Composer.Satie.htm>