



Sonic Anchor #7 Review

Da Xiao: Faking it

Text: Samson Young

Composer, sound artist and media artist. Received training in computer music and composition at Princeton University under the supervision Paul Lansky. Currently an assistant professor at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong. Principle investigator at the Laboratory for Ubiquitous Musical Expression (L.U.M.E), and artistic director of experimental sound advocacy organisation Contemporary Musiking.

“Every performance is to some degree ‘faked’ – nobody goes out on stage and sings about exactly what they did and felt that day.”
– Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor

Barker’s statement seems obvious enough. Performing is not being – it is a very specific state of (constructed) being, in specific performative contexts. Yet in the world of music, we cling to the notion of the authentic performer or performances. We respect musicians for “keeping it real”, for not “selling out”. This quest for authenticity is of particular concern in popular music genres. Kurt Cobain is “real” for many, and Justin Bieber isn’t. This obsession for the real is quite understandable in the context of popular culture consumption: to proclaim one’s love of a musician or a band is an act of self-identification, a confession, an open display of taste. Perhaps the key word here is consumption: the punk rock kid next door with a 10-inch Mohawk certainly isn’t any closer to self-actualisation than you are – he just doesn’t know it yet.

And now, on Da Xiao’s performance: his Sonic Anchor offering had a certain punkish quality of DIY ethic to it. Da Xiao performs with DIY re-wired electronic devices and open circuits. He touches these open circuits with his hand and his body, allowing electricity to be conducted through his skin. These circuits are re-routed to an array of effect pedals. There is a long tradition of musicians performing with re-wired sound-making devices. The sonic outcome of such acts is hyper-physical, often unpredictable, yet extremely nuanced. Da Xiao’s sound is not so nuanced: the noise texture lacked colour and complexity, and after a while it felt more like an imposition than immersion. Da Xiao had unfortunately burnt out one of his tactile circuit instruments minutes before the show. Technical hiccups are commonplace in live situations, but Da Xiao’s choice to not reveal this information prior to the performance is an

interesting one. He was, as it were, “faking it” the best he could given the circumstances. Regardless of the sonic outcome, the performance was an admirable athletic display.

I have stopped caring whether somebody is an authentic {insert-genre-here} artist a long time ago, because it is about historic precedence and social expectations, not the artistic quality and rigour of a piece of work. Some of that concern for authenticity has seeped into the less profitable genres of artistic pursuit such as sound art as well. This is perhaps due to the fact that many early practitioners of sound art were closely associated with the musical subcultures. I certainly hope that one day we will arrive at a place where sound art is less about identification and inclusion, but the appreciation and production of auditory nuances.

About Sonic Anchor

Sonic Anchor is an experimental music and sound art concert series jointly presented by Contemporary Musiking (CM) and the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Sonic Anchor advocates, encourages, and cultivates experiments in sound and music. Taking full advantage of the intimate setting of the McAulay Studio, Sonic Anchor brings curious audience and adventurous artists together, to enter into a conversation of mutual discovery and respect. Please visit www.hkac.org.hk and contemporarymusiking.com for details

Sonic Anchor #10 will be held on 26 Mar. Please refer to p. 34 for details

Co-presenter:

