

AV FESTIVAL 2014: EXTRACTION

TEST DEPARTMENT

IT'S SOMETHING OF A COUP FOR THE AV FESTIVAL ORGANISERS TO COMMISSION TEST DEPT TO CLOSE OUT THIS YEAR'S PROGRAMME, BUT AS **LEE FISHER** FINDS OUT IN CONVERSATION WITH COLLECTIVE MEMBER GRAY CUNNINGTON, IT'S ALSO A PERFECT FIT

Test Department were one of the most musically and politically radical outfits of the eighties and beyond, their harsh metallic rhythms and strong working class politics coming into sharp focus in the appalling social upheaval of the Miner's Strike, which has its 30th anniversary this year. That AV has commissioned them to provide a powerful end to this year's festival, with its theme of Extraction, is a master stroke and it's exciting to see the core members of the collective working on something new under the Test Department name for the first time this century. I asked Gray Cunnington about what they had in mind for their 'intervention'. "The idea is to reanimate Dunston Staiths as a monument to the mining industry and the miners' strike. The Staiths is the last monument to the industry on the Tyne. It's interesting how since the strike the whole mining industry has been wiped from the face of the map. The audience will take a boat down the river and look at the Staiths from the river side where we'll use film and light and sound to bring a little bit of that story to life. It's an intervention into the Staiths, as opposed to a live concert, partly because of the state of the structure and partly because we didn't want to just come up and be Test Dept again." The event, which has been in development since 2012, hasn't been without its logistical problems, including issues with the Tyne bridges, which will need to be raised and lowered numerous times during the three nights the intervention is taking place. But Test Dept have a long history of large scale site specific work dating back to the miners' strike. I asked Gray about the impact the strike had on the group. "It focussed our attention, we were already politically motivated but we looked at things in a more dispassionate way, in a similar way to Laibach - we looked at power and ways of manipulating it. But the miners' strike made us realise we had to get real, in a way." Getting real in this case involved organising benefits, encouraging the formation of the

South Wales Striking Miners Choir (with whom they recorded the *Shoulder To Shoulder* benefit album) and engaging with mining communities across the UK. The group's archive footage of that period (including film from benefit gigs in Newcastle) will make up part of the intervention. Gray is at pains to make it clear that they're not, literally, bringing coals to Newcastle. "It's not for us to come up and talk about the mining industry in the North East, because we're not from there. So while we're trying to connect it with the area as much as possible, we're also looking at our connection with it and the 30th anniversary of the strike." Gray reflected at length about the incredible community action he witnessed during the strike and how so much of that is now lost. "The communities built up around the mining and shipbuilding industry are what's most sadly lost. These communities were so solid during the strike, that experience showed the sense of community at its fullest. After the pits closed the villages fell into disrepair and the drugs and the social problems moved in. There are strong communities still, but in general there isn't anything to hold it together so much anymore, because of the wholesale dismantling of the manufacturing base in Britain, turning it into a service industry country, none of which encourages solidarity... beyond the occasional paintballing trip."

Test Dept at Dunston Staiths takes place on Thursday 27th until Saturday 29th March. A book about Test Dept, *Total State Machine*, will be published in June by PC Press.

www.avfestival.co.uk
www.testdept.org.uk

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Dunston Staiths

THEMED WEEKENDS

WHILE AV RUNS THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE OF MARCH WITH EXHIBITIONS IN PLACE ACROSS THE WHOLE REGION, IT ALSO HAS A SERIES OF THEMED WEEKENDS IN THE BUILD UP TO TEST DEPT'S DUNSTON STAITHS INTERVENTION AT THE FESTIVAL'S END



OPENING WEEKEND (SATURDAY 1ST - SUNDAY 2ND MARCH)

At the heart of the opening weekend is Akio Suzuki, perhaps best known in the UK as a pioneering sound artist but across the last six decades he has involved himself in all manner of disciplines from visual art to instrument building. Described by musician and critic David Toop as 'a magician', Suzuki brings his playfulness and invention to a number of events this weekend. Throughout the festival, a piece called *ot-date* Newcastle is in place, a guided walk across Newcastle that encourages people to stop and engage with their surroundings each time they come across one of Suzuki's trademark ear symbols, and on Saturday 1st March Suzuki and collaborator Aki Onda will personally lead a tour of some of the locations featured.

That same evening, Suzuki appears in *Solo Performance* at the Castle Keep, using a combination of handmade instruments and natural or historical objects rendered musical by Suzuki. The following evening Onda joins him at BALTIC for an extended and mobile piece. Onda's tape manipulations accompanying Suzuki's instrumental inventions and interactions with the performance space. The rest of the weekend is dominated by cinema or film-based performance, including the first part of Wang Bing's epic *West Of The Tracks* film at the Tyneside Cinema and

Showshadows Surrounded By Obscurity, an 'immersive 16mm projector performance' at BALTIC from Bruce McLure, a piece Rebecca Shatwell was particularly excited about: "I really like the way he's really taken the theme on board, responding to this notion that the ideal cinema experience is an underground cinema cave with people sitting on boulders watching a screen carved out of rock".

POST-COLONIAL CINEMA WEEKEND

(FRIDAY 7TH - SUNDAY 9TH MARCH)

The second weekend of the festival has a theme of post-colonial cinema and primarily takes place at the Star & Shadow Cinema, where eight films or series of shorts from five creators, alone or in pairs, explore what the programme describes as 'the complex histories and material traces of past colonial inequalities', using a variety of film techniques ranging from straight documentary pieces such as Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's *Africa Addio*, a contemporary piece that builds on the themes of the long banned film of the same name that presented in often horrific detail the end of colonial era in Africa, to the more experimental work of filmmakers such as Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi who manipulate and juxtapose archive footage to shed fresh light on colonial attitudes and practices.

DIGGING FOR SOUND (FRIDAY 14TH - SUNDAY 16TH AND FRIDAY 21ST - SUNDAY 23RD MARCH)

Spread across two weekends, the Digging For Sound programme includes five world premieres and a mix of concerts, installations, films and soundscapes to respond to the geological and geographic elements of the Extraction theme. Perhaps the best known participant is Richard Skelton, who will be collaborating with experimental contemporary string quartet The Elysian Quartet on a piece which involves the use of violin that Skelton will bury and dig up somewhere in Newcastle, in keeping with his practice of engaging with the landscape in very specific ways. Chris Watson has gone from being a founding member of Cabaret Voltaire to a sound artist and field recorder who's a regular on Radio 4. On each weekend he'll be leading a guided walk around Embleton Bay, the source of his newly commissioned sound art piece *Dunstanburgh Diamonds*, which premieres at the Sage Gateshead on Sunday 16th March. Acclaimed improv musicians John Butcher and Rhodri Davies appear twice, as a duo at the Sage Gateshead on Friday 14th and as part of *Common Objects* alongside Angharad Davies and Lee Patterson at the Mining Institute the following night, using ancient rock art as a graphic score for another newly commissioned piece.