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Phil: review of Anna Best installation.

Stefan Szczelkun

CARTE (Centre for Arts, Research, Technology and Education)

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Phil

By Stefan Szczelkun

The setting is the Beaufoy Institute on Black Prince Road in Vauxhall, South London. A product of nineteenth century philanthropy, intended for the edification of local 'scumbags', it has fallen into disuse and disrepair and is now a focus of what is euphemistically called regeneration. Once again it is the scene of a cultural class war: this time between local residents and nearby Art organisations. The residents want it, for example, to develop the hip-hop skills of local youth, whilst the Art institutions want something more upmarket. The Art entrepreneurs are cheered on by shady developers and their pet bureaucrats – they want Art to make their shit look pretty.

In between was the artist Anna Best – offered the crumbling Beaufoy edifice, plus the services of the London Philharmonic Orchestra (who would also like to use the old institute as a rehearsal room), plus a bucket of cash, to make some Art. The tradition of the symphony orchestras still serve to promote an aesthetic model of the harmonic togetherness of the working ensemble – which stands in for labour relations in general. Mix that with the Beaufoy's love of mankind – education as a thin veil over galloping social control – and you have the historic elements of the game.

What Best did was dismantle the orchestral image of fake togetherness and put each broken piece into a local person's home. Each member of the London Philharmonic was filmed playing his/her part of a well-known Mozart Serenade, in a domestic setting (chosen because the residents have 'phil' somewhere in their name). This can be taken as either hinting at how local community is fractured by the shenanigans of urban development and/or a symbolic dismantling of the Classics and returning the parts back to the folk, from whose stolen native tunes they were originally constructed.

There was something moving about the famous piece of great art being broken up and the bits handed out to almost random individuals. I visited two of these intense home recording sessions and was struck by the poignancy of the event (which was not captured on the videotaped recordings). The recordings showed the musicians alone, but in reality the often small living rooms were packed with other people: two camerawomen and their tripods, the orchestra manager, the home occupier and friends, and, on at least two occasions, a writer.

These sessions were then reassembled, each part playing on a separate domestic-sized television set, before an art crowd gathered at the Beaufoy. The technical challenge of synchronisation was something that Best had studiously decided to avoid. This was a key aesthetic decision and the 15 parts played variously unsynchronised with each other (I estimated an approximate average four second variance). The structure of the serenade was not entirely lost – pauses, pianissimo and crescendo were all still evident – but the tunes were mashed. Phrases stood out for no apparent reason, before being submerged again in the sinuous tumult. The audience sat as if on the pavement in front of a shop window in some dystopia of digital choice.

The audio effect reminded me of the Portsmouth Sinfonia of the '70s which a mixture of skilled and unskilled players had a spirited attempt at playing the 'best bits' of popular classics like Beethoven's 5th. They had even had a 'hit' single in 1982 entitled 'Classical Muddly'. Apparently this was a spoof of the Royal Philharmonic's desperate attempt to reach out to the masses with 'Hooked on Classics'. The difference with PHIL was that the same disconcerting effect was achieved with a fully professional cast!

As an experiment with musical form PHIL was daring. Its presentation as an ‘orchestra of televisions’ was visually both familiar and strange. But for me this piece worked more profoundly through the way it embedded its creative process within the locality. Those 15 uniquely odd recording sessions will never be forgotten by the ‘phils’ who hosted them, and their friends. And in this way PHIL escapes the heavy gilded frame of ‘Art’ and ‘Regeneration’ and takes a special place in the communicative ether.

Anna Best // PHIL // Beaufoy Institute, Vauxhall, South London // 27 July 2002 // [\[http://www.philphilphil.net\]](http://www.philphilphil.net)

Stefan Szczelkun <szczels AT wmin.ac.uk> is an artist and writer living in London