

Between silence and the sound of the hyper-glade

New media means new spatialities. This 'margins of music' looks to the changing space of place within the oceans of sound.

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Net transmission veterans, Future Sound of London produced their most ambitious ISDN performance for Brighton's Essential Danceday Festival. In doing so FSOL opened new pathways for sound across cyberspace. The repercussions for music, place and cyberspace are myriad.



collage Oliver Lomenstein

362 days a year, Stanmer Park is a stretch of beautiful and cultivated parkland on the eastern edges of Brighton. It runs along the thin groove of an inset downland valley towards the major tracery which, at right angles to it, is the east-west valley corridor out of Brighton, and further afield. To the west the valley rises to a higher ridge which threads, in turn, north to Ditchling Beacon. A dramatic and thickly layered woodland sits on this ridge above the valley; the park itself is a soft carpet of smooth and tended grass. Amidst this open land are tall and elegant trees, not many, but enough to give the valley contrast and a sense of texture. Many of the trees are elms, some quite old, and this valley ecosystem, including the adjoining Sussex University campus valley and parts of Brighton, happens to be one of the few parts of the country where the once comparatively popular elm has survived. Climb the full height of the Ditchling ridge,

travel into the town a mile or so, and drop into the next valley fold and you are also in another large park, Preston Park this time. Here, along one of its peripheries edges are a line of elms which are amongst the oldest in the country.

You could see the elms of Stanmer Park waving in the wind from inside the Essential Festival site compound. If trees had rights who would ask them whether they wanted a festival in their midst? And who amidst the Festival goers would consider such a question? Surely a few – at least a fair proportion of this throng of young dudes is sensitised and in sympathy with the elements of the natural world. Indeed, how many of these thousands trampling around the site, sitting in front of the main stage, or dancing their heads off in the various dance tents and marquees, have been a part of the new eco-direct action, anti-roads protest and tree-hugging dwellers world of recent years? How many

would know people who are involved in such activism, or who feel for the emergent myriad of entangled environmental causes?

So were they in here for the elms, and for an experience of sound and music amidst the open, elemental world? There is something about music in the open, or at least there was – think of the roots of the Glastonbury Festival. But the Essential Festival is a strictly commercial event, and the association between the popular music business and the natural world seems like an idiot's question, not least since much of the support comes from beer firms, the real key to where the money is in such music fests.

Still, Brighton's Essential is a rock festival in the modern mode. Like so many others, this event packed in dozens of performances under half a dozen tents. Along with this were the obligatory stalls – mainly food, drink and rock merchandise. An extra dimension, however, was the novel addition to proceedings of possibly the first ISDN linked performance, to a festival. It was difficult to know how much this was a draw for the audience even if Future Sound of London, long abbreviated to FSOL, have become pretty much exclusively identified with this. As an electronic group, part of what FSOL have become known for has been live radio transmissions from their north London studios, an ISDN link-up between New York's 'The Kitchen' Art Centre and London's ICA. With the Stanmer event this reinvention of performance jumped a further step, a live transmission to a large and ostensibly festival audience, complemented by the parallel screening of visuals as a replacement for the usual focal point consisting of stick people figures of some live band a quarter of a mile away. For many, not least those of a 'keep music live' persuasion, such moves are close to abomination. For others in the telematics and various new media communities it is an obvious step which ought to have been tried and tested across such large scale canvases many moons ago.

It certainly does inaugurate some entirely new kinds of performances which, although remote, also occur in relation with people who are in place-specific locations. It's neither a net web cast or cyber-event as it doesn't occur completely in cyberspace, even as it uses cyberspace as its medium. It remakes the performance's relation with the physical environment it's being beamed into, rather than relegating the place of performance to being completely incidental. It is also

suggestive of how live performances may mutate across various convergent possibilities to completely redraw the festival of the future.

In the meantime there is this, trumpeted as Essential's main event: an ISDN beamed performance arriving out of mediaspace and transmitted to an audience in a single geographical location, chalk downland near the south coast of Britain. What was it like, this life-form? How may it evolve?

On the stage, an ensemble of sixty-four TV-sized screens waits to be unveiled stage-centre. Eight by eight, making for a chess board of screens. Flanking this bizarre centrepiece construction are, on each side, the two all-day screens. Evening approaches; a strange anticipation – people aware that something different, after all the dancing, is about to take place. The screens rehearse various tests, all sixty-four screens with electric blue lines switch off and disappear one by one. Next, and without warning the screens splutter to life – an algae-like mix of colours swirls like careless static onto all three screen sections. All of a sudden a fish-eye fly on the wall lens-picture of one of the Future Sound of London appears in sepia browns. It's momentarily breathtaking. 'London calling,' he repeats before adding 'two words – Fuck Tribal!' This could well be rave politics: roughly the same distance north of London as this is south, the third Tribal Gathering main festival is happening over the same weekend, and is taking place in a park in Luton Hoo, of all places. Gary Cobain of FSOL, who has caused consternation among various people by his statements, adds to this reputation by saying 'people said it was going to be impersonal. It's personal! I can see you, I can feel you!'

The progeny of telephony, FSOL's culmination of 'Essential's' danceday, if it is to be a success for anyone, is going to be a triumph for British Telecommunications PLC. As the music comes cascading out of the speakers, the three screens blaze into life in a closely choreographed sensurround show of computer-generated art. All the clips are exactly put together, containing individual narrative paths on each of the screens – and on the sixty-four TV screens split into micro-segments, with various sub-fragments of visual action. Quite a bit of these visuals owe considerably to William Latham and his computer compadres – riding the dream boundary between inner and outer space, added to by any number of FSOL visual motifs, played and replayed – including a doll-girl, a Martian