



ART MAKES THE WORLD APPEAR DIFFERENTLY

MATTHEW SHANNON CALLS HIS WORK A QUANTUM PROPOSITION. YOU CAN NEVER QUITE BE SURE OF THE OUTCOME OF WHAT IS OBSERVED, OR IN THE CASE OF ONE MESCALINE INHALATION EXPERIMENT, WHETHER IT'S EVEN THERE, WRITES **EDWARD COLLESS**. PORTRAIT BY **KIRSTIN GOLLINGS**.

Conceptual art and science fiction," enthuses **Matthew Shannon** – glancing at the mechanomorph Japanime artefacts installed around us in a tiny but crowded Shinjuku-style bar – "I think of them as fundamentally similar genres. Artworks can be like Sputniks, launched to test the boundaries of geomagnetic and gravitational fields..." Then the noise drowns him out, but the audible words are as finely tuned as a succinct mathematical formula written in the scribble of a classroom whiteboard. In that flash of clarity, there's precisely the giddy humour and daft cleverness that characterise Shannon's art as among the most intriguing new work to look out for today.

His equation of conceptualism and science fantasy was demonstrated indelibly a couple of years ago in a shiny black monolith, adopted and exactly scaled from the famous motif in **Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey**; every bit as imposingly incongruous as in the movie, but which Shannon had converted into a frighteningly massive speaker box, although with a laughably bare and minuscule speaker cone embedded in it like a belly button. What kind of sound would emanate from this? A high pitched mystical signal directing humanity toward a stargate, or just some brain splitting doof to drive neighbours insane?

For his Honours graduation in 2006 at the Victorian College of the Arts, Shannon installed in a darkened gallery room a slickly minimal white drinks counter with plastic cups and jugs, which – glowing alluringly with

"Artworks can be like Sputniks, launched to test the boundaries of geomagnetic and gravitational fields."

a chill blue downlight and floating on a thin layer of cold fog mysteriously seeping from its base – suggested a **Donald Judd**-inspired vodka bar trimmed in hospital ward chic.

Anyone fool enough to take up the invitation of a free drink would have gagged on a briney emetic. But this wasn't just a practical joke. With the same imaginative contortion as the extraterrestrial speaker system, this

brine bar's luminescent architecture alluded to the design of a teleportation dock, as if hyperspatial transit required being poisoned. In a way, violent retching can lead to a type of out-of-body transport.

As his accent belies, Shannon grew up in the United Kingdom's rural Oxfordshire, more particularly in the evocatively named Wychwood Forest, which one travel writer has referred to as being like going down Alice's rabbit-hole – and forests, as Shannon points out, "are the chaos-mos: where tricksters operate and identities interchange". The famously eccentric – if not, in one or two cases, actually mad – **Mitford** sisters lived in the area, which is also where the notorious British fascist **Oswald Moseley**, married to one of the Mitfords, was interred during World War II. Local lore has it that the carnage wreaked on isolated family homes by the droogs in another Kubrick film, *A Clockwork Orange*, was set in this area.



Relishing this sinister as well as loopy milieu, Shannon defers to a genius loci, resurrected in blank crypto-zoological guise through his surreptitious work of amateur signage, posted throughout Melbourne's Domain Park – a favourite leafy and potentially spooky location for evening joggers – urgently warning about nightly sightings of a very large black animal on the prowl. The work of art is no more the staging of a prank than it is the graphic design of the signage; it is, instead, the uncertain prospect within any shadow of this conspiratorial phantom creature.

This is a delirious but also marvellously sceptical inducement of suspicion and hallucination. Can we see what we believe? Shannon's art is precisely pitched in what he wryly calls "a quantum proposition": that, at some level of interaction with art, you cannot be certain about the outcome of what is observed. At a recent exhibition up a musty wooden stairwell, in an otherwise empty, claustrophobic and almost airless room of TCB Gallery in Brisbane, was a benign looking planter box housing – as if sprouting from black rubberised soil – a transparent zigzag perspex tube. Resembling some open plan office décor from the Eames Studio, this was actually a customised humidifier; a therapeutic device, in fact a type of air conditioning unit, but one releasing mescaline – distilled legally from a cactus – steadily into the room's atmosphere. Admittedly, this hallucinogen was diluted according to homeopathic medicinal proportions. One part to a thousand. If you believed in homeopathy would this give you a mescaline trip? If you acquired this object for your art collection, just what effect would it eventually have on you? Was even the bizarre appearance of this object in the room a hallucination? Is it wish-fulfilment? We really do believe art makes the world appear differently, don't we? ■

Matthew Shannon's exhibition *Infinity of wind muskets* will be showing at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces in Melbourne until 4 October 2008.

EMILY CORMACK ASSISTANT CURATOR, GERTRUDE CONTEMPORARY ART SPACES

Matthew Shannon is one of 16 studio artists selected for a studio at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces in 2008/9. During their two-year residency at Gertrude, each studio artist has the opportunity to initiate and investigate new ideas within a professionally supportive context. This year Shannon's work culminates in an exhibition entitled *Infinity of wind muskets*. Cormack notes: "Shannon's diverse use of materials and consistently acerbic wit attracted us, as did his use of materials and creative engagement with those materials, their unique and clever connotations.

"The artist has a particularly interesting way of combining precision and quality of finish with a ready-made aesthetic. His work is always conceptually rigorous yet slick and seductive."

One of the characteristics of the space is that it affords emerging artists crucial breathing space to try out ideas without the

slick appearance or pressure that commercial obligations can so often place on an artist, resulting in truncation of vision or aborted projects. Cormack says: "Shannon has a solid exhibiting career in artist run spaces where his works sell from \$700. His sales are typical of an emerging artist with friends and budding collectors keenly purchasing his work. As this is his first exhibition with Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, we look forward to welcoming new audiences to his practice, though we are a not-for-profit public art gallery therefore unable to sell works. That said, the work Matthew is exhibiting would sell through him for around \$10,000.

"Responses to Shannon's work to date have been keen and enthusiastic. In particular people connect with his humour as well as the psychedelic nihilism at work in his installations and sculptures."

Courtney Kidd

From far left:

Matthew Shannon, *pirtyaD*, 2008. Pine, plexie glass, humidifier and mescaline solution

Matthew Shannon, *For A Theatre Of Unknowing*, 2006. Wood, audio speaker parts

Matthew Shannon, *Untitled*, 2008. MDF, emulsion and invitations to a show that doesn't exist

Matthew Shannon, *Odradek's flesh*, 2008. Pine, foam, audio equipment and audio description of a work.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST



Above: Various stills from Matthew Shannon's, *Two meters beyond vanishing point*, 2008. Digital video of a documented performance with a hypnotist.
 Opposite: Matthew Shannon, *Infinity of wind muskets*, 2008. Studio view, various materials.
 COURTESY: THE ARTIST

ANUSHA KENNY ART WRITER

Gertrude's spaces support contemporary art practices and current critical debate, risk and experimentation in the visual arts. Shannon's works are edgy and experimental. Kenny notes:

"In *Infinity of wind muskets*, Shannon takes as his positive matter both the sonic vibrations produced by an electric guitar and the vibrations and sounds produced by activity in the exhibition space. Shannon recognises his audience-as-vibration, but reverses the direction of the flow of information, allowing the audience's slightest breath to penetrate the electrical system of the artwork, and to generate a concrete visual output.

"To extend the analogy, it could be said that Shannon has displaced the burden of interpretation from the human on to a machine. We supply the data, and the sound-to-light converter tells the lights to turn on. Teaching us by kinesthetic analogy, Shannon has set up an interpreting system that exempts the human from work and leaves them free to play."

Courtney Kidd