

VA AA LR: On the Spectacle of Sound

An e-conversation with Adam Asnan, Louie Rice and Vasco Alves

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The Oxford Dictionary's definitions regarding the notion of spectacle primarily stress the visual character. One of the definitions speaks about "a visually striking performance or display", the other about "an event or scene regarded in terms of its visual impact." It is as if the only thing that seems to matter is what the eyes get to devour; yet what about the sonic impact? When we talk about spectacle in general, we usually indicate interplay between various elements contributing to a total experience that we experience as spectacular. Yet the visual component usually occupies a privileged position in our society full of tantalizing screens as it is. This assumption, that we are seduced solely by what we see spectacle-wise, is precisely what the work of sound collective VA AA LR counters with their performances, staged to affect more than just our eyes.

Concert for Signal Flares is an undeniable feast for the eyes. Upon arrival at the outdoor site during Ghent's *Ear to the Ground Festival* in 2017, three performers awaited the audience with a pile of distress flares. These flares are normally intended for use as an emergency beacon or a distress signal to indicate a location at sea. The constellation formed with the curious and captive audience almost resembled a festive fireworks celebration, whilst simultaneously a more unsettling atmosphere lingered in the air. Harsh sounds and visual astonishment intertwined, and three guys wearing masks added a pinch of danger into the mix when they moved around the audience. Despite the dominant visual undertone of the sparkle and hiss brought about by the trio of Adam Asnan, Vasco Alves and Louie Rice, it was not the harsh illumination of the flares that the artists found most interesting. On the contrary, it was the sound of these instruments that intrigued them most.

In order to understand the functioning of the notion of spectacle in this particular performance, and in sound art more specifically, London artist, location sound recordist met up again with one third of VA AA LR, Adam Asnan, during the Brussels' sound festival *Oscillation* (April 2019), and it resulted in a good old joint e-mail interview with all three members. Certain questions about the set-up of the *Concert for Signal Flares*, and particularly about its connection to the allure of colour and spectacle, were fired in their direction.



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Where did the idea for this *Concert for Signal Flares* originate?

The idea for *Concert for Signal Flares* started at a time when we were exploring different means to emulate the kind of electronic instrumentation (and *Crackle Party* aesthetic) we had developed previously. The signal flare was one of a handful of (slightly hazardous) items that we had appropriated for performance purposes. We decided to work further with it, because of the quality of its sound. Simultaneously, we started experimenting with CO2 fire extinguishers as another method to harness a particular sound. But at some point, we decided to focus on signal flares as a performance piece in itself.

Was there also a certain visual curiosity, or were you thinking straightaway more about the acoustic and auditory aspects?

From the earliest stages we maintained directly that the auditory aspect of our use of the signal flare was primary and would become the main subject of promotion. The fundamental point of this use is and always has been to harness the sound. The accompanying visual display is not to be mistaken for anything artistically intended, but as inherent to the objects' design.

The signal flare burns hotly and violently, which is why it produces a wideband, high-pressured rasp and crackle. The flame is extremely bright, and as such it becomes the most immediately recognised and spectated aspect of this performance. For better or worse.

Looking at descriptions of the performance, I stumbled upon labels such as “a visual concert”. What do you think about that term then?

The origin, and subsequent development, of the work has and will always be about the interplay of proximity, movement and distribution of the sound as an instrument in a spatial context. Anything that could appear to be a visual gesture results from the fact that we have a setting in place for the staging of sounds. We think about how these will function in a performance arc or structure.

However, we do think there is an interesting variety of (pseudo) audio/visual implications and interpretations assigned to the performance and therefore we do not propose that the audience should only access the work by averting their eyes. The performance remains interesting to observe, but it should bear no influence on its core premise.



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When does sound (art) become spectacular for you? How would you tie together spectacle and sound?

It's impossible to pinpoint only one way in which sound and spectacle relate. Some works rely on spectacle to transmit uninteresting ideas where scale, for example, is assumed to be analogous to power, although that is not always the case. The whole effort becomes very unspectacular in these set-ups. By virtue of being a 'spectacle' something receives a set of prerequisites or implications, but generally, we believe that the most powerful instances to 'spectate' are related to physicality and something along the theme of common ground between performer and audience – where both are susceptible to the same forces. Spectacle should inspire contemplation between one's own body or position and the subject of that spectacle. It should be able to have that kind of influence.

The concert also becomes spectacular in a sense because of the risks involved. You need to control and concentrate, like an acrobat. How did you develop that?

Practice and familiarity, trial and error... The performance can never be rehearsed, and always has to be site-specific, meaning it is unique. By now, we have all experienced when a flare malfunctions. Some misbehaviour is typical, but others react in totally surprising ways. All of us have had very minor burns at some point.

How does the colouration of sound play a role within this performance? And how is it affected by the locations where you perform?

Colouration as an auditory phenomenon is actually an important factor in the way the sound is choreographed. The kind of inharmonic, broadband 'noise' that the flare emits is very effective for demonstrating shifts in sound colour with every movement. When the flare is placed closer to the ground, the reflection has more of a comb-filtered effect, and when held high, it's sound propagates further. So between open air, hard surfaces or unusual architectural locations, interesting variations of the sound can occur.

We have performed the piece on two occasions with makeshift wooden screens. The concept with this was to try to promote these aspects of colouration but using the surface to reinforce the sound as a kind of acoustic reflector, and conversely, as acoustic obstructions.

We have been fortunate to perform the piece in variety of different settings already. In Porto we performed on the rooftop of the Town Hall, which was one of the occasions where we built and used right-angle wooden screens. For this

performance air traffic was redirected for approximately 30 minutes. Another location was in a concrete turret pit in Newhaven (UK), where the audience looked down, while we built up the array of flares in that confined space. Others include a large set of stone steps in a former hospital courtyard in Bologna, an empty car park in Ravenna, a Dutch school playground and a woodworking factory courtyard at the Milanese art space Standards.

Distress flares inevitably carry the connotation of danger and violence. How does the performance work with this?

We do not collectively associate the flares with a grim scenario any more than maritime safety, or even with celebratory events (as gloriously demonstrated by supporters at certain football games). Having said that, we are forced to order the flares from a pretty questionable Polish website, because a license is required in certain locales. We can only assume they are regulated for safety.

***Concerto per Fumogeni* can be understood as a colourful event in a classic way. Sound-wise it is definitely an experimental work. Is there some kind of friction you tried to create there?**

There is already friction in the fact that the performance is first and foremost a piece for listening, accompanied by an intense light show, which may be difficult to disassociate from the auditory experience. The light has actually never influenced how we work or how we create a performance with the flares, but remains an aspect inherent to the performance, which is necessary to create the sound quality of the piece.

Another factor in our performances is to surround or bear down on the audience, in an attempt to have them experience the sound from different angles and proximities. Sometimes we attempt to displace and disperse them. There's undeniable friction to this.

What is the (aesthetic) experience like as a performer? You are right in the middle of the colorful chaos, yet you also probably frighten the audience a little.

Given that we handle the flares, we always have the most direct point of audition, so we try to get as close as possible to promote this direct sound on occasions. We embraced the confrontational element of this proximity in that in subsequent performances it became a way to disperse the audience and force them into different listening positions and perspectives, in addition to simply having the sound sources moving around them.

We have to wear gas masks because the smoke can sometimes be very nasty for prolonged periods. On top of that the masks help us assume a role without getting uncomfortable. Something we do want from the audience. Our aim is that they experience a concert, without being too comfortable, it's not a fireworks show, after all.

Are you questioning spectatorship as well within the framework of sound art, contesting the role of a passive audience?

Yes, absolutely. It is quite an appropriate definition of what we aim to do with this piece. As a matter of fact, we may only have the initial steps of the performance agreed beforehand, how we then proceed is in response to our feeling for the audience's degree of passivity and how the space may allow for different ways to engage with and disrupt that passivity.



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