

## **AT HER MUSIC** - Ellen Southern at Dear Serge, the De La Warr Pavilion, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2013

*At Her Music* is a process based, site-responsive vocal performance and installation, which I developed on my Performance and Visual Practices MA course at the University of Brighton. The piece takes shape over the course of a day in different locations, and so can sound and look very different depending on the setting. The piece combines my own live and recorded voices, and goes through several stages of transference, mediating site-specific sounds from one place into another, and re-forming the piece in the process.

I was recently selected to perform at the prestigious De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill, having been invited to submit a proposal by my course leader. The event, Dear Serge, is a new bi-monthly live art, music and performance series, in homage to Serge Chermayeff (1900-1996), who was the partner architect of Erich Mendelsohn for the De La Warr Pavilion during the 1930's and was responsible for most of the interior design.

At the De La Warr, I first performed a cycled-song on the north staircase and digitally recorded it. I played it back straightaway in the space and harmonized with my recorded self. I made a second recording of this, which I took away and carefully transcribed to produce a score of layered parts, which I re-recorded during the day. As a textural 'accompaniment' to my two harmonising voices, I included vocalized versions of the noises of the space - the words of passers by and nearby sounds including electronic noises from fellow participant Ian Helliwell's electronic works. This layered track was then spatially installed within a camera obscura to be once more combined with my own live voice during the final evening event.

To experience the final installation, the audience entered through the doorway into the mezzanine of the auditorium. But instead of finding themselves in the usual open space, they arrived in a small dark space, with unseen 'voices' arranged to their left and right. In front of them hung a frame seemingly floating in mid air, on which they could see the auditorium optically projected via a lens, appearing upside down. In the auditorium and on the other side of the lens, I entered the frame and performed a final live layer to the song, harmonizing with my recorded selves, moving nearer and further from the installation to allow the audience to hear different degrees of live-ness. Over the process of the work, the parts of the song disconnect and transform, and maybe it is the presence of the audience which ultimately creates the work by instinctively assembling all the musical and visual elements.

The work is inspired, or 'haunted', by the paintings of Vermeer and his use of optical techniques. This 17<sup>th</sup> century technology, like the eye itself, projects a reversed and upside down image, and was used by painters to compose images. Echoing this, I aimed to reveal the constructed and illusory nature of performance by reversing the conventional order - singing from my song score to start with, and warming up pre-performance style during the second version (a layered canon). Like the poignant lone women performing their tasks in Vermeer's works, I consciously present herself at my own work, or in homage to Vermeer's titles, *At Her Music*, occupying the still moments between major events, in transitory or 'backstage' spaces. The idiosyncratic blurring and re-focusing of the camera obscura image adds to the feeling of the layered voices having been drawn together from different tenses to co-exist, overlapping and emotively amplifying the sung lyrics through varying degrees of presence.

My approach allowed the acoustics, architecture and aesthetics of that space to flow directly into the work, showing the staff and visitors the pavilion in a new light. Both the sounds from the staircase, and the view of the auditorium seen through the camera obscura, became inherent features of the piece. The image of the ceiling in the auditorium was especially striking, and it was especially fitting, as it is an especially iconic example of Serge Chermayeff's innovative approach to design and acoustic technology of the time. Having had such a positive experience at the De La Warr, I would be interested to apply the same form to other spaces and create a collection of versions all looking and sounding distinctive yet with consistent and unifying elements connecting them.