



## OUT OF THE AIR: THE SUBLIMITY OF 'SHEETS OF SOUND'



EMILY GREEN ([HTTPS://GROKONLINE.COM.AU/AUTHOR/EMILY-GREEN/](https://grokonline.com.au/author/emily-green/)). × JULY 6, 2019 × [ART AND FILM](https://grokonline.com.au/category/art-and-film/)  
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Top photo by Rachael Barrett, lifted from Louise's website

*Sheets of Sound* is the latest project of Perth-based percussion performer and composer Louise Devenish, who has worked with composers Matthias Schack Arnott and Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh to create post-instrumental pieces that explore the sonic properties of everyday objects, as well as the relationship of sound to gesture, time and space. To this end, a percussive playground had been set up in the PICA performance space; this was as much a visual arts installation as it was a performance. "Percussion has a very visual and sculptural setup," Devenish says. "With percussion, you can see the cause and effect of movement and gesture on sound—this is not so much the case with something like brass."

*Percipience: After Kaul* consists of an 'overtone triangle', an instrument devised by German percussionist Matthias Kaul which extends the sonic possibilities of the humble primary school triangle. The triangle is attached to a half-dome of polystyrene by a piece of brass wire. By striking the triangle at its base, a series of glissandi are generated, which travel along the wire and are amplified by the polystyrene—a very simple and effective means of conducting sounds. With a few hammer-like strikes to the base, Devenish produced a kind, delicate tremor that shimmered over the top of a lower-pitched sound bed generated by pre-recordings of the instrument. The results were something resembling a B-Grade science fiction soundscape, complete with extraterrestrial-sounding squiggles over a slow, ominous bass.



*Louise Devenish performs Percipience After Kaul by Louise Devenish and Stuart James: Photo by Nik Babic.*

The second piece, *Catacomb Body Double*, was designed by Matthais Schack-Arnott, a Melbourne-based composer and performer whose work incorporates meticulous visual detail, paralleling his extremely layered and textured compositional style. Here, visual cues are taken from the Catholic Church's rather macabre practice of decorating skeletons—supposedly belonging to the Catacomb Saints—with jewels and other iconography to create lavish objects of (potentially false) religious significance.

Repurposing was a key theme here; the assortment of objects resembled a foley artist's setup, with small percussive instruments constructed out of wine glasses and finger cymbals. Steel drums were animated electronically, and these instruments—along with knives and an ocean drum—were manipulated with deft, graceful precision across the drum's surface by Devenish. Sound loops and repeats, the rhythmic shrill of glass or scrape of metal against the pulse of the amplified drum. Schack-Arnott invites us to consider the forces that suspend and carry sound forth in time and space. Devenish's movements and placement of objects created friction which travelled and reverberated, it was sustained electronically resulting in a constantly evolving and complex work.



*Louise Devenish performs Catacomb Body Double by Matthias Schack-Arnott: Photo by Nik Babic.*

In contrast to the previous two works, the focus of *Permeating Through the Pores of Shifting Planes* is not upon the possibilities and interactions of a single complex instrument; instead, Pittsburgh-based composer Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh has created a sensual, tactile environment born of an initial desire to explore the sonic capabilities of paper. Suspended above and behind the installation were sheets of silver acetate which refracted intricately-patterned veils of light across the space. “There’s an organic quality to the light...it’s always shifting,” Hsieh says. She found the acetate at an art supply store clearance sale and was drawn to its “web-like, geometric refraction patterns”.

Devenish began by pouring rice slowly onto tracing paper and metal sheets, evoking the first tentative drops of rain before a downpour. Above this hung four sheets of aluminium, which Devenish struck gently with a mallet before she lightly moved her wrist back and forth, just above the surface which exposed tiny, otherwise inaudible soundscapes to the audience via small wrist mics. As the sound built, the entire installation became an animated landscape beneath the shifting webs cast by the acetate. The quivering, glittering space alluded to the work of atmospheric forces, and Devenish's steady silhouette embodied them all.





*Louise Devenish performs Permeating Through the Pores of Shifting Planes by Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh: Photo by Nik Babic.*

Much of the collaborative process occurred online, with emails and sound files shooting back and forth between the collaborators and consolidated with the occasional Skype session. The compositional process seems relatively free, allowing the performer to draw the audience into the exact moment of creation. "There is this interesting ambiguity between composition and performer," says Hsieh. "As a composer, I am communicating, but also always observing movement."

The evening ended with the fashioning of an origami boat, a symbolic gesture developed by Hsieh to gently guide the room back to the equilibrium of silence. With the ingenuity and imagination of Schack-Arnott and Hsieh to guide her, Devenish's skill as a performer lies in her ability to draw her audience into a state of elevated mindfulness and invited us into mesmeric soundscapes as she conjured them.

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