

Playing the Fool

I am a multi-media artist working across sculpture, sound and performance. My most recent work includes the making of a series of *Fool's Instruments* played as part of a 'fairground installation' that poses the question: 'Is reality television a repackaging of the carnival freak shows of a century ago?'

Included in the installation are several brass and copper instruments created from recycled plumbing components, car exhaust systems and cannibalised parts from retired brass instruments. The centrepiece is *The Snurglaphone*, a fairground organ that plays humorously dark carnival music.

Traditional brass band music and instruments of the 'big top', and the development of street and fairground organs that fronted smaller travelling fairs and carnivals have provided an historical background for the construction of my *Fool's Instruments*. These instruments have a dual purpose. They are played live within an ensemble of traditional brass instruments to create darkly humorous carnival music; and a fairground organ (constructed from recycled car parts¹) digitally activates recordings. The flavour of this music ties in with the humour, pathos and absurdity of the degraded carnival that is reality television.

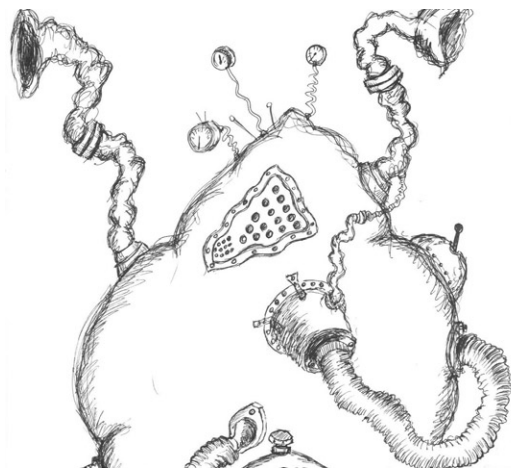
I have always loved pipes and tubes, connections and couplings. I spent a lot of my early childhood in various work-camp boiler houses with my father, half listening to the background murmur of tall stories punctuated by blasts of hissing steam and juddering pipes. Whenever I see a collection of disused pipes I want to raid them for any interesting flanges or couplings I might find handy for my work. I forage in filthy rubbish skips at the back of the local muffler fitters for that special pipe and I'm always drawing obsessively.

My drawings are those of a compulsive doodler. Pipes appear in many of my drawings, twisted, distorted and bulbous; pipes growing rhizome-like in many directions. I have always enjoyed the books of Dr Seuss, particularly the absurd way his cobbled-together machines always seem on the point of collapse. G S Smith² describes the Seussian world as one of "benign decline"; it is not revolutionary or apocalyptic. "Seuss knows things fall apart by themselves, they don't need to be destroyed." This aesthetic of the *cobbled together* forms the basis for the construction of my *Fool's Instruments*. The use of plumbing materials references the connection between

the spluttering, rumbling, bellowing, burbling, farting, and incontinent dribbles common to both brass instruments and antiquated plumbing on the verge of collapse.

The early difficulties in learning to play these *Fools Instruments*³ accurately has resulted in some truly horrendous squawking and rumbling that I have since put to good use, by recording these in various slightly (and not so slightly!) discordant combinations. The later recordings have been far more purposefully discordant as I have learned to pitch the instruments more accurately. I have also experimented with timing, especially on slow tracks delaying the return to the oncoming beat to provide an aura of irritated expectation. This feeling is no doubt familiar to viewers of 'final' reality television episodes wherein the outcome is dragged on through far too many advertising breaks.

I am also playing, recording and editing experimental music with several other musicians, using a combination of my *Fool's Instruments* and conventional wind and string instruments. The music is mainly improvised using a single word, phrase or concept as the starting point, for example 'think of an excruciatingly slow elephant bumbling around'; or we use nonsense phrases with a Seussian flavour, for example 'rickety gallumph' and see what sounds eventuate.



Jane Venis, 2006, *Drawing for a Fool's Instrument*, pencil on paper, approx. 20 x 20 cm.

The concept of playing music that has a humourfully discordant or a-rhythmic feel has its problems. The music has to sound just bad enough to be funny but not too bad to be misinterpreted as merely incompetent. My first contact with this concept was listening to PDQ Bach in the late 1980s. PDQ Bach was the fictitious son of Johannes Sebastian and is the brainchild and pseudonym of 'professor' Peter Schickele. Through PDQ Bach, Schickele undertook a satirical exploration of the conventions of musicological scholarship and of Baroque music, using humorous slapstick timing, incorrect notation and an array of unusual instruments.⁴

The concept of creating wrong notes or wilfully playing behind or ahead of the beat is something I share with Schickele, although the way the outcome is achieved is very different. I improvise to create chance clashes and work within a group that constantly experiments with ways to keep contact with an underlying theme or melody by only a merest thread, while being poised for diversion at any moment.



Jane Venis, *The Snurglaphone*, from *Freaquent Viewing*, interactive exhibition at the Seque Gallery, September 2006 (photograph: the author).

Jane Venis, 2006, copper and brass 'steel' drum made from recycled hot water cylinders, tuned by beating with a hammer (photograph: the author).



I have also been making drums, which have an historical connection to carnival. My set of copper 'steel drums' responds to the history of the West Indian steel drum and its connection to carnival. The notion that primitives' "irrational, violent and dangerous natures"⁵ are stirred up by the pounding of traditional drums appeared to be behind the banning of skin drums in Trinidad. Freed African slaves traditionally played the skin drums in carnival and other festivities, but these were eventually banned by the government, and were replaced by hollow bamboo drums. David Mangurian, from Laventille, Trinidad, in his article "A Short History of the Shiny Drum,"⁶ tracks these changes from the outlawing of the traditional skin drums through to the development of the steel drums. Steel drums were made from oil drums that washed up on beaches during the Second World War.

Steel drums took their name from steel bands⁷ dating from the early 1930s, whereby all manner of discarded steel objects – ranging from car parts to biscuit tins – were played in carnival. These objects were used because they could produce a much louder sound than the bamboo drums. All my instruments are also made from recycled metal objects, including car parts. I discovered the history of steel bands after I made my first drums and can now see even more links to my work.

Mangurian recounts a possible origin of the first tuned steel drum:

Around 1942 or 1943, according to one legend, a 12-year-old Laventille youth named Winston 'Spree' Simon, loaned his large iron 'kettledrum' to a friend. When it was returned, his drum had been beaten concave and had lost the 'special' tone Simon liked. He started pounding the under surface of the drum back to its original shape and discovered that the pounding created different pitches or notes. He produced a four-note drum and, by this accident, started the transformation of the steel 'drum' from a rhythm instrument into a melodic one.⁸

I have used this same idea in tuning my copper drums but have used an animal skin pattern within different-sized concave pads that produce different notes. I am particularly enjoying the irony of re-instating the animal skin into the Afro- Caribbean drum.

To play is the prime motivation in my work. I play with ideas and concepts. I play with materials as part of my making process, I playfully doodle and draw and I play my instruments, (playfully of course).

- 1 The concept of a car being reconstructed as an instrument is also linked to reality television shows such as Jessie James' *Monster Garage* wherein he works with a team of people within a tight timeframe to transform cars into a series of multi-functional super vehicles, for example, flying machines, turbo-charged lawn mowers and other eccentric fusions.
- 2 GS Smith, *Sewanee as a Seussian System* (2002) at <http://smith2.sewanee.edu/texts/Sewanee> last visited on 4 April 2004.
- 3 They are called *Fool's Instruments* not only because of their nonsensical appearance but because of the experimental nature of the music. In the way that the fool leaps into the unknown, I often play these instruments spontaneously.

- 4 www.wikipedia.org/wiki/PDQ_Bach - 24k last visited on 20 April 2006.
- 5 Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals Modern Lives* (London: Blackwell, 1991), 8.
- 6 David Mangurian, *A Short History of the Shiny Drum* (2004) at http://musicforlondon.com/Steel_Band.htm last visited on 2 March 2006.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.

Jane Venis is an artist who works across sculpture, sound and performance. She has completed the Master of Fine Arts degree at the School of Art, Otago Polytechnic in 2006; and is the academic leader for the Creative Studies Programme in the Design Department. Her studio work explores the notion of the 'carnavalesque' and the ways in which it manifests in contemporary popular culture.