

Waterwheel

Kimmo Vennonen

Essay by Mitchell Whitelaw

The new home of the Australian Bureau of Statistics is a massive, glassy rectilinear building, which stands out against the grimy concrete low-rise of the Belconnen Town Centre. The ABS building is a hard-edged box of boxes, all right angles, down to the statistical charts etched on the façade; its lobby is the base of a tall atrium, another box. The materials are shiny and monochromatic; the impression is modern, efficient, rational. During its installation, Kimmo Vennonen's *Waterwheel* made another nested box: a cubic aluminium frame, 3.6m to a side, sitting just to one side of the flow of people coming and going. At each corner of the cube a small speaker, pointing inwards; and in the cube a place for two or three visitors to sit. A curious presence, in this clean-cut space: visually unobtrusive - even nondescript - but clearly defining a space, an interior, and inviting you in.

Reality shifts, once inside. To begin with you've left the modern mundanity of lobby, crossed that awkward threshold which public art always skirts, between business-as-usual and the conscious engagement with the work. Galleries make this shift very easy - they induce it automatically through a kind of cultural peer-pressure. Here it is more apparent, first of all because just outside the edges of the cube is business-as-usual. At the same time, more importantly, this interior is really somewhere else: it is filled by, and defined by, sound, and in particular the sound of water. *Waterwheel* creates a lush, sensory overlay for this everyday space; it fills a static, architectural people-box with sloshes, sluices and flows, droplets, rivulets and streams.

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The work uses eight channels of sound playback to create a rich impression of three-dimensional sound. When rain hits a tin roof we hear and feel each impact distinctly, each point in space: the cubic volume of the work is not simply occupied by sound, but articulated by it.

Technically, this work taps into an important trajectory in the recent development of audio media: these technologies are increasingly concerned with space and spatiality, or at least, a sense of space. We take for granted now, in our domestic listening, the phantom spatiality of stereo, where our auditory perception interpolates sound sources located between the speakers. With the boom in home theatre, many homes are now wired for "surround sound," with the line or arc of the stereo image extending, potentially, into a horizontal plane around the listener. I overheard one visitor to *Waterwheel* ask, "Is this some kind of surround sound thing?" Yes and no: in *Waterwheel*, the surround sound plane becomes a cube, a truly three-dimensional audio space. But there's more to this distinction: established surround sound formats are all based on cinema, and thus are oriented in every way around the cinema screen, and cinema content. Although surround sound does surround us, it has a strong spatial bias: a front and a back. We face the front, and not only to see the screen: front is where the dialog comes from, it's where the core of the narrative is located. All that actually surrounds us (in the rear channels) is atmosphere, context, the setting for the front-and-center voice. By contrast *Waterwheel* creates, a spatial field without a front or back, an un-oriented sonic space; what's more the actual sound materials used here, are themselves three-dimensional fields. Vennonen uses a system called Ambisonics to record and replay sound events in three dimensions, which is

exactly why we can feel each raindrop, and why the river rush seems about to sweep us away.¹

Immersion has become a buzzword in digital media, used to describe an ideal state of audience experience and subjectivity; to be surrounded, saturated, caught up, transported, engaged and (pleasurably) overwhelmed by the media experience. Yet with the wide takeup of "immersive" media systems, an ethics of content becomes even more crucial. If we are going to be immersed, rather than merely dipping our toe (or dunking our head) then surely the question is, *in what?* Try watching the news on your home theatre system, with the lights down and the sound up.

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Waterwheel immerses us in — what better — the sounds of water. As a sound source, water has long fascinated musicians and artists.² Water produces a wide range of complex, dynamic sound events, so while water sounds are distinctive, there is no "sound of" water. In general we are habituated to locate the source for sounds we encounter, in discrete and nameable objects or actions. The answer to the question, "what's that sound?" is strangely, almost always an object or event, not a description of the sound. It's the door banging; it's a possum on the roof. Water defies this simple object indexicality; it flows and shifts, it ripples, eddies, swirls and rushes. It's not a thing, but a stuff, a substance, and its sound connects us richly with the dynamic material qualities of that stuff.

Though ironically, we can't hear the water itself, or not without getting wet. Human hearing is adapted to detect vibrations in air, not water, and so the

sounds of water are actually the sounds of water's interaction with the airy spaces in which we hear. Water's many sounds are a factor of the way this fluid activates and *sounds* the spaces and objects it moves through and in: the sound of water trickling through the gutters into the tank, is the sound of gutters and tank, as much as water.

In sound and substance, water is connective and conjunctive; it articulates. It traverses domains, environments, individuals, jurisdictions; *Waterwheel* illustrates this clearly. Water also joins us with our material environment, moves through us, outside us and back in; it is a reminder of the shared material mesh in which we're all embedded. In the same way *Waterwheel* reactivates a sense of corporeal materiality, though it does so paradoxically through a sophisticated virtual immersion. This work immerses us not in the narrative pleasures of home theatre, but something both more abstract and more urgent: the complex dynamics of the real, material, stuff of life.

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¹ On Ambisonics see for example Richard Elen, Ambisonic.Net, <http://www.ambisonic.net/>.

² See for example Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water Meat: A History of Sound and Aurality in the Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), pp 245-259.