



by Syd Moore

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Profile interview:
On the couch with

DAMIEN ROBINSON

At 17 Damien Robinson lost her hearing. Despite advice to the contrary, she set out to become an artist, and now works primarily in the medium of sound. Our editor **Syd Moore** talks to her about her relationship to sound and vibration and the crucial role Cliff Richard plays in her art

When I googled you before our interview I saw an article where you described yourself as an artist who explores the relationship between sound and image and vibration. Are you? And are they three separate things?

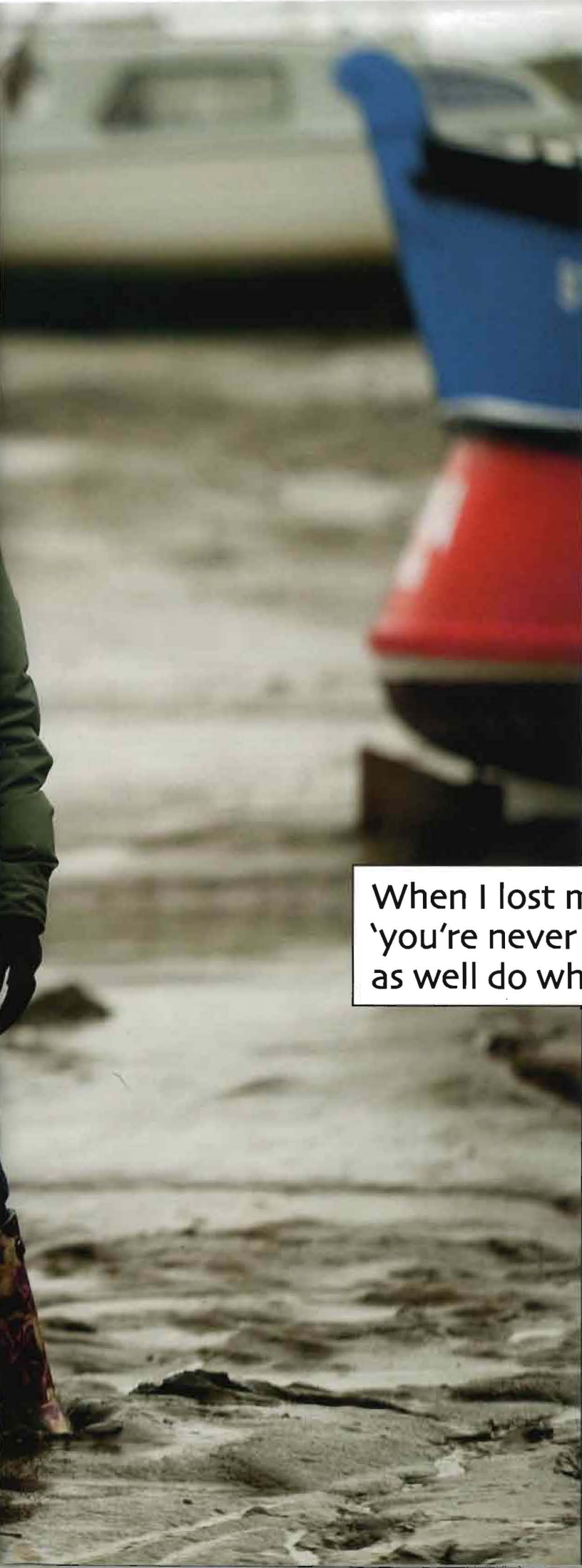
DR: No. Not for me. They're not separate but part of the same thing but sometimes you need to explain them separately to people as they are only used to accessing that information in one way. Obviously most people listen to sound but if you're deaf, depending on the level of hearing you have, you might experience part of that as 'heard' sound and part of it as 'feel' sound. I don't have any hearing. For me it's all 'feel' sound.

What do you mean by 'feel' sound?

DR: Well, someone who has hearing can also experience 'feel' sound but they may not be aware of it. For example, when a door slams you 'feel' that but mostly you 'hear' it. I don't hear it but I feel it. So depending on where you are, what kind of hearing you have, you will experience that mix in different ways. And there are also visual aspects to sound. I use the visual aspects a lot. Though for someone who is visually impaired they may rely more on the 'heard' part and the 'felt' part. And also there is remembered sound. I have a memory bank of sound from my 'hearing' life, so when I see a door slam sometimes I also remember the sound AND 'feel' it AND 'see' it. We all have different balances because we all have different levels of each element. And that's sort of what I like to explore in my work.

I remember last year we had a conversation about when you became deaf. You told me that you see yourself having two lives





—a hearing life and then from 17 onwards, your deaf life. You were very eloquent in describing the processes that a deaf person goes through when they've lost their hearing (or part of it). I think you said infancy was when you had to relearn everything again, sign language etc. Then you get into the teenage when you start campaigning for rights and that sort of thing. Then into maturity or adulthood. I wondered, because when you started working with sound you would have been 12-13 in your second life, was there a defiance, or a punk attitude, inherent in your initial decision to focus on that area?

DR: That's interesting but I think, no. At that point back then no-one was really talking about how sound was operating for deaf people. Hearing people tend to think that for the deaf everything is muffled, like you're wrapped in cotton wool. Or that you live in total silence, like you're in space or a cocoon. It's not like that at all. There's lots of noise. It's incredibly noisy all the time. I wanted to look into that.

I had actually wanted to be an artist since I was about eleven. I never said anything at the time but I had two older cousins who were artists and that was enormously useful. I could see them go through everything — the parents saying 'You'll never get a job!' Teacher's saying 'Are you sure you're not doing science because you're a girl?' Lovely but wrong! When I lost my hearing, a lot of people, not my parents, said 'you're never going to get a job, you might as well do what you want.' A lot of people who develop impairments get this attitude. The constant barrage of 'you'll never be able to do it.' Quite often that's the hardest thing to battle with, after the physical change. I did a foundation course and went on to do Fine Art at Goldsmiths.

So you didn't choose to do visual art because you were deaf?

DR: No. I had a year out to sort of be 'properly ill' (laughs). Then I did the foundation year which was quite tough because I was still learning to lip read. But they had a lot of students there with hearing impairments. I liked painting and print-making and went into that in my second year of the degree. After graduating I got a traineeship at the Arts Council. Then I got an opportunity to work



Arboreality (11am)

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on a project at the Photographer's Gallery where I had to put some sound onto a piece. It was then that I had the realisation that I could control sound with a computer and that had a huge impact. I started to think 'I can work with sound.' After that I did the piece of work about tinnitus.

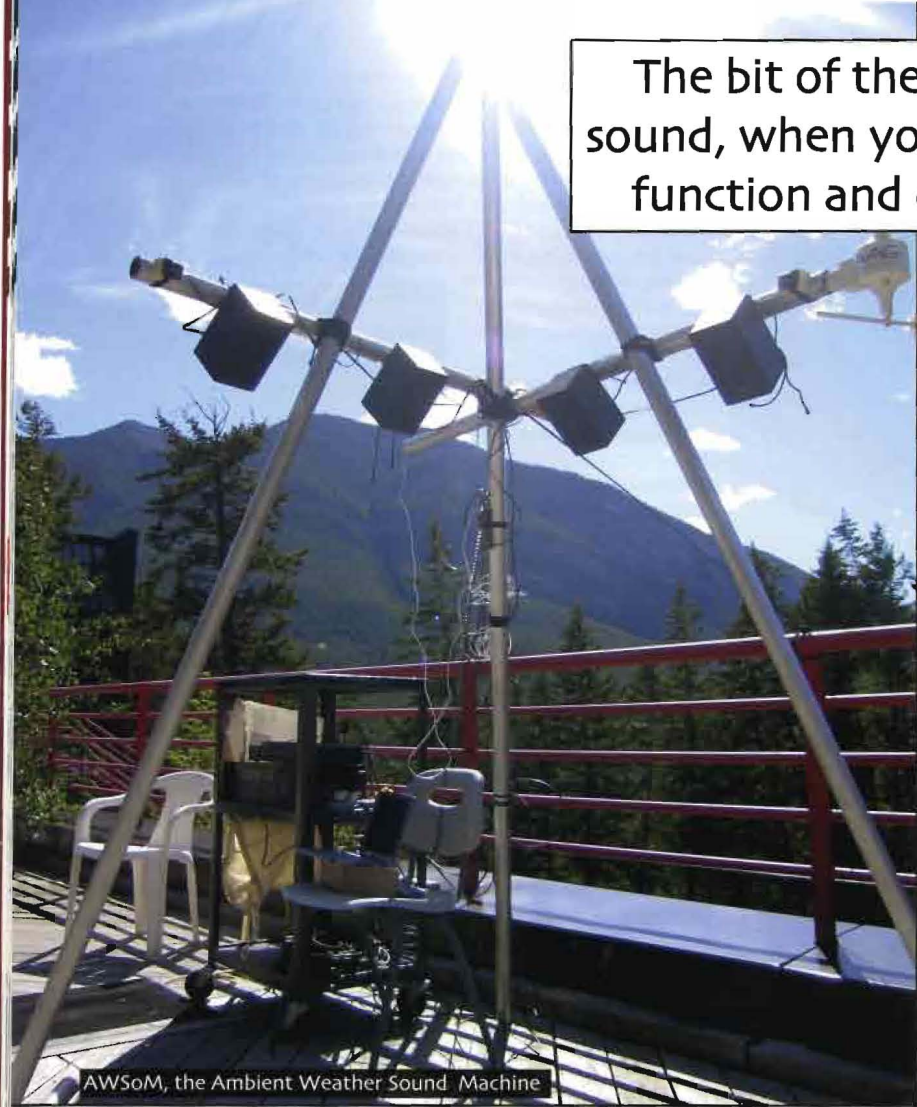
What was that?

DR: On the Tuesday when I was becoming deaf I had started to develop tinnitus and that has stayed with me since. So although I'm deaf I still hear tinnitus constantly. There are lots of different sounds to it. Sometimes there is a loud banging sound which can actually wake me up in the middle of the night and I think 'What's happened? Has something fallen off my shelf?' Then I remember that I can't have 'heard' it and that it's nothing. It's weird. I don't like that. But I decided I wanted people to know what it was like, to try and create an external version of what you hear inside your head when you suffer from tinnitus. I had to spend a lot of time focussing on what I was actually 'hearing'. With tinnitus if you push it back it can be like road/traffic noise. If you start focusing on it, it becomes louder. So that was quite a hard piece of work. I worked out about six different noises in this ear (her right) and about seven in this ear. There's a hissing and a kind of white noise one which goes up and down in tone. I have a whistling one and then those banging noises. And they change — they go up and down in different parts so I've got my own little mix going on all the time. I wanted to work with them.

How did you replicate them in the work if you couldn't hear them externally? How did you know that they sounded the same? >>>

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The bit of the brain that used to deal with sound, when you have lost hearing, changes function and deals with vibrations instead



AWSoM, the Ambient Weather Sound Machine

I needed to understand them so we came up with this thing called the 'Cliff Richard scale of sibilance'. I can remember what he sounds like. He has a strong hiss on S's. So to understand some sounds I'd ask her 'How much of Cliff Richard is this hiss?' You have to find something that you both understand and recognise. And then you translate it - 'This comes off the scale at this point etc'. But up to a point it's guesswork.

That's funny. Poor you! Cliff Richard.

DR: Oh yeah, you can remember a lot of rubbish. The Noodle Doodle advert.

So did you continue to work with tinnitus in your art?

DR: I got interested in the sounds that you feel. Over time I'd become more and more sensitive to them. I found some research where they discovered that people who were deaf actually experienced vibrations in the auditory cortex. This meant that the bit of the brain that used to deal with sound, when you have lost hearing, it changes function and deals with vibrations instead. This astounded me. I thought 'Wow! How did the human mind manage to do that?' And I realised that I too was 'hearing' vibrations and decided that I wanted to do explore that. Who wouldn't? So, much of my work has looked at aspects like that. Although I'm not restrictive. Recently I've made solar-bots - little

robots. And I'm doing a course to develop my new media skills. I guess I'm lucky. I've been able to achieve success through being self-indulgent, through tinkering and playing around with ideas.

Looking to the future, I'd like to develop a speaker for 'feel' sound. So people could feel sound, and hear sound. But if they wanted to they could turn off the hearing part and just feel the sound like I do. And as my friend, Will, said of the Vibe Cube, I'd like one in every home!

>>> DR: I can't say I 'replicated' them as I couldn't check back. The process that I went through with creating those sounds was partly using sourced sounds about tinnitus and adapting them. But I also worked with an interpreter. You have to have a very good relationship with them and get to know them very well so that you can say talk to them about what something sounds like and they can link it to what they are hearing. On a different piece of work I was talking to another interpreter called Diana and we were trying to store voices.

DAMIEN'S WORKS

De@fsite for the Photographers Gallery

De@fsite was an arts education project which explores Deaf culture, identity and language through multimedia technology, creating diverse images of Deafness. This initiative emerged from a history of work at the gallery with deaf and partially hearing people, looking at photography education through a series of courses, workshops, interpreted talks and exhibitions.*

Songbird, a sonic/acoustic work initiated in a LabCulture Residency exhibited as part of 'Re:Thinking Time' at Peterborough Digital Arts

Songbird explored the relationship between sound and vibration.

Recorded birdsongs were dropped in pitch and/or duration, increasing the level of vibration. Sound generation can trigger decline of both animal habitats and of airspace unpolluted by human sound. The

work has developed as a parallel to the convention that deafness constitutes loss, by enabling sounds to be experienced as a physical as well as sensory phenomenon.

www.pva.org.uk

AERIAL (an x-space commission for INIVA)

Arial drew together sound and image to convey how sounds might look if they could be experienced visually. This project for X-Space linked air pressure levels to sound frequency and triggered visuals developed as a correlative to the sound.

www.iniva.org

AWSoM, the Ambient Weather Sound Machine (with Stuart Bowditch)

AWSoM used the weather to play foundsounds recorded by Damien in remote places. This project, in collaboration with Stuart Bowditch and the Mediashed has been installed at Two Tree Island in the Thames Estuary, Sutton with Shopland Music Festival and as part of "Interactive Screen 0.7 - User Friendly is Not Enough" at the BNMI in Banff, Alberta, Canada (August 2007).

www.mediashed.org



Vibe□(Vibe Cube)

Percent for Art commission 'Arboreality' for Gloucestershire County Council

This installation used coded digital animation and soundtracks. Arboreality drew on the Froest Special School's unique position in the heart of the forest to draw

the outside in and interpret it through different sensory possibilities.*

Vibe□(VibeCube) a commission for Essex County Council

Vibe□(Vibe Cube), Vibe□ enables artists to draw on techniques developed through this work but refract them through the principles of earlier works like AWSoM drawing on recycled and 'low' technologies to be installed and experienced outside, away from conventional gallery settings.

* see www.damien-robinson.co.uk