

ART IN AMERICA

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MUNGO THOMSON

by Kate Green



View of Mungo Thomson's *Cricket Solos*, 2014, iPod, mini-speakers, handmade cricket cages

Mungo Thomson's latest project, which translates the often-ignored sound of crickets into music, touches upon a century of avant-garde art-making strategies. In the early 20th century, Wassily Kandinsky proposed that abstraction could capture the essence of life: nature. Decades later, Edgard Varèse and John Cage, both students of composer Arnold Schoenberg, Kandinsky's colleague, organized compositions around noise and silence. In the late 1960s, interest in the "overlooked," presented with minimal expressivity, became a defining feature of Conceptual art. Thomson filters all of this into the exhibition "Crickets for Solo and Ensemble," which fits comfortably alongside his other efforts to turn "background" into an elegant main event. Over the years, Thomson (b. 1969) has created works centered on the sounds of his empty studio (*Room Tone*, 1998), converted images of inky galaxies into colorful murals ("Negative Space," 2006-13), and turned the Whitney Museum's coat check into a system of chimes (*Coat Check Chimes*, 2008).

The work in "Crickets for Solo and Ensemble" started in 2009, when Thomson and composer Michael Webster began exploring whether cricket "songs" (produced when the nocturnal insects rub their wings together to drive away or attract one another) could be reproduced by musicians. Later, Thomson found source material in a French record compiling decades of field recordings of crickets from all over the world, and 25 tracks from that record—some lasting seconds, others minutes—were turned into a score. An ensemble played the work in live performances, first in Los Angeles for the multi-venue exhibition project "Pacific Standard Time" (2012) and then in Manhattan on the High Line (2013). Along the way, Thomson recorded

solos—with flutists, violinists and percussionists—and gathered 17 of the musicians for a film shoot in a black-box theater.

The focal point of this exhibition was the 17-minute video that resulted from the shoot, which was projected large-scale so that it nearly filled the wall of a darkened gallery. This was a serious affair: Webster conducted, and the musicians, who wore formal attire, were instructed to avoid “conventional expressive musical sounds,” according to performance notes in a book published in association with the project. Subtitles on-screen convey details about the original recordings, such as the locations (including Borneo, Thailand and Cameroon), the non-cricket sounds that are mixed in (like those of frogs or goats), and the years (from 1971 to 1998). The ear searches for acoustic differences arising from the changing variables, and the mind ponders connections between the sound-making movements of insects and those of musicians.

Outside the room with the video, a framed edition of the conductor’s score lined a wall. Produced without ink so that the printing-plate impressions are all you see, these works on paper have a light touch that seems appropriate to this act of translation. Downstairs, in a small gallery, the exhibition’s third component used similarly minimal means to harness the wild: 11 cricket “solos” played from tiny speakers contained in small, handmade wire cages. The beauty of Thomson’s attempts to represent nature through conceptual strategies is that, paradoxically, they drain it of its magic. The results suggest the impossibility of the task, and in so doing evoke the particular wonders of nature and of art.