

BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF GALLERY

132 East 68th Street New York, NY 10065

William Anastasi: Sound Works, 1963–2013 By William Corwin

October 2013

William Anastasi is “piping to the spirit ditties of no-tone.” In his retrospective at the Leubsdorf Gallery at Hunter College, curated by Maxim Weintraub, Anastasi’s ready-made “The World’s Greatest Music,” (1977) hits all the notes. The piece consists of three colorful children’s turntables playing records from the series, “World’s Greatest Music.” Each of the records—Brahms, Wagner, and Mozart, have reached the no man’s land at the end of the disc, and spin eternally, producing the familiar crackling sound. At the core of Anastasi’s practice is the Cagean concept of the impossibility of silence.

Though Anastasi deals in very straightforward conceptual cause/effect pairings, there is a strain of sentimentality and personal narrative that causes the work to be very warm. “Sound Object [Radiator],” (1964/2013) is an endearing entity, a small cast iron radiator, ubiquitous in any pre-war apartment in New York, sandwiched between two speakers that at one time (the piece has since been digitally reconfigured) played the random clanking and hissing that many city dwellers know so well. This little object with its plaintive anthem, is exhibited with many similar pieces, including “Microphone” (1963), and “Sound Object [Pneumatic Drill]” (1964/2013), and “Sound Object [Fan]” (1964/2013) in the gallery window on 68th Street. These pieces, taken together, as most were in Anastasi’s “Sound Objects” exhibition at the Dwan gallery in 1966, create a cacophony of banal object’s voices that often go unheard. “The World’s Greatest Music” similarly derives from the artist’s polio-induced convalescence; his father presented him with the record set to listen to while he lay in bed.

The drawings in the exhibition hinge on a graphic response to sonic/sensory input. Were one able to develop the correct algorithm, feeding Anastasi’s drawings into this equation would yield the same music as the original score. A hybrid piece “Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony” (1965) lies in between drawing and sculpture, and presents a physical counterpoint to Bruno Walter’s interpretation of Beethoven’s masterpiece. Hung from two nails spaced on the wall at the height of the artist’s outstretched arms, the unspooled cassette tape is draped down the wall to the floor. These loops and twisted lines, loaded with the electromagnetic potential to render sound are mirrored on an adjoining wall by “One Hour with Graphite” (2013) created in the gallery itself, wherein the sound of the artist drawing was recorded.

In between these two larger pieces are three memorials to John Cage, with whom Anastasi played chess almost every day beginning in 1977. On two clipboards, one by the artist (1993), a second by Merce Cunningham, and a third, framed, by Jasper Johns, are 8.5 by 11 inch “Sound Drawings” (all 1993) with recorders. Each gently reminding the viewer that whether intrinsic to the artist’s practice or not, there is always a soundtrack to the generative process.

The 50 years of artistic production on display are tied together by a poetic randomness that while maintaining a practical distance from the subject, in the end exposes a more tender and sentimental vision less interested in materiality and much more concerned with story. “Window on an Airshaft” (1964) is an extraordinary work in which Anastasi somehow managed to get permission from his landlord to remove a window from his tenement apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and recreate an airshaft, with a day’s worth of sounds welling up from within. Though it is fundamentally nothing more than a recording of a specific site within a gallery-sized recreation of that location, the sounds of couples arguing, music wafting off the radio, and children yelling transfixes the viewer (or listener). It is as if one is standing backstage at a play.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/11/artseen/william-anastasi-sound-works-1963-2013>