

Questions for Q&A with Squidsoup

A discussion with Philippa Adams, curator of Squidsoup's 'Lost in Light' solo exhibition at 118 Curtain Road, Shoreditch, London.

November 2024

General

Philippa Adams: Your installations often take place in unconventional and interesting spaces. How do you think the work for this particular show creates a dialogue with the architecture, history and culture of shoreditch?

Anthony Rowe: We've always liked the idea of a dialogue between the work and the space it inhabits; and seeing how that dialogue completes the work. Our works don't exist in a vacuum, and any kind of spatial work is going to have an impact on, and be impacted by, the space it occupies.

There are five main spaces in the gallery, so we needed to work out what would work in each, but also how the spaces interconnect, and what the final visitor journey is. Together, the works create a narrative arc, collectively building an evolving story. The meandering route we have designed through the space I hope adds to that sense of journey, through a range of territories, moods, atmospheres. These moods and atmospheres definitely result from the 'discussion' you mentioned; the graffiti on the walls, the echo, the dingy corridors and stairwells between the works all give additional flavour to that journey.

Shoreditch also has a special resonance for Squidsoup, as our first two studios were here – Hoxton Square, then Rivington Street, in the late 90s. They were for me highly formative years. Although the area has been through various phases since then, it still retains its grimy underbelly, and wears it with pride.

PA: How inspired were you when I first invited you to walk round this abandoned building?

AR: (laughs) I remember that first visit vividly. These strange cavernous rooms, untouched since they were a squat in the 80s or early 90s. The 'Kill The Bill' graffiti took me right back to anti-Thatcher protests. Stalactites coming down from the ceiling where the flat roof had leaked over the years. Liam and I were immediately imagining what we could do with the spaces, creating hidden gems in the filth. Anything could happen in this space; its labyrinthine nature could turn the venue into a game of hide-and-seek; its dank smell, darkness and low ceilings creating strange oppressive claustrophobic atmospheres. And again, this feeling of returning to our roots was strong; I definitely felt that our work would belong here!

PA: For this particular show, you are revealing two new pieces from the studio, Infinite and Three Volumes, alongside your more celebrated installations. Besides the building lending itself so generously to each work, tell us a little about them, the process, they are very different pieces to have been developing simultaneously.

What new aspects do the world premiers shown in the upcoming exhibition bring to the table? How do they differ from your previous installations?

AR: They are quite different. We have a few technological approaches that we use, and further develop and refine for each work, a little like learning to paint with a new brush, or colour.

I feel that *Infinite* is possibly the last word in our 'Audiowave' series – a series of works that started with *Field* (2016) and incorporates works such as *Wave* (2018 – commissioned by Salisbury Cathedral) and *Murmuration* (2019 – commissioned by Scottsdale Museum). The works all use hundreds of individual orbs, each comprising a processor (ESP32), LEDs and a speaker, giving us the ability to create truly spatialised sound as well as lightscapes, with over 350 speakers. The core of the work is a never-ending series of algorithmically generated randomised chords. The resulting chord sequences are at times quite achingly beautiful, made as they are of individual notes coming from a cluster of speakers. Chords and light emerging in groups like clouds.

Three Volumes is a new take on our *Submergence* project (since 2013, and actually the basis of my PhD thesis). *Submergence* is a walkthrough environment that runs through a sequence of movements that, over time, gradually build to a crescendo. With *Three Volumes*, we wanted to present multiple media textures simultaneously, as floating objects. The three parts each have different cycles meaning that at times they are all on, sometime one or two will be active and, occasionally, almost nothing will be happening. People can then explore each volume in turn, or mix the three together as they navigate through the space. The idea of having multiple complex sound sources in physical space is a theme we first visited with an early project called *AltZero2* (1999, shown at the ICA). As soon as the ground floor space was turned into a long white cube, we knew that this was the opportunity to finally make *Three Volumes*.

PA: As a collective, how do you find the process of collaboration and togetherness is filtered through into the work?

AR: Squidsoup is currently 10 people, each with different skillsets. These projects are fairly technically complex, physically complex and creatively complex – it's very hard to find one person who can do all aspects of such multidisciplinary projects.

[The name Squidsoup emerged from this multidisciplinary notion. Although the name actually came from the best dish in a favourite South-East Asian restaurant, the rationale is that a good soup has a lot of different ingredients in it, and tentacles reaching outwards into different disciplines.

The development process, and indeed the somewhat fraught installation process here at 118 Curtain Road, has been a team effort at a very fundamental level.]

PA: What's the process when working with musicians? Is there a back and forth between their sound and your visuals, or are you given free reign to develop your response?

AR: This depends on the musician, and also the scenario. When working on installations, it is usually a very embedded process, where the music, concept and lighting emerge together as a whole. For that reason, most of our installation sounds are now made by us, and a sonic idea is often at the heart of the work.

When working with live artists, different rules apply. When we first discussed working methods with Four Tet, for example, his approach was *serendipity* – ‘you do what you do, I’ll do what I do, and let’s see if it works’. The first attempt left a fair amount to be desired as we were not skilled at VJing, but we’re quick learners; and the results rapidly became unique and interesting. The lighting patterns are all triggered manually, there is no timeline, no click track or anything; Four Tet will play live and we do our best to follow and respond.

PA: Your installations appeal to both adults and children. Do you consider there to be a potential for learning about the sensory and scientific world through your installations, as well as an aesthetic impact? You’ve run workshops in the past, are you planning more to coincide with this exhibition?

We have been exploring the potential of our work to educate and explain scientific processes – we have just finished a project with the Manchester Science Museum on how the brain works, a collaboration with neuroscientist Adrian M Owen (@comadork).

PA: Your work acts as a gateway for newcomers not previously familiar with exhibitions to become interested or entranced by contemporary art. How do you feel your work allows newcomers the freedom to develop the contemporary art conversation, without direct interactivity? (a technique used by artists such as teamLab)

AR: We’ve always been very keen to break through the silos of ‘fine art’, to get our art into as many contexts as possible, and to engage with as broad a demographic as we can – from families walking in a park during a winter light festival, to live gigs, galleries and installations in remote or secret locations that nobody knows about.

Our work can be quite ‘entrancing’ as you put it, and easy to enjoy, and accessible. We believe the works also have a rigorous conceptual underpinning though, so there is meat below the glossy surface for those who want it. And we know from putting the works inside art galleries that they do draw in a broader audience than more conventional exhibitions – surely a good way to encourage engagement with contemporary art.

Touring and Locations

PA: You’ve generated a lot of support in places like Texas and Hong Kong, why do you think your work appeals specifically to these markets? Do you have any permanent installations?

AR: I think the techniques we use, the abstract and non-verbal nature of our work, lends itself to international audiences. We have shown our work on six continents. We currently have two

permanent installations: *Shoal* is just outside Houston TX, and *Volume 4,096* is in Wellington, New Zealand.

PA: Is there a specific place in the globe you'd love to exhibit?

AR: *Antarctica is the only continent we've not shown our work...*

PA: Do you find that international sites where you exhibit generate inspiration for future works? Were either *Infinite* or *Three Volumes* site-specific to Curtain Call, Shoreditch?

AR: Our works are flexible by nature, and scalable. So they can be designed to fit within a broad range of locations. And as we were discussing before, the works are in permanent dialogue with the spaces they are in – each time we put an artwork up it develops a unique timbre and feel. *Submergence* has now been shown well over 100 times, and each one really has been different!

Infinite and *Three Volumes* were both ideas we had been working on theoretically for a while, but it was when seeing the spaces at 118 Curtain Road that we felt their time had come. And undoubtedly, the location had a strong effect on how we developed the works.

PA: *Submergence* is so far your most exhibited installation, having been shown over 100 times on six continents. Where has your favourite rendition of this work been held and how do you find the nature of the work is changed by its place of installation?

AR: *Submergence* was shown in Athens a couple of years ago, suspended from a massive geodesic dome in Stavros Niarchos park. It looked and felt pretty good there, in the warm Greek winter. It also looked at its pristine best in a black cube at Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. I really like it in Curtain Road too – the way it responds to the graffiti on the walls is excellent.

And I'll never forget the first ever time it was shown, in Galleri ROM in Oslo in 2013 – but that was at least partly just the relief that the idea worked!

Process and Inspirations

PA: *The new piece Infinite brings to mind biological systems and swarms which have often been likened to the functioning of the digital networks, the modern internet and computers. From the standpoint of technologists are you directly interested in researching and referencing these connections in your new work?*

AR: I love that take on the work! It is endlessly fascinating to hear how people interpret our projects; what they see in them. I really do believe that is a far more powerful and imaginative form of interaction than pressing buttons, using sensors etc. Imaginative interpretation.

In my mind, the piece is an impossible orchestra, where musical notes appear in ephemeral clusters of sound, light, energy, that disappear as quickly as they emerge. But you're right, there is a lot of similarity between Infinite and the concepts of neural networks both digital and biological.

As a group we are interested in research, several of us are or have been academics as well, but I think most of our works emerge from an idea of a feeling or an emotion that can't be explained in words. If we come across a technological process that enables us to make a rough sketch of that feeling, we'll give it our all.

PA: The title of one of your studio works is 'Singularity' which brings to mind the AI Singularity, how do technological developments such as Artificial intelligence influence your aesthetic choices?

AR: We discuss AI a fair amount. It is very much a current subject, and its potential is immense and unpredictable. We have different views on the subject. My own is that it is already a powerful tool, but it is being developed for the wrong reasons. I see a future drowned by AI media, content, data, where reality and fiction become more and more blurred. Data is not truth, information is not wisdom...

PA: Are there other artists working in similar mediums across the globe whose work you feel an affinity with? From UVA to TeamLab or James Turrell come to mind. Do you feel there is a general shift or movement right now within the field of light art?

AR: The West Coast light and space movement (including Turrell) and also the New York minimalism scene were both revolutionary in the 60s and 70s, as were the musical minimalists (Young, Riley, Glass, Reich etc) - absolute go-tos for me. I often also reference Rafael Soto's penetrable works as a source of great inspiration (I also reference the humble LED cube as a source of inspiration). There is a lot of interesting work currently out there, as the technology becomes more accessible and usable, more artists are getting into it – and coming up with amazing work, both physical and virtual.

Future plans

PA: Would you be interested in pursuing future partnerships with other musicians or even artists working in different mediums such as dance or performance?

AR: Yes definitely. In fact we are doing an event in Hong Kong next week where we'll be working with a range of artists from contemporary dancers to a locally famous boy band! That will be a one-off and hopefully quite fun, but yes we're always on the lookout for interesting new collaborators – preferably longer term ones, where the ideas and synergies have a chance to develop and flower.