

Eight Emperor Penguins Sang a Dirge

an audio installation by **David Simons**

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The Cargo Cults of Melanesia provide an interesting parallel to late 20th century urban viewpoints. As isolated primitive island cultures first encountered the jettisoned cargo and later the steady supply of food not in a natural state (tins, boxes, prepared, instant), they attached a mythology to it: these gifts came from the Gods afar. Later on, of course, they had serious political problems with the colonialist attitude and arrangement.

In our present lives, we go into a supermarket and buy cargo that comes from afar, usually not native grown. And at the checkout counter shrieking headlines of scandal sheets proclaim, "ELVIS DELIVERED MY TWO HEADED BABY ABOARD A UFO" . . . kidnapped by Aliens again. Our civilization has created its own mythology of Vulcans and Klingons and the resurrection of a crucified entertainer, a modern Frankenstein. This is just something we humans need to do: create mythology.

Is Earth now quarantined by the superior intelligence of an Inter-Galactic Federation because we're as dangerous as the savage Hawaiians that killed Captain Cook? Or are we being subtly manipulated through the mass media and the arts, softened up for eventual colonization by interplanetary aggressors?

EIGHT EMPEROR PENGUINS SANG A DIRGE is an installation that uses text, music, images and sculptural musical instruments to bring home the point that our so-called advanced civilization is not fundamentally different from our "primitive" cousins, in terms of how a society embraces the unknown future. Texts and scores are exhibited from Alien Communications Research Project, which was founded to bring a new theory of musical composition into practice - that playing scores from outer space sources broadcast with right intention would alert extra terrestrials (monitoring our radio and psychic wavelengths) and invite or elicit a response from them. Documentation includes star charts, graphs of radio emissions, symbology from the planet LISHTA and their English language message.

A brief description of early 20th century Cargo Cult practices, and an excerpt from Sir Ernest Shackleton's diary of his failed Antarctic expedition are juxtaposed with a comic book description of the UFO myth-in-progress. Why does an explorer have to be a cultural imperialist?

Two 40 foot audio tape loops form an anthropomorphic X with a video monitor as its head. One tape combines wood, skin and metal percussion with Balinese vocalisms, while the other tape plays STAR TREK dialogue over a bed of Tibetan chants. The video will show excerpts of work including SECOND SKIN, a collaboration with dancers as "take up reels" for the mutable audio tape sculpture. By tightening their pressure on the tape, the speed and pitch of sound are altered.

I have constructed, out of natural South Pacific island materials, "primitive" musical instruments: bamboo buzzing sticks, coconut shell drums, dried seed pod shakers. In one corner is a Clap On/ClapOff cassette player (activated by the audience) with a composition entitled "Commercial Music" - made out of actual TV commercials collaged and edited, with an original soundtrack to hold it together. The modern "art form" of advertising is inescapable now.

The more our civilization incorporates different cultural ideas and practices, or wipes them out for the sake of homogeneity, the more assimilation becomes repellant to purists and fundamentalists of both sides. Sacred and practical traditions are lost or perverted. Blood lines are diluted and mixed. And yet it seems crucial that we as a planet must cohere because we have and will be faced with a massive test of unity. Aside from Mutually Assured Self Destruction from nuclear weapons, and pollution from toxic and mutagenic elements due to over-industrialization, there is another heightening strain of warning: that early in the new millennium Earth will be invaded and an attempt at colonization will be made by beings from another planet.

This installation is just a scarecrow, a penguin singing its dirge as the wooden ship is slowly crushed by ice with the relentless and inevitable pressure of Time. A museum of vanishing cultures.

- **DAVID SIMONS**

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