

## City Loops

Zita Joyce

178

Zita Joyce

Fifteen loops around the Christchurch tram track, between 2003 and 2009. A looping of sounds: wheels on tracks, creaking of woodwork, loose slapping and rattling of handstraps, slowing to a stop and beginning again at intersections, a signalling bell. A looping of sights – cathedral, square, boulevard, art gallery, arts centre, museum, bridge club, hotels, parks, cafes, shops.

*Trambience* began at the end of 2003, growing out of distance and a need to reconnect with the space, sounds, and potential of the city Adam Willetts and I grew up in. We read about a performance project in Bergen using a public trolley bus on a hillside route around the city. The Christchurch tram was an inversion of that: a tourist ride little used by locals, the derided flat rollercoaster going nowhere around a few central blocks, demarcating the city's English heritage, its nineteenth century buildings and sites of colonial significance. Our audience was used to being on the outside of trams, observed by passing visitors through windows, waiting for them at intersections, navigating bicycle

tyres around the tracks. We knew their sounds, the bell rung twice on leaving a stop, the rumbles and resonances of different street and bridge surfaces.

*Trambience* brought locals inside, turning the long narrow spaces into a performance venue, a kind of corridor on tracks that stretches audience and musicians in a row, facing towards and away from one another. Some carriages are divided into sections, with indoor and outdoor seating, glass partitions, canvas sides. Inside there are warm worn wooden fittings, leather hand straps, gold-painted lettering ('Motorman's exit only') and brass plates ('Spitting in the car is STRICTLY PROHIBITED'). Looking outwards familiar shapes are framed and distanced through glass, the motion of the tram lulling into quiet contemplation of buildings and spaces.

For most *Trambiences* the audience would board the tram at once and travel together through sounds both interior and exterior, three times around the city loop in the hour. One loop is for the novelty,



the pleasure of the moving space itself, re-seeing familiar sights out the windows. By the third loop the mind drifts, moving over surfaces, beyond the immediate view, and listening becomes more relaxed. The closeness of the space was always a bit uncomfortable, listening faces adjusted self consciously when facing or catching the eye of another careful listener. Someone was always sitting right next to a performer, watching but trying not to stare.

Each *Trambience* was documented on video; recording the space, performers, and audience, but often watching out the windows, contemplating the city outside in the space of the music:

#### **Loops 1 – 3: 18 December 2003**

The video begins in the tramshed in Tramway Lane on tram 244, which is broken into indoor and outdoor sections. Sarah Peebles, visiting the Physics Room from Canada, and Adam Willetts, are setting up, arranging computers and devices on a seat, the floor, settling into the space. The tram moves out to Worcester St, the camera traces the turn, past 'Little Bosnia', the Press building, and around the cathedral. It's quiet, nervous laughter, feeling the movement and timing of the space. At the Cathedral Square stop an audience embarks. Adam begins. Bright electronic tones gurgle along with the tram's bassline of shakes, shudders and rolling rumble, as motion-sensing gamepads translate its movement into musical control data. Outside is high contrast, dark shadows on white buildings and blue sky. Sarah layers field recordings of Tokyo and Christchurch around the streets. Bird song as we travel towards the museum, straight into the bright summer's late evening sun. Waiting for another tram to move on in New Regent Street, the chug of the waiting tram, festive laughter from a bar.

#### **Loops 4 – 6; 5 September 2004**

Documented by two short pieces of video. One is on YouTube: Greg Malcolm and Chris O'Connor explain their process in front of the tramshed, fragments of performance

are filmed from the next seat, a camera mounted on the front of the tram fast forwards just above the road. The other video watches out the open carriage door moving through the square. The Post Office building and bare trees are floodlit, an audience waits under streetlights. Greg and Chris sit across from each other on benches along the carriage sides; guitar and tools opposite small drum kit, gongs and bells hanging from the rails. Their music sways in time with the tram's movement through a dark winter night, enveloping the audience in the warmth of acoustic sound, golden wood. The camera watches through a glass partition, reflecting audience members against the musicians, while the sounds of the tram layer against the music. Fragments of voices remark on the ride, the view, the motion. Streetlights, headlights, and pale night-time buildings are glimpsed through the windows.

#### **Loops 7 – 9; 28 February 2009**

The recording begins at the tramstop outside Christchurch Art Gallery. It's grey and damp early evening as tram 278 arrives. Unseen waiting audience members chatter, the tram squeals and chugs on stopping. The members of Hot Solder are distributed through the single-spaced carriage, each with a homemade synthesiser and amp. This ride is all crunches and squalls, clicks, beeps, howls, a building momentum of hand-built circuits. The tram's indicator, brakes and wipers blend in and out of the synth noise. Through the rain the camera traces grey stone buildings, trees, people staring in at the sound, lights flaring on raindrops. In the third loop we stop for other trams to move ahead, and wait with a howling of synths and counterpoint of windscreen wipers, with rain and a glistening Cathedral Square out the window. Near the end the carriage is filled with tourist overflow from other trams, with the promise that the music will only last another three stops. There are jokes, complaints, a sense of mild panic. A man asks if this is 'normal music' for New Zealanders.

#### **Loops 10 – 15; 1 March 2009**

The video shows a perfect sunny Sunday afternoon. For the first time, this *Trambience* is an open event, a free get on / get off circuit of the city. Some people board knowing that something is happening, others come for the free ride, others are confronted to find such a racket going on. Greg Malcolm begins, guitar and amplifier set up across the back of tram 278, quietly picking out an accompanying rhythmic tune, overwhelmed by massed bagpipers as we pass through the Square. Outside people stroll along Worcester Boulevard, there are vintage cars and then a brass band outside the Art Gallery, Hot Solder are busking outside the museum, a Dixie band plays on another tram. The city is relaxed and festive. The carriage is full of chatter and children, a small girl leans out the window marvelling at stilt walkers.

An elderly lady disembarks and thanks us sweetly for the experience as Grunge Genesis begin gently with Richard Neave on shamisen, Adam Willetts on kokle, Shannon O'Brien on recorder. As the trip wears on the momentum builds. On New Regent St Shannon paces the tram and the street outside, sampling himself on an old tape deck, 'sorry for the inappropriate music', while Richard and Greg play on quietly in the back of the carriage. Shannon plays melodica out the window at the Square, briefly drowning out the bagpipers. People get off. Richard on acoustic guitar, Shannon on bells, Adam bangs a gong. Greg gets off and sets up to play on the Worcester St Bridge. People come and go. Shannon shouts out at the Arts Centre market 'It's free! It's free! The tram's free today, unlike the usual quotidian extortion experience, get on the tram today, but you're paying a



Trambience 2 (5/9/04). Greg Malcolm and Chris O'Connor. Video still, YouTube user 'Zeitstar'

price'. People hold on to the hand straps in the aisle. The driver jokes to passengers to come on board at their own risk. They laugh nervously and enter, staying on for a stop or a loop or more. Richard plays Japanese flute. Shannon sings a song about rugby. Over and over again I explain at the door that there's going to be loud music on this tram. Finally, for the last run down Worcester Street, Richard plugs in his electric guitar. Most passengers flee as he stands barefoot at the end of the aisle and begins. Heads turn on the street outside, the fudge seller in Victorian dress on the bridge blocks her ears, a man headbangs into the window by the Arts Centre.

Travelling together around Christchurch, the beautiful wooden interiors of the tram carriages contained us in space, connected by the shared experience of the performances. A grand kind of shared walkman, or car stereo, *Trambience* was a time for collective contemplation of sound, the city, and each other.



Trambience 4 (1/3/09). Shannon O'Brien and Richard Neave. Video still, Sally McIntyre.