



David Byrne: Playing a Building
as seen
or
EXPERIENCED
by
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I've been riding my bike alot. Not necessarily frequently, but for hours on end, miles upon miles at a time. It is a great way to see unfamiliar parts of the city (and get out of them as the case may be). Recently, I've been trying to get as far from my home in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood as I can before realizing getting back will be a near impossible task. Last week, this found me on Manhattan's Upper West side, somewhere around 110th St and Riverside Drive. On my last trip, I wanted to ride around the borders of the island, making my way from the west side around the tip of the island and back up the east. The nerd in me wants to call myself a bipedular flaneur - the cool guy in me tells him to shut up and that bipedular probably isn't a word. In short, my bike tourings brought me yesterday to Manhattan's southern-most point where any number of ferries arrive/depart and David Byrne has not just written a song about a building (or food), but actually made an instrument out of one.

When I first heard of the exhibit, I thought to myself, "What's next? 'David Byrne plays the cheeseburger?'" Either that or it is just a wet dream of his finally come to fruition. Jokes aside, as I rounded the corner by the Staten Island Ferry, I came to the exhibit and had to stop my tourism to join other foot tourists to see what he had done. ~~was~~ As you may know, I am a pretty large Talking Heads fan, owning all of their records on vinyl and seeking out bootlegs of live concerts both in audio and video formats. Walking in, I signed a release to enter as admission is absolutely free, which, as a fairly broke person, was nice.

You round a winding staircase, industrially lit with exposed lightbulbs, carefully placed to help you navigate what may otherwise be a treacherous ~~and~~ path. At the top of the stairs, a dim room that looks almost like a closed-off loading dock of sorts with two ramps that lead nowhere. Turning a corner, a brightly lit room (from a skylight running the length of the room) with thirty to fifty people in it, meandering around and standing in line. Those waiting are doing so for their chance to try their hand at a modified pipe organ with electrical wires running from its inner workings. The wires trigger various effects from the vibrating of four large columns ostensibly keeping the roof up, to blowing air through pipes high on the walls, to hammers banging on radiators in a sort of street percussionists style. Each person approaches, musician or not, with the hope that the sounds they will create will be satisfying to them.

The result is a dischordant, nightmarish sound found more commonly during climactic scenes in horror films. The most common sounds played are the more melodious pipes which emanate a sort of hollow, breathy flute sound which is still altogether dischordant. They get held down as the clanking of radiators interrupts in very stacatto fashion, doing nothing to help melody. The low grinding of the columns makes a significantly more infrequent appearance, usually by those brave enough to "experiment" with the experimental music.

It strikes me as odd because this form of music, when practiced by musicians themselves - see John Cage or Lou Reed's "Metal Machine Music" - is generally unpopular to the general public. But this is different. This is the people themselves creating the dischord. Between the actual sounds coming from the building and the occasional thrush of voices echoing throughout the warehouse walls, the people are the ones creating the experience. There is no maestro, no elitist musician, to present this to the people - which is why I think they tolerate it. It is incredibly egalitarian, and people are fascinated by it. Some even applaud when a player gets up from the seat. Byrne, here, I believe, has achieved bringing free music to the masses (and not just because there is no admission fee).

Needless to say, it was an incredibly interesting experience and certainly worth your time if you are in the New York area any time soon. Just don't wander around too much finding yourself walking through a security door that once you pass through, you can't go back in and have to go back to the entrance to start all over again, as happened to me.

Cheers,
e.

PS - I think this installation is also great as an example of the necessity to preserve old buildings and fight the urge to constantly destroy and rebuild for the sake of modernization. Remember history!