

Elisabeth Mahoney: Earworms, Cardigan Pool

Civilization ends at the waterline.

Hunter S. Thompson

Take a music bath once or twice a week for a few seasons, and you will find that it is to the soul what the water bath is to the body.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Cardigan is closed to traffic when I arrive on a sleety afternoon in late April. A lone policeman languidly waves cars away, pointing them vaguely into the Ceredigion countryside. Nobody in this sleepy market town in west Wales seems to mind the delay and diversion; there is no road rage, or sense of urgency.

After the hold-up I've got less than an hour to make it to my destination: the local swimming baths, where I'm hoping to experience Yvonne Buchheim's underwater sound installation, Earworms. This draws on the artist's archive of over 800 informal recordings of people singing songs of their choice in Europe, the U.S and Iran. I abandon the car, and set off on foot. The sleet has turned to sharp hail, and I'm getting very funny looks when I ask passersby where the pool is.

A few wrong turns later, and I'm now running through the hail into the centre of town. Crowds line the streets, and nobody else has a rolled towel and swimming costume under their arm: they are here, I find out, for Barley Saturday, an annual parade of horses, vintage tractors and fancy agricultural vehicles. Stallions clip-clop by, bells and ribbons in their manes, and it turns out we are going the same way, as all the horse boxes are in the swimming pool car park. "Follow the ponies," is the weirdest set of directions I've ever had for visiting an exhibition.

The pool, in an unprepossessing modern block, is almost empty thanks to the event outside and there are just three of us in the water. This gives me a near-private view of Buchheim's work – view isn't quite the right term, though, as there's deliberately nothing to see in the pool area – detached from the usual atmosphere, noise and rituals of a busy swimming pool on a Saturday afternoon. But the peace and calm of the space, after such a boisterous and unlikely journey to get here, dramatically underlines the fact that swimming is about slipping into another realm. It's about temporarily shedding some, or all, of what you bring to the pool's edge as you enter the

watery world of weightlessness and, in Buchheim's intervention, rich, imaginative possibility. Civilization, as Hunter S. Thompson mooted, ends at the waterline. Or at least, it's put on hold.

One of the things I like most about Earworms is its playful, thoughtful oscillation between public space and private, personal or secret experience. This begins with the collection of songs. Buchheim asks individuals – on the street, in shops, in different countries and cultures, but always strangers in public – if she can record them singing a song. These are not performers, or professional singers, and the vast majority decline. Those that sing, do so alone and unaccompanied, unaided too by karaoke lyrics on screen, just as they might when thinking themselves unheard in a quiet, or private, nook of daily life.

In the pool, it's the same creative juxtaposition of hidden and suddenly present. Apart from an easily-missed information leaflet at the pool's reception, there is nothing to tell you that an artwork lurks unseen within the water. It's possible to swim entirely unaware of it if you don't venture underwater. Pool staff report that one swimmer thought she was hearing things; another heard the sounds but her friend swimming alongside didn't. I compare notes with the other swimmers after my visit and none of us recall the same songs. Like memory and dreams, which this installation reminds you of, the experience here is random, fluid, personal, fleeting and unreliable. Weeks later, I'm not sure if I heard a burst of a particular song (I Never Promised You a Rose Garden), or if I've heard it someone since and blurred the two together.

Buchheim is not alone in exploring the artistic potential of a public, liquid setting. Last month, Juliana Snapper presented an underwater opera, *You Who Will Emerge From The Flood*, at Manchester's defunct Victoria baths. Composer Michel Redolfi has staged over 150 underwater concerts since 1981, including *The Liquid City* at the Venice Biennale in 2006, aiming to immerse audiences, he says, in "a bath of sound". And last year's Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival in Florida was given an U.S. presidential election theme, with Reefpublicans pitted against Democrabs. Thankfully, the Democrabs won.

The idea of a bath of sound, or as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, a "music bath" comes close to the feeling of Buchheim's installation. It is a whole body experience; you can only hear it when immersed in water, and you are as you listen enveloped by the water carrying the sound. There are the obvious reasons why floating in water is soothing, with its echo of the womb, but

Buchheim's use of the amateur singers gives her installation an edge over formal, polished spectacles staged underwater. There is something deeply affecting, listening to someone sing a favourite song alone, inevitably revealing something of themselves to us as they do – why else would so many dodge doing so? Buchheim embellishes this by deliberately leaving gaps between songs, and these offer a space of reflection (*What song would I choose? How would I sound? What was that last one called? My neck hurts in this position. How silly must I look?*) in the midst of what is an intense and charismatic individual journey through a secret, submerged sound archive. Many of us ponder how to open up the experience of contemporary art to wider audiences, and to demystify the gallery for visitors without having to sideline rigorous, challenging artworks in the process. Earworms achieves all this, not least because to experience it is necessarily to engage with it as you float or swim. But it also underpins the uncomplicated physical pleasure of listening, suspended in water, with a strong undercurrent of ideas – ideas about where the bodily meets the imaginative; how performative it is to sing to a stranger, or listen to the results in a public pool; how an unseen, seemingly silent intervention alters the familiar, echoey soundscape of the municipal swimming baths; how perception is a collision of traces that seep away as fast as you can identify them.

The last song I hear, floating on my back, eyes closed, is Que Sera Sera, the anonymous singer a bit shaky on the verses but relieved and emboldened with each chorus. It's a fitting end to my experience of Earworms, with its celebration of the randomness of things ("whatever will be, will be") - the theme that quietly emerges from this barely-there public installation in west Wales one Barley Saturday.