

ABANDON NORMAL DEVICES

Digital Dark Ages

If you wanted to distil a definition of ‘Englishness’, in both its positive and negative senses, you could do worse than explore the winding streets of Castleton, Derbyshire. Historic caverns, knick-knack shops, potholes, tearooms, outdoor suppliers and quaint pubs, all overlaid with National Trust ‘visitor experience’ marketing, Perfect Curve style. The famous English eccentricity is there too, with the legendary ‘Cameron’s Emporium’ and its quirky owner who proudly offers free Max Bygraves LPs to ‘non-purchasers’, and one of the main cave attractions with a big sign: ‘Welcome to the Devil’s Arse.’ You can’t help but be slightly won over by this singular image of sturdy individualism, even though we are probably in the heart of Brexit-land. Imagine taking such a place and refitting it with a very European media and sonic art festival such as the recently established roaming biennale *Abandon Normal Devices*, which promises ‘Vertical Adventures, Experiments in Digital Culture, Art and New Cinema’, ‘revealing the earth’s layers, from the drone’s-eye view to deep into subterranean fear-inducing bunkers’. Definitely more Berlin currywurst than Kendal mint cake.

To really bring the tourist infrastructure to life and, I suggest, to justify getting access to some prized underground sites, AND has commissioned an extraordinarily successful temporary public land art exhibit and soundscape by Daan Roosegard *Waterlicht*, which fills the V-shaped valley of Winnats Pass with swirling watery clouds. LED-lit, it dramatically recreates the historical pre-Ice Age water levels and shows how contemporary art strategies can attract thousands of people to a remote area. On the night I saw it, at least 6,000 people (and their cars) had arrived in this village of 300 inhabitants. People seemed to really enjoy it.

The payoff is the way in which the festival has managed to integrate itself into this quirky touristic village infrastructure by utilising the three main cavern attractions and yet not pulling its punches when it comes to the art. The main way of seeing the cave part of this festival – because of the controlled nature of the terrain, which is slippery, precipitous and sometimes claustrophobic – is the guided tour, although there are some outdoor works.

Director Gabriella Jenks stresses that this is about the vertical – from the aerial view to the deep earth.

Deep time also features strongly, most specifically in the ‘below ground’ section, specifically in the exhibit ‘Digital Dark Ages’ at Treak Cliff Cavern. Described variously as ‘artists’ skunkworks’ and ‘cultural fracking’, many of these artists deliberately subvert what have now become art-science conventions. Notably, Shift Register (Jamie Allen and Martin Howse), whose *Earth Observatory Array Elements* is presented in the documentation and by the guides as an underground neutrino detector similar to Rutherford Appleton’s Bowlby mine further north of here, ‘countering the decay of all signals emitted since the big bang’. Well, yes, an ambitious aim. One thinks of Will Self’s comment on the Large Hadron Collider at CERN: ‘It doesn’t look to me like the rose window of Notre-Dame. It looks like a filthy big machine down a hole.’

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Once the seed of disbelief is sown by this piece it is hard to take seriously the notion that Charlotte Jarvis’s bubble machines really use bioinformatics technology to encode a recording by the Kreutzer Quartet into DNA which literally bathes the audience in music; in order to listen to the complete recording you need to sequence the DNA. In this vein, Martha McGuinn has devised a fossilising machine that appears to synthesise the natural physical processes of petrification as seen in these spectacular caves. Her machine pushes down with incredible pressure on (maybe) layers of fossilised ... teddy bears. Only Thomas Thwaites and Sam Lavigne seem to be making some kind of non-fictional statements. Thwaites is, of course, famous for making a toaster from scratch and for attempting to become a goat, and here he turns discarded hard drives into stalactites and stalacmites.

Lavigne’s *Deep Time Decryption* takes layers of found material from Homeland Security educational videos and applies them to concepts of geological time.

This links well to the all-Mexican augmented-reality exhibition/hike ‘Your Wall is My Filter Bubble’ curated by Doreen A Rios and Matthew Plummer-Fernandez with various geolocated images and animations that reflect the US/Mexico border wall, the corruption of Enrique Peña Nieto’s government and, of course, He Who Shall Not Be Named. The most effective of these were the dancing bacteria animations of Arcangelo Constantini, which filled the grey skies above Castleton with twirling, mutant Mayan extraterrestrial entities, and Alfredo Salazar-Caro’s *Peña Fiel* – a fountain of money raining down on an Aztec monument to President Nieto.

Back down in the caves are sonic experiments in Peak Cavern (known as the Devil’s Arse because the early 17th-century cave explorers really imagined they might be finding the entrance to hell) by The Hive, from Indonesia, *Extensionless Thought Points* by Mark Fell and the very impressive work in the Great Cave by resident sound artist Beatrice Dillon. Inspired by the rope-makers who worked hand-in-hand with the miners in the area, she created a magnificent and complex vibrating soundscape that left the listener in fear that it might cause rockfalls.

Prize for the scariest cave, though, goes to ‘hauntologists’ Audint who researched ‘the weaponisation of vibration’ in *Undercurrency Vault*. The participants descend to Speedwell Cavern silently through a tunnel strapped into ‘SUBPAC’ low-frequency haptic suits and are propelled through another tunnel, packed 30 to a boat, and attacked with flashing lights and loud bangs, to emerge in a further tunnel where reputedly many miners died of radon poisoning. Evoking a ‘Stone Tapes’ narrative (where the voices of the dead are recorded in the architecture of the underground), the audience is invited to experience the trauma for themselves while facing the flooded ‘bottomless pit’ of this cavern – and experience the fear you do. ■

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