



Damien Robinson, *Songbird* (screenshot), digital animation and sound, work in progress, 2002-03.

# Sound and vision

Artist's story: Damien Robinson

When I moved to the Essex coast from London in 1999, I began experimenting with digital techniques while I was refurbishing my studio. This resulted in a change of direction in my practice from print-based 3D work to using media in which I had no formal training. I discovered that using new technologies – with information displayed visually – meant I could work with previously inaccessible media, particularly sound.

Although I'm deaf, my interest in sound stems from a different perceptual stance, rather than being therapeutic or compensatory. For example, the x-space commission for inIVA – *Aerial*, 2002 – allowed me to investigate a speech phenomenon: that most voice power is contained in lower frequency sounds, yet information content exists mainly in higher frequencies. The work explores spoken sound structure (rather than meaning) by cutting the sounds into fixed-frequency ranges, distorting the clips across what can be heard and what can be understood, and connecting these changes to atmospheric pressure and cloud formation.

I'm also working with the relationship between sound and vibration which I think of as 'hear-sound' and 'feel-sound' respectively. Research in the USA has

demonstrated that deaf people use the area of the brain normally dedicated to sound processing to experience vibrations. Last year I was looking for an environment where I could experiment with this concept, and saw an article about PVA Medialab's LabCulture programme in *a-n Magazine*, which led to the development of *Songbird*. This is an experimental work in progress using birdsong adapted both in pitch and speed. Sounds can be experienced by touch as well as – or instead of – being heard. Many recordings I researched were made in the 1950s and 60s, and these sound 'memories' plus the concept of sound production engendering loss – of wildlife habitat and of airspace unpolluted by human sound – created a parallel to the convention that deafness constitutes loss. This year has been focused on more reflective aspects of my practice with the support of an ArtsAdmin Artists' Bursary. The award also triggered match funding to pay for increased interpreter support, helping me avoid potential cashflow problems.

I've maintained contact with organisations I've worked with previously and these kind of ongoing dialogues can place your work within a broader context. As a former ACME studios tenant I've been able

to contribute to studio development ideas through advisory work with their Design Working Party. Information about my work will shortly be added to inIVA's digital archive, which documents work initiated over the last nine years. A short residency at PVA Medialab will provide time to investigate how *Songbird* – currently web-based – might be developed, and discussions with their associate curator, Ele Carpenter, have triggered potential new directions. Through these opportunities I've also had more contact with other artists and learned how they sustain their practice, particularly when they have a 'work/work balance' of more than one job, or are both employed and self-employed. Diversities of survival strategy are as extensive as diversity of practice.

**Damien Robinson is an artist based in Essex. She also works for Arts Council England as Resource Development Officer at the national office in London.**

*Songbird* can be seen at [www.pva.org.uk](http://www.pva.org.uk) and *Aerial* at [www.iniva.org/xspaceprojects/robinson](http://www.iniva.org/xspaceprojects/robinson). inIVA's digital archive is an educational resource and living archive documenting the work of artists from different cultural backgrounds. [www.iniva.org/archive/index](http://www.iniva.org/archive/index)

Damien Robinson became the 11,000 current subscriber to *a-n* on 13 August.