Return to Ritherdon: Incidental Rendition

Incidental Rendition is made from layers of sounds recorded while walking around the Ritherdon factory floor. The same 'soundwalk' route was carried out multiple times, producing timelines of sounds occurring in each area of the factory floor, at different points throughout the day. These timelines are carefully slotted together, so individual sounds are not in competition, and the musicality of the manufacturing environment can be better understood. Despite the often-uncanny nature of the sound, audio transitions between each workspace have only been affected by navigating the architecture of the factory itself.

The soundwalk route follows the sequence of manufacturing processes necessary to make Ritherdon products. Therefore, the negotiation between the requirements of these processes and available space in the factory building is a major factor in the structure of this sound work.

Each process has one or more areas of the factory floor designated to it, which are laid out logically on the floor plan for ease of movement, to minimise human labour, and for compliance with health and safety requirements. Each area contains multiple tools and machines, which make sounds specific to their individual function or range of movement. The specific product they are producing at any one time dictates the rhythm of this. Therefore each product produces its own soundtrack according to its size, shape, material and other specifications. The operation of tools and machines rely on the people who work at Ritherdon. Even the machines informed by CAD drawings require fabricators to initiate the files, move the metal according to the requirements of the program, and ensure every measurement is exact. This human labour is regulated by the structure of the working day.

On site, the sources of recorded sounds are- in the most part – visually striking and easily identifiable. However, there are other less obvious systems at play, which contribute to this 20-minute reflection of the factory's sonic environment.

The overall factory workload is dictated by orders placed by customers, which are managed and tracked with the software '*Progress'* in the office and '*Seiki*' on the factory floor. Ultimately, these digital systems are in place to support and make physical work more effective. Inevitably, there are parts of this interaction in which the physical and the digital are not one hundred percent compatible and one side must make a sacrifice in order to maintain the status quo. Additional microsystems or 'work-arounds' are put in place to remedy these points of friction. This give-and-take is what keeps the whole ecosystem not only functioning but somehow alive and breathing.

 Another system in place at Ritherdon - for the purpose of maintaining a safe and efficient workplace - is 5S; a methodology originally developed in Japan as part of the Toyota Production System. The 5S steps are;

1. *Seiri or* 'Sort'. Sort through all items in an area and remove anything unnecessary.
2. *Seiton* or 'set in order'. Put the remaining necessary items in their optimal place for use.
3. *Seisō* or 'shine', Inspect and clean all things in the workspace.
4. *Seiketsu* or 'standardise'. The process of standardizing Sort, Set and Shine to ensure they happen as frequently as necessary.
5. *Shitsuke* or 'sustain'. The above points should become part of working practice rather than instructions to be followed.

Time is made to carry out 5S every working session, day, week or month as required. The actions might not be as immediately identifiable as machinery and process are, but they shape the culture of labour - and therefore sound - throughout the factory site.

Incidental Rendition is one way of communicating a cross-section of systems in place, and the relationship between functionality and musicality at Ritherdon. However, each day has a different workload and therefore a new individual soundtrack, complete with background drones of extractor fans or water sloshing down a drainpipe, for example. These more incidental sounds have been captured in hyper realistic detail. Microphone techniques were used to zoom specific sound sources, as to bring out textures otherwise obscured when amongst the more dominant punching and grinding processes. By simply tweaking the way sounds in each area of the factory interact with each other, the existing hierarchy of sounds is levelled out.

For me, *Incidental Rendition* is like hearing the factory again with 'fresh ears'. Retaining 'fresh eyes' or 'fresh ears' is important because they make the constant re-discovery of the systems in place at Ritherdon, possible. An ongoing aim is to gain an understanding of the systems, while avoiding over-familiarisation. To this end, I have to constantly walk the line between acknowledging my position as a welcomed outsider and being an active member of the workforce.

This work, along with many of the others made during this placement, is indicative of that push and pull between the new and the familiar, which is something I feel to be an inherent condition of being an '*Incidental Person*'[1]. The work functions as a way to share the '*Incidental Person*' experience with the people who work at Ritherdon. Many other listeners will of course be entirely unfamiliar with the sounds and have no other choice than to invent their own version of the Ritherdon factory environment with guidance from the audio track.
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[1] Please visit the Incidental Unit's Glossary to see descriptions of the 'Incidental Person'. https://incidentalunit.org/glossary