



**Geoffrey Farmer**

## **Let's Make the Water Turn Black**

### **Galleries 3 & 4**

Let's Make the Water Turn Black fills two large galleries, but Geoffrey Farmer considers his artwork as a single instrument. His most technically ambitious work to date, it is as much a piece of music as a visual artwork. Different every day, it starts when the gallery opens, and ends when it closes. Computers control the movements of the sculptures and the soundtrack, drawing on a stored bank of field recordings, Foley sounds, archival sound recordings, and pieces of music. The artwork will remain a work in progress, changing daily, and evolving as it travels to two more galleries after Nottingham Contemporary.

The life and work of the experimental rock musician Frank Zappa (1940 – 1993) is Farmer's starting point. The title echoes a 1968 Zappa track about two teenage boys who lived next door to him. It is a patter song, where each syllable of text corresponds to a note, a form often used in comic opera. The lyrics refer to making alcohol from raisins – and to the boys' own deliberately disgusting personal habits.

The “engine” of Farmer’s work is the complex collection of recordings he has assembled. Known for his research and scholarship, the tracks include Edison’s talking doll recording of 1888, the oldest American made recording of a woman’s voice, 1890 recordings of Passamaquoddy Indians, believed to be the oldest “field recordings” made outside a studio, a 1902 recording of Alessandro Moreeschi, the Sistine Chapel’s last castrato – a male singer castrated before puberty to preserve his high voice, and Ursonate by Kurt Schwitters, an early example of sound poetry made in 1922. The work also draws on Foley, or film sound effects, and field recordings made in Southern California that relate to Zappa’s own life. Computer algorithms, or mathematical formulas, recompose the soundtrack each day, following the track of Zappa’s own life through six decades, ending with his death as the galleries close for the day.



Farmer's methods draw on the "cut up" or collage technique of the writer William S Burroughs, as well as musique concrete – a movement that resulted in the first purpose built "electroacoustic" music studio in early 1950s Paris, where electric sound production was incorporated into composition. Notable 20th century composers who worked there included Pierre Boulez, Oliver Messiaen, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Edgar Varèse, a musician who had a profound influence on Frank Zappa. Varèse sought to redefine music as the organised collection of sound. A pioneer of electronic music, he dreamed of the day when a machine could perform music on its own from a score – an ambition realized in Farmer's exhibition.

Farmer's work shares other parallels with Zappa's. At his core a serious, experimental musician, Zappa quoted, parodied and satirized American post-war culture. In the song Cheepnis he professes his love of 50s monster movies, the cheaper the better – because the monsters would appear obviously ridiculous, the sticks and strings that moved them clearly visible to the viewer. These were movies that didn't need deconstructing. Farmer's sculptural objects have a similar stagey, improvised quality. Because we can see how they are constructed, we are not taken in by what they claim to represent. He sees the individual sculptures as having a similar relationship to the soundtrack that lyrics have to music in songs. The music is paramount, and the lyrics - or here the sculptures - are there to draw attention to and enact the sound.



The link between the sound compositions and the sculptures also evokes listening itself as a creative process. Music is individually transformed in the mind of the listener, giving rise to associations that are different for each person.

Farmer's work contains his own imaginative associations. Some of the sculptures in *Let's Make the Water Turn Black* use objects he found in an old movie props store. Other materials are ordinary, but put together in new and unfamiliar ways. The fantasies and clichés of American-derived popular culture are thus somehow reflected, resembling Frank Zappa's satirical takes on post-War pop culture – his love of low-budget movies, 50s doo-wop music, and his use and abuse of advertising jingles.

Farmer thinks of *Let's Make the Water Turn Black* as a "sculpture play", with the sculpture acting out a script – or in this case a score. The sculptures stand in for human actors. They are animated, or brought to life by computer technology, reflecting Farmer's interest in animism – the belief that natural and manmade objects are invested with a spirit or soul.



Time is an important component of Farmer's work, hence his interest in giving his visual art the time-defined qualities of theatre and music. The work exists only in gallery opening hours – unless it magically comes to life at night. Paradoxically *Let's Make the Water Turn Black* is never finished. It continues to evolve as it is reconfigured at each gallery it visits. For this reason, Farmer and his assistants will continue working on the piece "live" in the first week of the exhibition. The work will remain in a state of flux, rather than frozen in time.

Zappa would often reuse sections from one recording within different tracks, irrespective of tempo. He called this technique 'zenochrony' – 'zeno' meaning alien, strange or foreign, and 'chrony' meaning time. He looked on each recording as part of a larger continuous project. Farmer has a similar approach.

Like Zappa, Farmer often defamiliarises aspects of our shared culture that are familiar - perhaps overfamiliar. He based one work on 50 years of illustrations in *Life* magazine, and another on a popular encyclopedia called *The Last Two Million* years. He cuts up these familiar accounts of our history, so that our understanding of the world is scrambled and then reassembled in new and mutated forms. The effect is like looking through the wrong end of a telescope – instead of seeing stars and other planets, we see our own world from afar as if viewed by a different species.

In this way we can see that what we thought were universal truths are merely norms that apply to the culture that produces them. *Let's Make the Water Turn Black* is similarly unsettling.

Geoffrey Farmer (born Vancouver, 1967) is one of Canada's leading artists.

All Geoffrey Farmer images: Geoffrey Farmer, *Let's Make the Water Turn Black*, 2013. Exhibition view, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst. Photo Stefan Altenburger, Zurich. Courtesy of the artist, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, und Casey Kaplan, New York

For your safety please be aware that some of the sculptures may move suddenly. Visitors are kindly asked not to touch them. Thank you.

