‘Ceremony’: an audio visual art installation
David Howarth (Music / Performance)

Overview
‘Ceremony’ is a durational piece, comprising of a brightly lit sphere of coloured ice, attached to a metal pole which is placed on a canvas. Over the course of several hours, as the ice melts under the heat of the lights, small objects, frozen into the sphere, most of them parts from a laptop computer, fall onto the canvas to produce a variety of different sights and sound effects. The ‘performance’ invites the spectator to consider human existence and human behaviour, both internal and external, the micro and macro, the human invention of time and the philosophy of time. ‘Ceremony’ presents an interaction of time as portrayed in the notion of past, present and future, hence the title, which was chosen to highlight important times in our lives, the rites of passage, such as birth, marriage and death, and the ceremonies that mark them.
Genesis

The origins of this work lie in my earlier installation, ‘Wizbit’, in which a microphone was hung from a pole, so that when it was thrown, it swung round and round to produce different feedback tones off the speakers to which it was connected. ‘Wizbit’ was based on ‘Pendulum Music’ by Steve Reich; the main focus of this earlier piece was on motion and energy, in particular the energy involved to start the performance. But, in ‘Ceremony’, there was no physical energy on my part to start the piece; it was placed in position, but was neither released nor triggered in any way. As such, my role had changed: I was a kind of referee who, having created something, was now an observer of my creation, which was going to change over time. I also hoped to involve the audience in the piece, to make them feel as responsible for it as I was. I wanted to create something that underwent a change, so it had to be made from a material that would alter throughout the performance, hence my choice of the ice sphere. Next, I had to work out how to create and install the piece.
The Production Process

First I filled 200 ice bags with a mixture of water and blue food colouring and placed them in the freezer. Two ice trays were then filled with a mixture of water and green food colouring, to which were added some laptop keyboard letters and these too were frozen. Into a small plastic tub went a mixture of water and red food colouring, together with more laptop keys, a coin, a small padlock, black and white Queens from a chess set, a tiddlywink and dice, which were likewise frozen. Next, some of the ice cubes from the trays and bags were emptied into an 8 litre semi-spherical mixing bowl. A frozen plastic tub was placed into the top of the bowl which was then completely filled with water. Purple paint was added and then left to freeze. When frozen the plastic tub was taken out of the bowl by adding a little hot water around the sides, and then placed back in the freezer.

The remaining ice cubes were added to a second semi-spherical bowl, filled with water and frozen. When frozen, the contents of the frozen plastic tub were placed on top of the second bowl and frozen together. The two semi-spheres were then joined. To achieve a tight fit, I used hot water, sand paper and bench files, making sure there were no gaps and the join was completely sealed. After a further hour in the freezer the sphere was taken out and a hole was worked into it using hot skewers, so that the piece could be mounted.

A saucer was then filled with olive oil and frozen; when frozen it was, placed at the opposite end of the sphere from the mounting collar to distinctly mark out the top and bottom and to see what effect it would have as the piece progressed. The frozen ensemble was then ready to transport using an electric cool box.

The Performance

A microphone stand was placed in the centre of the room on a canvas upon which were placed some of other parts of the laptop that were not frozen in the ice. Surrounding this were several microphones, positioned to pick up the sounds of dripping ice and falling objects. Four powerful spotlights were pointed at the sphere. A Public Address system was used to amplify the sound to the audience and a video camera was used to capture the event.
When the ice was placed in position and the spotlights were turned on, the object was motionless enough to be viewed as a piece of art, which was also delivering a sonic performance. The energy used to create this performance was the heat from the spotlights. Crucially, the lights, which brought the object to life, would eventually destroy it. Time, however we wish to identify it, is uncontrollable and the melting of the ice was inevitable.

Recording the sound was a main focus. I believed that a recording capturing the ice creaking and loosening, under the humming spotlights, causing the droplets to turn to drops, to turn to dripping, occasionally and leisurely, then more frequently, penetrating the drum-like canvas surface, interspersed with heavier sounds as fall-out occurred connecting base and sphere and finally capturing the heaviest sounds as the spotlight and gravity defined the piece. In reality I required more sensitive microphones and the specialist skill to achieve this, although the sounds produced and recorded are closest to achieving my reasons for creating the installation, in that I could play the sounds in the background and feel free to look and move around at other things (whereas watching a video recording the spectator is
fixed, looking at the screen), just like the performance itself, which was meant to be visited and revisited throughout the performance.

All attempts to record the sound and vision are portions of the performance. As the strange, cold sphere stood in the space warmed by the lights a moment of wonder was created that sought to involve the spectator and encourage the spectator in the shadows to reflect, to relax and to embrace the time and space. My purpose was to create the perception that time had stopped or slowed down and I wanted to create a sense of peace, far removed from the deadlines, work commitments, struggles and achievements of everyday life. The piece was an offering to the spectator and I hoped to make the sphere as beautiful and fragile as possible, creating simple recognisable sounds in an attempt to convey the amazing complications in nature yet the simple truth of how fortunate we are.

The video of the entire installation, which lasted over two hours, was subsequently edited into a time lapse movie, the abridged version of which accompanies this description online. By applying time lapse at the video editing stage, this allowed me to consolidate the whole process with a difference. In contrast to the durational performance, the time lapse gave an animated feel to the installation, providing an alternative piece and almost removing the experience felt on the night.

The piece was intended to create an atmosphere that was conducive to thought, reflection, inspiration and peace. I also hoped that it would raise questions as to how we as humans spend our time: how free are we and is there is anything we do that is not inevitable? To this end, the sphere takes on the role of a person whose traditions and expectations may be under scrutiny, someone waiting for something, an outcome.

**Retrospect**

After completing the piece I forgot about it; I wondered if I would ever revisit the effect, or experience again any of the impressions which the performance had on me. It seemed, to some extent, that the exercise belonged to the past, the experience itself of the moment. But, several months later, when I was watching the votes coming in for an election and politicians standing around talking to people and giving interviews to TV reporters, I re-
envisaged my ice sphere melting away. So perhaps the performance was capable of transcending the moment and maybe there was another theme unwittingly worked in there somewhere too, one of power and its temporal status.

As previously mentioned, I wanted to have the piece as a backdrop for time, an installation that had presence enough to help us realise the importance of just being here. However, I now see ‘Ceremony’ as challenging our attention to time, whether waiting for something to happen, working all the time, doing absolutely nothing, or simply taking part in activities and pleasures. Fundamentally, ‘Ceremony’ provides the space to search for an analysis into how and why we choose to spend our time.