

Transport, absorption, fracture, and displacement:

words that can describe the effect of sound enmeshed in a visual art experience. In these situations, the sonic information often dissolves our ability to link what we are hearing to where we are standing and what we are seeing. We might feel a sensation of disconnect or suspension as sound creates, disrupts and reshapes our perceptions of space and time.

Often designated “sound art” this genre encompasses diverse practices from avant garde musical composition, Djs and digital instruments to quasi-cinematic audio narratives and ambient installations. *Suspension: Sonic Absorption* focuses on the use of sound in object-oriented installation art and explores sound’s capacity to inspire emotional responses, bodily reactions and intellectual revelations. By blending visual and aural, the artists in the exhibition expand our sensory experiences in imaginative ways.

Presented in conjunction with the annual conference of the College Art Association (CAA), the exhibition features multimedia works by 12 individuals and 2 collaborative pairs. The artists were chosen from over 150 who responded to a call to the CAA membership for sound-based work. Engaging sight and hearing, and in some cases touch, the selected works transport the viewer through unexpected aural landscapes for familiar observed surroundings. The resulting sensory experiences operate on multiple levels reconciled either through the imagination’s suspension of disbelief or the intellect’s rational analysis. The exhibition plays in both zones, providing creative examinations of language and everyday sounds and inventive looks at the mechanics of sound and hearing.

Today’s culture is dominated by the visual so much so that aural experiences are often registered semi-consciously. Several artists in the exhibition take advantage of our collective unawareness by manipulating everyday sounds. Taken out of context, the transformed sounds call into question what we assume to know. Joe Diebes’s installation *Aviary* features

numerous empty white birdcages hanging in a stark room; the altered songs of various birds fill the space. Rather than soothing tones, the haunting songs are unexpectedly profound. Baggs McKelvey’s humorous animated short of a traffic jam, *A Chicken in Every Pot, Two Cars in Every Garage*, edits the sounds of idling cars and honking horns into a parodic rhythm. In *Chair for Cabbage* by Jennifer Parker, the cabbage placed on the seat of a wooden kitchen chair. The audio surprisingly references bodily sounds. Megan Roberts and Raymond Ghirardo’s installation *Rain/Fall* features several white umbrellas suspended in mid air. Onto the fabric appear projected video images of actual and virtual objects falling in the rain. The imagery begins literally (raindrops) and slowly transitions to the unpredicted (cats, refrigerators, bombs, Buicks...) to create an absurd surreality. Sounds alternately reinforce or contradict the imagery.

In *Soliton*, Perri Lynch offers an opportunity for meditation on inherent, yet hidden, properties of water. Using hydrophones and underwater acoustic sensing equipment, Lynch captured wave action and below sea-surface sounds as she studied the unique properties of the soliton, a phenomenon of isolated waves that prorogate over large regions of space without dispersing energy. Instead of the sounds of a trickling stream or gentle surf, Lynch aims to heighten sensitivity towards the complex aural presence of water in our surroundings.

Other artists in the exhibition play with the familiarity of spoken language. Jane Philbrick considers the possibilities of gender communicated by the voice in her mixed media work *Voix/e*. Philbrick altered her own voice into masculine, feminine, and neutral for the spoken version of the biblical love poem, the Song of Solomon. When played back on multiple speakers it forms a complex dissection of language as emotive and communicative systems. Also touching upon spo-

ken intimacies is Yumi Roth and Rosemary Williams’s *Secret*. Positioned in the gallery the unassuming bench is a welcome spot for a viewer to sit and take a break. Her motion triggers an audio track of compelling secrets entrusted to the artists by willing strangers. REvealed to the sitter, the whispered secrets enroll her as an unwitting confidante.

In another interactive work of a more analytical bent, Philip Galanter has created an audible language of color in *Chaotic Conductor*. Participants push the pendulum-like cameras color block abstractions; a computer reads the images to produce a composition of sounds unique to each swing and reformulated at each pass.

Other artists also take on the task of making tangible what sound might look or feel like. Ashley Hope Carlisle’s oversize polished metal cones suspend from the ceiling. The colors and shapes of the interiors reflect her visualization of how different sounds she listened to while fabricating the sculptures. When entering into the cone, the visitor pairs the various audio and the corresponding materials and sensations. Jeremy Boyle’s sculpture *Untitled* appears like a minimalist cube filled with opaque blue-grey tinted, viscous fluid. Inside the cube, a submerged sub-woofer speaker emits a sub audible sound that forms resonance wave patterns in the liquid. The work materializes the phenomenon of sound. In *Tone Room: Bed and Walls*, Derek Hoffend creates a zone for immersive listening and contact with certain frequencies. The artist attempts to unify sound with the physical structure of the space by recording the ambient sounds of the room then played back through the walls and a large platform bed. Invited to lie on the bed or lean on the wall, viewers become playback instruments as the tones vibrate through their bodies.

Light and sound waves are the focus of two participating artists. Ted Apel explores piezoelectric “sound bulbs” in *Potential Indifferent*. Discovered during Edison’s era light bulbs, piezoelectricity is another type of electric current produced by crystals

and ceramic materials subjected to mechanical pressure. Resembling light bulbs, Apel’s bulbs produce sound waves instead of light waves. By hanging them from loose cords in a dim room dispersed amongst actual light bulbs, Apel contrasts one set of filaments as the source of light and other as a source of the sound. Stephen Vitiello’s video projection *Light Readings (Visual Display)* grew out of his use of photocells and small circuits to amplify the frequencies of light waves. He captured the sounds through a photocell wired into a mixing board, with a small pin-hole video camera creates a visual presentation of the same lights. Vitiello altered the images with a vintage video synthesizer to process them in manner roughly equivalent to processing sound.

In a site specific work for *Sonic Absorption*, Deborah Aschheim examines the sense of hearing. A part of her *Neural Architecture* series, the *Eavesdropping Network* takes the structure of the inner ear as a starting point. A large sculpture of myriad plastic tubes hangs from the ceiling and sprawls into the space. Embedded within, transmitters play the sounds of other art works in the galleries, which are being monitored by sculpturally enhanced baby monitors placed near them. As viewers pass through the sculpture/ear they can re-experience the exhibition through the mediation of the gallery’s own prototype of nervous/surveillance system.

This exhibition proposes that the disjunction of vision and sound in a visual art context transports one sense (hearing) away from other senses (sight, touch, taste), and thereby brings into question what is real and what is not. As Stephen Vitiello once observed, “truth in relation to sound is even more subjectively determined than with visual imagery.” In this gap, sound artists like those in *Sonic Absorption*, asks us to engage a sense we often overlook as simply a receptor of information and reconsider its primacy as a stimulus to the imagination.

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