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About nine months ago, I joined four fellow Seattle curators to organize a sound art exhibition. When my colleagues and I first met to kick around ideas, we compiled a list of words—transport, absorption, fracture, displacement—that described the effects of sound experienced in a visual art setting. Today's loose designation of "sound art" encompasses many practices from musical composition, DJs and digital installations to quasi-cinematic audio narratives and ambient installations. But presented in gallery installations, sound art often dissolves our ability to link what we are hearing to where we are standing and what we are seeing. As the sound creates, disrupts or reshapes our perceptions of space and time, we feel a sense of disconnect or suspension. Inspired by our list of words, the Seattle exhibition, *Suspension: Sonic Absorption*, focused on the use of sound in object-oriented installation art and image-driven video as one way to explore sound's capacity to inspire emotional responses, bodily reactions and intellectual revelations.

To my eyes and ears, the fascinating current that flowed from the project was what seemed to be sound's direct access to the psyche. Granted, this observation is not groundbreaking: movies, video games and pop music continuously manipulate our bodies and minds with carefully composed, even formulaic, soundtracks. Within the world of art, artists have been utilizing this tool for decades, from the dadaist Kurt Schwitters's tone poems to the cinematically sophisticated audio of Janet Cardiff. So why did this seem so fresh to me?

Over the course of the exhibition planning, I was drawn to work that toyed with my perceptions and engaged my imagination in an extended, open-ended way. Artist Stephen Vitiello once commented, "'truth' in relation to sound is even more subjectively determined than with visual imagery" (interview with Vitiello, www.diacentr.org). In the phenomenological realm, sounds play more freely than images. Living in a predominantly visual culture we've become numbly removed from images' inherent powers of narration and emotive provocation. Images can certainly lie but, overall as a society, we're fairly blasé about it.

Aural experiences, on the other hand, still have some mystery. Partly defined by their ephemeral nature, sounds seem to be as they are perceived, not as they are. In this credibility gap, the often secondary sense of hearing surpasses its usual role as a receptor of information to become a primary stimulus to the imagination. To be sure, the act of listening is as much under assault by sound pollution as the act of looking is by image inundation. But acute listening in gallery environments underscores the endangered experience, allowing sound artists to echo an array of timely issues in unexpected ways.

Among the many trends in the genre, sound artists reflexively examine the listening act. Whether done by a nosy neighbor or by big brother, listening is an instrument of power, a tool to gain advantage. In *Secret Yumi* Roth (Boulder, Colorado) and Rosemary Williams (New York) entice unsuspecting gallery visitors to rest on an unassuming bench. The visitor's 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. First excited by the secrets and then captivated by their revelations, one is not only eavesdropping but pressingly searching for gossip and ultimately incriminating information.

In recent site-specific works, Deborah Aschheim (Pasadena, California) examines the sense of hearing both as biological function and as a surveillance system. 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. Inside, transmitters play the

sounds of other visitors, activities and art in the galleries, which are being monitored by sculpturally enhanced baby monitors. As participants pass through the sculpture/ear they re-experience the exhibition through the mediation of the gallery's own prototype nervous/surveillance system. A chaotic composition of random sounds, it eerily conjures up buildings bugged for security in the post-9/11 era. Even though the information passing through the monitors is for the most part trivial, the promise of hearing something juicy triggers the curiosity into imaginative leaps.

Aschheim's work utilizes unseen technology embedded in our day-to-day lives. Indeed, quotidian interaction with digital technology, smaller and smaller devices and wireless networks takes us further into the ether. At the beginning of recording technology, sonic information had a contradictory makeup: solid machines played back sound from a material. Some artists capitalize on the romance of the dying technology. For instance, Rodney Graham's *Phonokinetoscope* or Christian Marclay's *Tape Fall* straddle the visual and aural and fetishize the soon to be obsolete object-oriented technology. They nostalgically highlight its loss in the relentless push of culture's advancement.

Jesse Paul Miller (Seattle) views this loss as symptomatic of a more global change. *Searching for a Quiet Place: Turnbull Bay* combines digitally recorded sound, video and an old audio playback system. Field recordings made around the nature preserve of Turnbull Bay, Florida, at first infuse the installation with natural sounds of birds, frogs and waves. A video image of sun on calm water reinforces the peaceful atmosphere. Slowly, human intervention makes its presence known: a buzz of the plane overhead, muffled shouts, loud splashes. At the bottom corner of the panel serving as screen, an old-fashioned audiotape playback machine emits sounds of footsteps moving through underbrush. Triggered when a viewer approaches the machine, this track echoes our steps toward the image. In a visual motif, the audiotape uncoils from the player to outline a life-size human skeleton drawn onto the panel by a pattern of connect-the-dots of small channeling devices that carry the tape and define the shape of the figure.

The installation is like an updated, interactive, three-dimensional version of an allegorical romantic landscape painting. Like the romantics, Miller implicates humanity's technological advancements and resulting encroachment upon nature as the reason why we no longer experience nature in unfettered, authentic ways. Miller's Plexiglas panel recalls both a window and a television screen, devices that mediate direct contact with this realm. His reconstruction of a place and moment previously experienced relies on layers of technical intervention, not from one lived (and recorded) experience but from many. The fragile skeleton, visually and aurally composed of an outdated recording material, becomes a *memento mori*, reminding us to mourn the losses suffered at our own advancement.

The pairing of sound with visual and imagined landscapes is apt; sound delimits spaces and lends them characteristics just as spatial qualities affect acoustics. To signal purely audio experiences as "possible landscapes," as Steve Roden describes his sound works, argues for sound's transcendent capacity to trigger senses and intellect alike into a pattern of free association. An extended act of quiet listening brings us to a mental terrain of a temporal nature. We must pass through it in time and it causes us to feel or imagine that we inhabit an entirely different zone. Each of my recent sound art experiences lately has implicitly asked me to give up the control of my daily soundtrack and enter into another composed of other voices and unexpected noises. Maybe that's why the sound works I've recently experienced seemed so fresh—a new set of concentrated sensations for my jaded senses.

Guest columnist Sara Krajewski is a freelance writer based in Seattle.

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