

SOUND ART

White Noise, in Seven-Part Harmony

An international and intergenerational exhibition of sound art staged in New York honored the "Manifesto Bianco" of Emilio Prini, one of Arte Povera's cagier principals.

BY MARCIA E. VETROCC

A proposed perimeter of air whose method of demarcation is never specified, a unit of measurement that fluctuates from city to city, a list of never-to-be-executed actions, a tape recorder registering its own noises in an otherwise still room—since the late 1960s, Emilio Prini's conceptual work has been exacting, sly and scarce. A piece by this founding protagonist of Arte Povera made a rare appearance in New York at an exhibition of other artists' sound works organized in his honor by independent curator Lorenzo Benedetti, artist/curator Cesare Pietroiusti, and composer and musicologist Riccardo Giagni. This homage to Prini (b. 1943) was sponsored by RadioArteMobile (RAM), the Rome-based initiative that maintains an archive of sound art and brings visual and audio projects to life via installations and Internet broadcasts. The venue was Diapason, an intermedia gallery on Sixth Avenue near Bryant Park, and the timing in March could not have been tastier: coinciding with the Armory Show, the presentation of Prini's *Manifesto Bianco* (1981) and seven sound works proposed a gently puzzling, live-in-your-head alternative to the art market's hustle and din on the Hudson piers.

Prini's *Manifesto Bianco* is a silkscreen in an edition of 70, the sheets of white paper seemingly blank but in fact painstakingly printed with fields of white ink. The graphics were created for an exhibition at Rome's now-defunct Galleria Pieroni, whose proprietor, Mario Pieroni, along with Dora Stiefelmeier, founded RAM in 2002 [see "Front Page," *AiA*, May '05]. The title acknowledges the "Manifesto Bianco" that was the inaugural document of *spazialismo* ("Color, the element of space; sound, the element of time and movement . . . are the forms fundamental to the new art"), signed in 1946 by the students of Lucio Fontana in Buenos Aires months before their maestro returned to Italy to launch the spatialist movement. But the edition's wider formal

Bruna Esposito: Without Words, 2006, anthurium, vase, water, microphones. All photos this article courtesy Diapason Gallery.



View of Emilio Prini's *Manifesto Bianco* (left wall), 1981, silkscreen on paper; at Diapason Gallery, New York.

and spiritual cohort includes Malevich's *White on White*, Klein's blue voids and Manzoni's "achromes," reductive and quixotic all.

Employing a recombinant practice he has used for decades, Prini configured a fresh object, a grid of nine framed sheets from the *Manifesto Bianco*, which presided solemnly over Diapason's shadowy main space. The 65-by-19-foot hall also housed six of the sound pieces, all accessed via headphones to maintain a realm of silence for Prini's pale icon. Vito Acconci's *Decoy for Birds and People*, the audio component from a 1979 installation at P.S.I, offered a piccololike bird call, a door buzzer and a bell ringing. The sweet entreaty of bird-song and the more importunate human summonses vaulted back and forth between the left and right earpieces, the tempo accelerating and the pattern repeating with a zany obsessiveness reminiscent of Spike Jones.

For *Viraphone* (2005), a sound work first installed at a Madrid bus stop, Acconci collaborated with Sarina Basta of his Acconci Studio team and sound designer

Daniel Perlin. The artists electronically "infected" a recorded heartbeat to generate an array of blips, whirs and staticky hisses that seemed to excavate a volume of echoing space within the listener's body. The wall-hung headphones of the side-by-side pieces were connected by drooping wires to glossy black disc players on the floor, the ensemble looking uncannily like an Eva Hesse sculpture.

Across the room, a bare little lightbulb illuminated a disc player, casually left atop a covered piano, which played Phill Niblock's *Aomori Water* (1999), a dreamy, aquatic track recorded in northern Japan by the veteran minimalist composer. Dan Graham's *Lax/Relax* (1969) was on hand as a 24-minute color video of a 1995 performance at London's Lisson Gallery. A monitor, outfitted with headphones and set on the floor, showed rows of docile guests listening as Graham and an unseen woman took turns breathily, hypnotically reciting the words "lax" and "relax." This was the only sustained use of the human voice among the seven works, but the relentless and uninflected repetition denatured the vocal element.

Three new works from 2006 completed the exhibition. Brunna Esposito broadly protested the violence unleashed by political speech with the utterly silent *Without Words*. A lone red anthurium in a crystal vase was positioned before a bank of inquisitorial microphones, the latter referencing

In the expansive main room, with its improvisational air, the itinerant auditor became a performer of sorts, a pilgrim traveling from one sensory opportunity to another.



Annie Ratti: *Where I want to be*, 2006, fiberglass, rubber, CDs, CD players.

an early Prini work that involved a mock press conference. More mischievous was Annie Ratti's *Where I want to be*, a card table with a disc player concealed at the top of each leg and four pairs of clunky earphones, rather floppy at the ends of rubbery wires and requiring a two-handed grasp. The liquid audio—sloshing, gurgling and pinging that seemed more amniotic and digestive than maritime—was inevitably out of step from one disc player to the next, though the sociably square table created the illusion of synchronicity.

The final and untitled effort, by Michael J. Schumacher, a co-founder of Diapason, and Stephen Vitiello, was sequestered in an 11-by-18-foot rear room. The nearly clichéd mise en scène (red light and floor cushions, shoes shed and door closed, encircling speakers) required some forbearance. But the program of electronic and concrete sounds, sequenced in real time by a randomizing computer program, was expertly calibrated to induce deepening physical relaxation and incrementally focused listening.

The soul of the presentation, however, was in the main room, with its improvisational air and uncommonly expansive space. (One thinks, by



Dan Graham: *Video of a performance of Lax/Relax, 1969*, at the Lisson Gallery, London, on Oct. 7, 1995.

contrast, of the cramped wall of headphones in the 2001 Whitney Museum exhibition, "BitStreams"). Here, the itinerant auditor became a performer of sorts, a pilgrim traveling from one sensory opportunity to another. From the dark and lanky hardware of the Acconci works to Niblock's disc player, comically tiny on the swaddled piano, to Ratti's homely table and earpieces, the variously positioned works could be interpreted as demarcating a perimeter of potential sound. This was a knowing and aptly ephemeral tribute to the elusive Prini. □

Manifesto Bianco and "Sound Pieces" were presented at New York's Diapason Gallery, Mar. 10-14.

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