

## ***Soundwaves: Experimental Strategies in Art + Music***

Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University

Curated by Alison Weaver

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The Rice University Moody Center for the Arts celebrated its fifth anniversary this year as a site for multi-media creative experimentation and expression. Its post-modern architectural home became more than just a building when it hosted the recent exhibition, *Soundwaves: Experimental Strategies in Art + Music* (January 28–May 14, 2022). The show examined sound as medium, although the curator thought expansively about sound and presented it not merely as something heard by an individual outside of a context, but rather as it can be encountered in a particular physical and social space. In this case, the work was experienced in the stylish Moody Center, located in a wealthy, elite academic setting, within the multi-cultural, warm and humid southern city of Houston. Sound may be generated by a concrete object—a commonplace, lesser-known, or even invented

instrument—but it must be sensed by a visitor who necessarily hears and sees from a unique psychological and cultural perspective shaped by one’s background as well as one’s present mindset and location. If experienced with a colleague or friend, the encounter is further altered since it is shared. The exhibition examined the fluidity of experience, something that media such as sound and color can express well, given their actual physical fluctuations.

The exhibition considered two aspects of sound and visual form: one philosophical and one socio-political. The curator cited philosopher Hermann Schmitz as well as theorist Brandon LaBelle as their inspirations. The former is known for his concept of “atmosphere,” having argued that affect is not something only housed within the mind of an individual and experienced solely by that individual, but also something with an

objective reality that, according to philosopher Rainer Kazig, is “poured out over a wide area.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, LaBelle examined sound as something that can be shared, and to which appropriate reactions can even be learned, carrying cultural, economic, and political meanings beyond the generator or the perceiver of that sound. The echoes and sites encountered when walking through different parts of a city, for example, necessarily indicate the cultural values of the peoples who reside in each neighborhood.

It is important, then, to consider the physical and social space in which *Soundwaves* was experienced, the presentation of the art having been divided between two exhibition halls in the Moody Center. One side of the initial exhibition space was all glass, so that its location on the Rice campus, with its bright sun and green lawns that disguise its urban location, acted as backdrop to Anri Sala’s 2017 one-person installation, titled *The Last Resort*, that was housed in this first gallery. Outside light sparkled onto the metal rims of thirty-eight snare drums that were suspended upside down from a square steel grid on the gallery ceiling, a good distance above the viewer’s head. The drums seemed to stand at attention in rows, their drummers missing. It was up to the person

looking to fill in the blanks. Each was autonomously struck by mechanized drumsticks that, according to the gallery text, were triggered by the vibrations of frequencies emanating from a speaker embedded in the drums. Simultaneously, a modified version of Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto in A major played loudly from a second speaker within each drum. According to the artist, the concerto score was altered in conjunction with British explorer James Bell’s mapping of wind patterns during an 1839 ocean crossing from London to Australia. Notes of music were heard in the space, expanding or shortening as if tossed about by the wind on which they were carried. In this way, the artist challenged an Enlightenment-era belief in objective, measurable data (in that Bell believed he could map concretely something that in actuality is not altogether fixed) with contemporary understandings of observation as relative, shaped by place, position, and time.

One moved from the very open, sound-filled space of the first gallery and its drums installed by a single artist, through glass doors into a darker, windowless rectangular space where the work of several artists could be experienced. It was as if the initial space were the opening solo in the first movement

of a complex orchestration that continued into the next gallery. It was difficult not to think of this second space as one of variation and change, riffing in some ways off the Sala installation in that the works addressed the fluidity of sound in different ways. Both two- and three-dimensional art appeared in this second gallery along the walls and across the floor, either directly or on small groupings of pedestals. Artists represented included Jason Moran, Naama Tsabar, Christine Sun Kim, Jamal Cyrus, Jorinde Voigt, Jennie C. Jones, Idris Khan, Charles Gaines, Spencer Finch, Nevin Aladağ, and Nick Cave. Several artists in this room used sound as a means for exploring the fixed, or not-so-fixed, character of knowing. Others addressed the social aspects of visual form and sound in connection to race or gender. Some did a little of both.

Jorinde Voigt, Spencer Finch, and Idris Khan created works that challenged traditional assumptions about how music is perceived and experienced, questioning any notion of a solitary intention or reception. Voigt's arduous creative process, for example, asserted alternative ways of considering an aural event that opened possibilities that logic might shut down. Her *Beat + Wave* studies were comprised of delicate graphite lines

that created a visual dance across a white page from top to bottom and left to right in response to the artist listening to music. Her marks resided somewhere between a pictorial translation and an interpretation of what she has heard, offering a constructed alternative to a concrete musical score.

Idris Khan recognized the complexity of experience but sought to find some shared essence that he hoped could be achieved by using the color blue. It was reminiscent of Yves Klein. In Khan's *Each Second and Second* (2020), the artist sought to unify multiple experiences into a universal, and perhaps spiritual, one. At a distance, Khan's pieces looked like enlargements of musical scores written in blue or sometimes black. On closer observation, however, one could discern multiple layers of solid marks along with ghostly ones that together created the effect of forms fading in and out of view. The notes lost their function as musical score and were instead given a visual resonance. The effect resisted specificity while at the same time being visually unified by the blue color.

Spencer Finch is best known for considering the allusivity of human perception of any color. His installation, *Reflections in Water (After Debussy)*, was a series of just over two-foot-long LED tubes that

aligned across the entire east wall of the Rice gallery like railroad tracks, but in the S-shape curve of a meandering river drawn on a map. In general, each tube glowed purple, but the hues fluctuated the more they were studied. Finch considered Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau*, of 1905, and in doing so was examining the work of a composer whose music contained similar atmospheric sensations that have been compared to the fluid color combinations in an Impressionist landscape. Finch expressed his fascination with the inevitable subjective component of scientific inquiry into color by stating, "You try to do something again and again to get closer to the essence. Because the experimenter's perception is a little off, the subjective comes into it, which is fascinating to me."<sup>2</sup>

Other artists in the exhibition, like Nick Cave, Jamal Cyrus, and Nevin Aladağ, considered ways in which the intersection of visual art and music meets the social intersectionality analysis of human society. Cave's *Soundsuit* (2013) looked as if it comprised an array of objects found on a New Orleans Street after a Mardi Gras parade. Mangled webs of beads that were given structure by using wire supported flowers and painted ceramic birds of all sorts, including a small redbird and large rooster. Also seen were leaves that

approximated the *fleur-de-lis* motif but were painted white. This tangle of material was supported around the head and shoulders of a mannequin clothed in an ornate body suit that was designed, according to the artist, to obscure racial identity. The suit was meant to be worn as part of a performance and is one of several wearable sound suits from a series created by Cave since at least 2005.

Nevin Aladağ's *Body Instruments* (2021) likewise offered objects to be worn, suggesting one could wear one's communal sound systems like clothing. Aladağ explored instruments used to make music in the streets and activated by the wearer's body movements. A drum attached to a marching band that could be worn on the head, while accordions attached to one's arms emitted sound as they were moved up and down like wings. Silver bells attached to leg guards jingled when the wearers moved their feet. By making the musical sounds completely dependent upon body movement, Aladağ was examining long traditions of street music and assumptions made about the people who perform it.

Racially motivated violence was exposed by Jamal Cyrus's church pew with sandbags underneath, entitled *Medicated Shield* (2021), which addressed a shooting in a

Black church in Detroit in 1969. This work was coupled with Cyrus's piece *This Was Nearly Mine* (2022), which referred to a Houston nightclub in the historically Black Third Ward. Together the pieces considered the role of music in Black culture and how it at times provided creative and spiritual solace, or at other times defined identity or generated pride.

Other artists in the exhibition, such as Naam Tsabar and Jennie C. Jones, exposed the absence of women and persons of color from Western artistic movements such as Minimalism. Tsabar's *Transition* (2020) was made from a disassembled amplifier that was part of a performance piece. The amplifier still functioned, although it had been restructured to appear more like a Minimalist artwork hanging on the wall. A microphone was provided in front so that visitors could contribute their own sound to the room. That microphone was a charged focus for inviting participation, recalling power inequalities over who has access to that "voice" enhancer, including women.

While Tsabar's work often brings attention to the absence of women in the Minimalist movement, Jones similarly addressed the lack of women of color within that style. Her *SHHH, The Red Series #1* (2014) consisted of a noise

cancelling instrument cable, along with cable ties and endpin jacks, mounted to the wall. The cancelled "noise" in this case was perhaps the voices of women. Focus shifted to the minimalist form of the cable at the expense of its function, thus undermining its ability to quiet. Jones also placed an acoustic panel on the floor in *Wedge/Crushed Cords* (2020), appearing like a textured version of a work by Carl Andre. The draping and textural play in these two artworks by Jones was reminiscent of Eva Hesse's Minimalist sensibilities, although the neutral tones of Hesse's work have been replaced with shades of muted color.

In general, those works in *Soundwaves* that struggled philosophically with how knowledge is acquired and absorbed seemed more at home in the academic setting of Rice University. Those works motivated by social critique were inevitably diluted there, especially when many of them were remnants from art performances intended to be viewed in the streets or on location. Visual art's focus by its nature usually excludes sound and reduces human experience of the world to a cyclops-like perception. By foregrounding sound, this exhibition forced visitors to open their minds to that "absence" in our perception: the blind spots, or deafened

corners, of our life. The metaphors we choose, the language and turns of phrase, inevitably recreate those lapses in our understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Kazig, "Presentation of Hermann Schmitz's Paper, 'Atmospheric Spaces,'" *Ambiances: International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space* 2 (2016): 1, <https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/709>.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Hilarie M. Sheets, "Spencer Finch's Art Makes Light Speak Volumes," *ArtNews* (June 18, 2014) <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/spencer-finch-art-makes-light-speak-volumes-2460/>.