

Exhibiting Sound

by Rudolf Frieling and Tanya Zimbardo



Photo: Katherine Du Tiel

The barriers between the performing arts and the visual arts have become so porous over the last decade that museums now actively embrace the challenge of exhibiting dance, music, theater, and performance not as temporary events or spectacles in dedicated spaces for public programs but as a durational presence within their galleries. This shift responds to questions of liveness and immateriality and allows the public to experience museums with a different sensory perception. Sound exhibited as an intervention into an art exhibition is, however, still a contemporary frontier and is often critiqued by performing artists for its acoustic challenges. As sound cannot be limited by walls and creates overlapping acoustic layers, sometimes experienced as interference, the exhibition spreads out and creates a soundscape, blending into the aural environment of the museum. As Brandon LaBelle rightly emphasizes in his text “Room Tone” in this publication, sound is a profoundly social experience. To embrace the multilayered sequencing and spacing of sound-based works in the context of a museum and within an exhibition has been the driving force behind *Soundtracks*.

This analysis of sound as a spatial experience follows a long media-historical trajectory in which environmental acoustics are embraced as social and contextual. The terms *ambient* and *soundscape* often synthesize this notion. Researchers Vincent Meelberg and Marcel Cobussen write of the everyday sound of footsteps as “the sounds of things to come, the sounds of expectation.”¹ Registered subconsciously, these sonic impressions work on us and can be addressed as traces that “indicate a presence that is at the same time absent. . . . Footsteps are sonic traces of a physical presence, just as they are traces, or perhaps more accurately, expressions of the mental condition and of the possible intentions of the one who walks.” We always hear before we see.

Similarly, we have all observed an intimate, perfect conjunction between what we see and what we hear that is suddenly disrupted by a sound that we can only label as imperfect, intrusive, or even offensive. LaBelle has analyzed such an occurrence in the case of overhearing conversations during a musical performance in a club.² This concern has come to the fore in the space of

the museum as artists and curators have become increasingly interested in including music, dance, or performance in exhibitions of contemporary art.

Rather than presenting a history of sound art or music in art, we have deliberately focused in *Soundtracks* on the medium of the exhibition, prompted by our curiosity about how we might inhabit the recently expanded SFMOMA building through artworks that challenge us by contracting and expanding on a visceral level. A first glimpse of the sort of unexpected encounters such works can generate was provided by the 2010 commission of *Sonic Shadows* by the artist Bill Fontana, which created shifting acoustic events that caught visitors off-guard as they circulated through the various floors of SFMOMA's building prior to its expansion.

Exhibited sounds are not alone in space. Background noise—visitor movement, conversation, institutional operations—invariably forms a second soundtrack. The volume setting on a work might override this noise occasionally, but it can never eliminate the hybrid experience entirely. Art historian Helmut Draxler has elaborated on the very particular intersection between sound and art and the specifics of giving sound a durational institutional setting: “Unlike music, sound possesses no internal *Materialstand*, or historical state of the material—it does not develop. It can only be placed in concrete situations again and again, each time afresh, and addressed in such a way that visual and acoustic, aesthetic and institutional space can be distinguished and then, in this distinctness, related again. Thus, the history of the relations between music and the visual arts since John Cage cannot be read as one of fusion in the sense of the total artwork, nor in terms of synaesthetic phantasmagoria, but rather as the history of a shift in the direction of the fields of sound and museality.” A critical analysis of the materials of sound that follows the notion of progress or development within the category of music history—referred to as the “state of material” by Theodor Adorno—fails to take into account the shift in context from new music, avant-garde music, and so on to the presence of sounds in an art exhibition or in an art institution. With that in mind, “it is equally possible for the medium of sound to be called into question by the code of exhibition value or for the code of sound to be placed in question by the medium of the exhibition. . . . Thus, sound as art can speak at once from the vantage point of the medium as well as from that of the institution: as a result, it is able to thematize the tensions in their relationship with each other.”³

With this preliminary note on the museum setting and on the exhibition as a medium for the presentation of sound-based art, let us look at the specifics of *Soundtracks*. Titled to evoke a wide range of associations, from the cinematic and the musical to *tracks* as traces of movement, the exhibition foregrounds approaches to visualizing the relationship between sound and space.⁴ Looking back at recent approaches to the field of sound in art,⁵ we decided that it was time to move beyond medium-specific histories of the genres of sound art and electronic music as well as to sidestep the common art-historical focus on notation and scores or the relationship between image and music in different media. The selection of contemporary artworks, all made since 2000, includes key works from SFMOMA's media arts collection. Addressing the configuration and sequencing of sounds in space, the exhibition includes literal references to film, but it also broadens the perspective to embrace sound as sculpture, as immersive installation, as an act of listening, and as acoustic tracks in space.

The exhibition begins on the seventh floor of the museum the moment the visitor steps out of the elevators. Here the relationship between musical instruments and space marks the prologue to a series of movements. Beginning with the meeting of different media ([Richard T. Walker](#)) and the precariousness and reversal of spatial configurations ([Camille Norment](#), [Anri Sala](#)), the audience is invited to walk through an orchestra of low-tech mechanical “instruments” ([O Grivo](#)). After these opening references to the stage as well as the recording studio, the movement of physical objects and bodies in space playfully engages a multiplicity of sensory experiences ([Céleste Boursier-Mougenot](#), [Christina Kubisch](#), [Sergei Tcherepnin](#)) before visitors encounter recorded performances by artists ([Amor Muñoz](#), [Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader](#)) and are invited to engage as active listeners ([Amalia Pica](#)). At the far end of the seventh floor, two separate room installations deal with sensory immersion, listening, generative electronic patterns, and the specificity of objects in these environments ([Brian Eno](#), [Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon](#)). As the visitor loops back to the seventh-floor landing, sculptural works condense the acts of listening and playback into unique objects that creatively pay homage to histories in music ([Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#)) and recording technologies ([Lyota Yagi](#)). A large-scale immersive video installation that transforms an expansive bohemian mansion into a multi-track recording studio—the site for a durational performance of a band playing the same song over and over again—marks the return to a classic notion of the soundtrack, with viewers wandering through a room of simultaneity and synchronicity ([Ragnar Kjartansson](#)).

From these opening “tracks” on the seventh floor, which range from the ambient, the cinematic, the electroacoustic, and the electronic to the kinetic and the performative, visitors follow a path that circles down through the museum, traveling to the sixth

floor (Susan Philipsz); to two installations on bridges on the fifth floor, one overlooking the new double-height performance space known as the White Box (Paul DeMarinis) and the other below the Oculus in the museum's original building (Bill Fontana); to performances in the White Box on the fourth floor during the opening weekend (O Grivo, Camille Norment); to a walk-through of an exhibition, accompanied by a guitarist playing a personal soundtrack, on the second floor (Chris Kallmyer and Mark Allen); and ending with two works on the ground floor: a video screened in the Phyllis Wattis Theater (Guy Ben Ner) and a walk offering an enhanced acoustic experience outside the museum (Christina Kubisch).



O Grivo (left) and Camille Norment (right) performing at SFMOMA during the opening weekend of *Soundtracks*, July 2017; photos: Charles Villyard

In addition to interpretive texts on each of the artworks included in the exhibition, this publication features contributions that expand on *Soundtracks* in various ways. Dena Beard, executive director of the San Francisco-based nonprofit The Lab, and Frank Smigiel, associate curator of film and performance at SFMOMA, have supported live work and initiated performance residencies at their respective arts organizations. Here, they discuss sound as disruption in relation to performance and institutional space. Artist, writer, and theorist Brandon LaBelle extends the exhibition into this online format by contributing materials related to his project *Room Tone* (2008–12), which, in its very emphasis on the interaction between sonic and spatial imagination, enriches the curatorial premise of *Soundtracks*—to provide a sequence of spaces conducive to particular artistic proposals and to be open to unexpected encounters with their settings, their audiences, and their resonances with one another. Providing further insight into the wide-ranging works presented in this exhibition are writings by and video interviews with several *Soundtracks* artists and multimedia documentation of the works in our galleries—including new installation photography, audio and video clips, and two 360-degree video recordings that convey the experience of the immersive, room-size installations by Gordon and Kjartansson in a manner unmatched by any two-dimensional format.

Many of the materials gathered for this publication will additionally serve as documentation for the museum's institutional records related to collection artworks, which are developed and maintained by members of a cross-departmental working group known as Team Media.⁶ Since *Soundtracks* has opened, SFMOMA has hosted numerous educators and student groups as well as independent researchers whose methodology is centered on visitor interviews. In July 2017 the museum convened a multisensory workshop in which participants engaged with selected works, including Fontana's *Sonic Shadows*.⁷ Chris Downey—whose reflections on this sound sculpture written at the time of its original installation, in 2010–11, are reproduced here—shared his experiences of the shifts in perception of this work in light of changes to the building during its recent expansion.

The recursive and the repetitive, nonlinear swirling and sampling—all these strategies run counter to the regular progression of a film narrative with its soundtrack. Arguably, a good reason to challenge this notion with the experience of *Soundtracks*.

Notes

1. Vincent Meelberg and Marcel Cobussen, "Reflections on Sonic Environments," *Journal of Sonic Studies* 1, no. 1 (October 2011), <http://journal.sonicstudies.org/vol01/nr01/a10>.[^]
2. Brandon LaBelle, "Lecture on Shared Space," in LaBelle, *Room Tone*, Audio Issues 7 (Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2015), 95.[^]
3. Helmut Draxler, "How Can We Perceive Sound as Art? The Medium and Code of the Audible in Museum Environments," in *See This Sound: Versprechungen von Bild und Ton/Promises of Sound and Vision*, ed. Cosima Rainer, Stella Rollig, Dieter Daniels, and Manuela Ammer (Cologne: Walther König, 2009), 28–31.[^]
4. For an analysis of the historical relationship between sound and avant-garde film, see Gabriele Jutz, "Not Married: Image-Sound Relations in Avant-garde Film," in *See This Sound*, 76–83.[^]

5. See, for example, the exhibition *Long Play: Bruce Conner and the Singles Collection* at SFMOMA in 2010. For a comprehensive history of the genre of sound art, see *Sound Art: Sound as a Medium of Art*, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany, 2012–13; and for a comprehensive survey of “audiovisual” aspects in art and music, see *This Sound: Promises in Sound and Vision*, Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, 2009–10, and the accompanying anthology, edited by Dieter Daniels and Sandra Naumann, *Audiovisuology 1: See This Sound: An Interdisciplinary Compendium of Audiovisual Culture* (Cologne: Walther König, 2009). Recent exhibitions focusing on contemporary perspectives include *Listening* for the Hayward Touring Curatorial Open, which opened at the Southbank Centre, London, 2014–15; *Soundings: A Contemporary Score*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2013; and *Sound Image*, Laboratorio de Arte Alameda, Mexico City, 2003–4. A recent phenomenon is also the programming of musical performances in museum spaces, typically highlighting or evoking a relationship to the visual field; see, for example, *Soundscapes*, The National Gallery, London, 2015. ^
6. Associate media conservator Martina Haidvogel spearheaded the development of an SFMOMA MediaWiki as a dynamic, multi-author platform for internal records of time-based media artworks. Our approach to documenting sound, both for this publication and for the museum’s institutional records, has benefited enormously from a research visit by Amy Brost, Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Media Conservation at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Brost’s research addresses the inherent challenges of subjective and objective documentation of aural elements in media installations. ^
7. The workshop was convened by Robin Clark, director of the Artist Initiative at SFMOMA, as part of a larger project conceived by Fayen d’Evia, Devon Bella, and Georgina Kleege. The study days facilitated discussions about embodied encounters as a form of conservation and how audio description may be used as a medium for the documentation and archival memory of ephemeral performative encounters. ^

Soundtracks is co-curated by Rudolf Frieling, curator of media arts, and Tanya Zimbardo, assistant curator of media arts. The opening weekend performances by O Grivo and Camille Norment were curated in collaboration with Frank Smigiel, associate curator of performance and film, as part of the ongoing [Performance All Ages](#) series.

