

Stop, Look and Listen

Artists integrate sound into works

The eye rules in contemporary culture.

Think how much more engaged it is than the other senses in the computerized workplace. Think how much more attention people pay to how they look than to how they sound.

We should not be surprised, then, to find the radical impulse in contemporary art probing the ear in several current shows.

"Rooms for Listening" at the California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco presents three interactive pieces that toy with how ear and eye assemble understanding. (CCAC's Oliver Art Gallery in Oakland will add two more, beginning Sept. 27.)

Leo Villareal's "Sound Box" (2000) is a metal-clad cube with a single door sitting in a large room pervaded by a low, pulsing, electronic drone. A pale, sherbet-green video projection appears on one wall of the room, fed by an infrared camera from inside the box.

Entering the box and closing the door leaves a visitor in total darkness.

Inside, one reclines on a "zero-gravity" bench, padded with a malodorous, acoustically absorbent material, that produces a feeling of near-weightlessness.

The box responds with sound to one's every move. Swing a hand or lift a leg and electronic stutter tones vary in pitch and rhythm accordingly. Keep still and the sounds settle into a staccato purr.

Visitors outside the box see activity within it register as ghostly movements in the video projection. The box's changing interior sound is a computer's analysis of fluctuations in the image.

Villareal's "Sound Box" is an experiment in disengaging eye, ear and touch from one another and changing their familiar perceptual weights. Even a few minutes inside the box leaves the visitor with a temporarily altered sense of self.

Villareal's work may seem to have slight claim to being art, but it has a plausible ancestry in older pieces by Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier and Dan Graham.

Tokyo artist Toshio Iwai's "Composition on the Table, No. 1, Push" (1998-99) has a more social flavor.

Here an overhead data projector throws an image upon a tabletop grid of 36 white push buttons.

Push a button and a pulse of colored light appears, with a corresponding musical sound, and bounces rhythmically around a



Toshio Iwai's "Composition on the Table, No. 1, Push" (1998-99).

short path within the grid. More presses of the same button can alter its path and the associated sound.

As other buttons are pushed, the system integrates the various inputs to produce a new composition. The musical output can express collaboration, competition or disconnection among visitors working the piece together. But only the artist himself may know its idiom well enough to hear it expressively.

"Composition on the Table" has faint echoes of the Japanese game of go, but its mechanical quality will keep most visitors from giving it enough time to reveal what meditative aspect it may have.

The third "Room for Listening" also invites group participation.

"Mutable Muzzy Musics" (2000), by the German collective Involving Systems/Meso, both plays and projects recorded sound, subject to visitors' manipulations. On the wall are three tiers of visual information: graphic representations of looped audio tracks on a computer hard disk. The graphic tapestry of data gets reweaved as visitors retune the audio with four switch boxes.

Sometimes the impulse to repattern the graphics may guide people's interaction with the work, sometimes the urge to hear its sound change. But implicit throughout is a kind of wordless signaling to one another among participants — probably strangers — working the piece in tandem.

The fourth "Room for Listening" is the "Mute Room," the upstairs gallery that architect Thom Faulders has turned into a seatless auditorium for CCAC's extensive fall program of lectures, films and performances.

Fontana Mix at Refusalon

Gallery shows seldom pose the problem of what to do with one's eyes as Bill Fontana's at Refusalon does.

Here eight speakers on pedestals dish out sound, leaving one's ear

filled and eyes idle. The mind's eye comes awake, though, trying to envision sources for the noises layered into Fontana's flowing soundscape.

Ocean and other aquatic sounds predominate, but sustained listening reveals how seamlessly evocative sounds can sink into and re-emerge from an apparently meaningless stream of sonic information.

Fontana says sounds collected over 25 years — from those of joints in the Golden Gate Bridge to the creak of Venetian gondolas — contribute to his "Spatial Concept/Sound." Even without knowing this, the visitor slowly becomes aware that the strata of sound denote stretches of time that, like the fibers in a rope, combine without necessarily connecting.

Despite its title, "Spatial Concept/Sound" warps the gallery's bisected space less than it creates the sensation that remote currents of time have been magically summoned in concert. Fontana restores a sense of sorcery to sound recording, despite its familiarity.

The only visual piece in Fontana's show is "Wave Phase Study" (2000), a black and white photo of ocean waves digitally flopped and repeated to form a scroll of found Rorschach patterns. This image corresponds to what we hear less by its reference to waves than by the way its ambiguity baits imagination.

'Aural Sex' at Clark

After the asperities and ingenuity of Fontana and CCAC's shows, "Aural Sex" at Clark mostly misses chances to make telling connections between listening and libido.

Nina Khatchadourian's "The Europe Collection (Surface Spoils)" (2000), the most conceptual piece here, is almost the most engaging. It offers a CD made from snippets of audio cassette tape found on the streets of European cities. One's curiosity about the CD, frustrated by the banality of the recordings, reveals its own morally dubious depth.

Alison Ruttan's video "Bippity Bop" (2000) is a devilish abstraction of pornography into simple, digitally animated color blobs, bouncing suggestively to jaunty elevator music. Eye and ear are made co-conspirators in one's subjective agenda to seek or avert excitement.

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GALLERIES

ROOMS FOR LISTENING. Sound installations. Through Oct. 14. Logan Galleries, California College of Arts and Crafts, 1111 Eighth St., San Francisco. (415) 551-9210 or www.ccac-art.edu/institute.

BILL FONTANA: SPATIAL CONCEPT/SOUND. Sound installation. **MYRIAM DYM: I ONLY STOP ONCE.** Mixed-media installation. Through Sept. 30. Refusalon, 20 Hawthorne St., San Francisco. (415) 546-0158.

AURAL SEX. Works in various media by seven artists. Through Oct. 7. Catherine Clark Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 399-1439.