



**Making
Worlds** Chicago Sound
as Sculpture



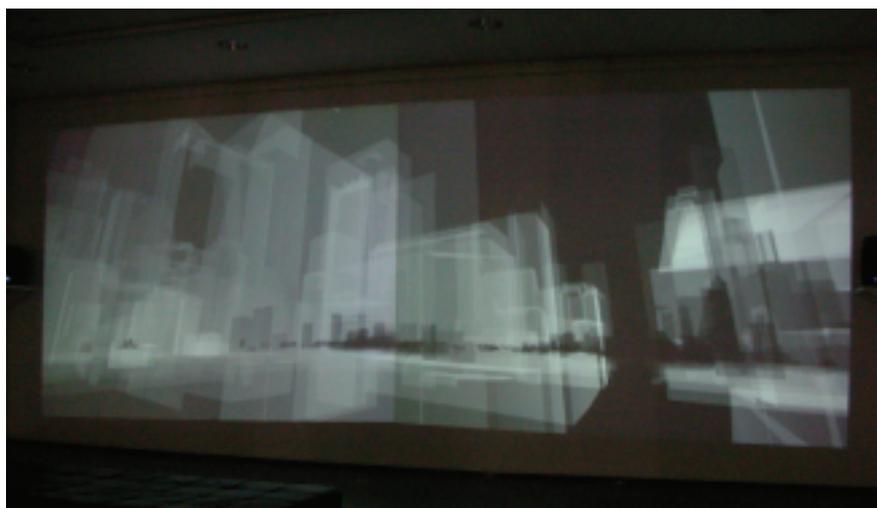
BY POLLY ULLRICH

Sabrina Raaf, 3 details of *Curtain Wall*, 2009. Steel, extruded plastic, LEDs, video tile display, and interactive light display, wall: 20 x 6 ft.; sculpture: 40 x 12 x 16 ft.

Sculpture—situated within the sensibilities of space, embodiment, and the physical world—offers a richly speculative arena for experimentation with materials and technology. The continuing expansion of practices reminds us that sculpture no longer resides in a world of “things”: contemporary physics now reformulates “solid” matter as process and flow, foundational concepts for art are now redefined or dismantled, and virtuality often stands in for the “real.” The implementation of sound created by artists as sculpture has contributed robust tools and a new sense of identity for these changing boundaries. Yet while sound



Above: Christy Matson, *Movements*, 2008. 4-channel interactive audio, jacquard weavings, copper, and linen, 14 x 20 in. panels. Left: Eric Leonardson, Chad Clark, and Brett Ian Balogh, *Chicago Phonography*, 2009. Performance at MCA Chicago.



has become almost ubiquitous in contemporary art, it has garnered scant scholarship, and its artists are often neglected.

Chicago has emerged as a major nucleus for sound in visual art, and its diverse community of artists offers a significant opportunity to explore the implication of aural elements within contemporary sculpture. One of the city's best-known practitioners, Lou Mallozzi, a founder of the venerable Experimental Sound Studio, describes Chicago as "one of the sound epicenters."¹ The city stands on a par with sound communities on both American coasts, enriched by its strong experimental music scene, its art venues and sound organizers, and its vigorous visual art schools, which offer graduate degrees in sound studies with notable artists as professors. The outdoor Jay Pritzker Pavilion, located in Millennium Park, has become a seminal showcase for monumental public sound projects, including the Edible Audible Picnic, an annual summer series of performances. With a 120-foot-high trellis of crisscrossing steel pipes and a 5.1 Dolby surround-sound system, the pavilion spans 95,000 square feet of grass.

Among many supportive local institutions, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) has pioneered sound projects for more than 40 years, inaugurated by its "Art by Telephone" exhibition in 1969. The museum is currently hosting an exhibition devoted to the sound-oriented work of 2010 Turner Prize winner Susan Philipsz, on view through June 12. And Mallozzi's Experimental Sound Studio has sponsored two longstanding annual projects: the Outer Ear Festival of Sound and Florasonic, a series of site-specific sound installations in the Fern Room of the Lincoln Park Conservatory.

Sound in visual art is not new: early in the 20th century, the Dadaists used it to smash conventional definitions of art. Since then, sound has boasted a roguish, anti-establishment imprimatur, coalescing in avant-garde performance, conceptual art, installation,

video, and digital art in the second half of the 20th century. Acknowledging the significance of aural perception refashions Western philosophical frameworks based in classical Greek thought, which linked "thinking" or "perceiving" with Apollonian light: only by "seeing" do we become "enlightened." Sound offers a radically different understanding of experience, relying not on a clear, conventional distinction between viewer and viewed, but on sound waves reverberating intimately within the body, according to the philosopher Don Ihde, who pioneered a groundbreaking but under-recognized analysis of sound and perception in the 1970s.²

In Chicago, as in other urban centers, "sound art" achieved a heyday in the 1980s and '90s as it collaborated in the mixing and erosion of art categories, but there has been a backlash against the term because it is also loosely used for experimental music. Chicago artist Philip von Zweck, who hosted "Something Else," an experimental sound work program on WLUW that ended in December 2010 after 15 years, defines the field as "sound by artists trained in the visual art world. It's the creative non-musical use of sound." This is a useful distinction (although there is an inevitable blurring between sound in the context of the plastic arts and some atonal, experimental music). Prying sound away from music's conventions of composition, temporality, and rhythmic structures, how-

ever, allows it to emerge as an effect—even as a kind of physical stuff, with sculptural attributes. It forces attention to the act of listening and opens up new fields of experience.

Perhaps sound has become so pervasive in contemporary art because it intrinsically embodies multi-dimensionality, a touchstone in 21st-century thought. It exists simultaneously as presence and absence, as action and object, as the spatial and the temporal, and as form and flow. An auditory experience is a hybrid process of multiple activities, consisting of waves of energy that move through and interact with physical space as they enter and reverberate in the ear and body. “It’s almost impossible to have an acoustic experience that’s not bodily,” Mallozzi says of this seemingly immaterial substance. “It vibrates certain parts of your body with volume and frequency.”

Sound’s ability to straddle the “here” and the “not here” has elicited new aesthetic possibilities for Chicago artists who explore poetic alliances across physical matter, duration, and space. I spoke to 15 of these artists, asking, “How is sound sculptural?” The query was meant to acknowledge that old models of reality as they are proposed and explored in art continue to undergo constant re-evaluation, challenging what critic Michael Heller has termed “reality as a habit of mind.”³

Analyzing sound as a sculptural “medium”—if sound can be called a medium—reaffirms sculpture’s alliance with the “real” world (where the field has historically maintained its identity). With an aesthetic sensibility grounded in sound—that is, an approach to materiality that overflows the traditional boundaries of space, time, and the body—sculpture stands at a unique focal point in a contemporary discourse on the virtual, the spatial, and the concrete.

How is sound sculptural? It offers a sense of tangible “nowness,” an immediate presence that is historically and sensually attached to the textures and vibrations of the organic world. Since sound permeates and penetrates the body, one “feels” sound as much as “hears” it. (The Austrian artist Bernhard Leitner once remarked that he “hears with the soles of his feet” when sound passes underneath him.⁴) A number of Chicago artists vividly intertwine embodiment and sound. For example, Christy Matson’s interactive installation *Movements* (2008), which recently appeared at the Evanston Art Center, produces the grainy, clacking tones of a working loom when viewers press their hands on three monumental, wall-hung jacquard weavings, intersecting both the act of listening and the act of touching. Mark Booth’s remarkable *This is the sound of the milky way*, an ongoing installation of field recordings begun in 2003, deploys his sonorous, embodied voice as he names and points his microphone at mute elements within the environment. “This is the sound of

dust becoming visible,” his voice says, or “this is the sound of a half moon above trees.” It is a deeply absurd project that eloquently throws into sharp relief the poetic presence of the immanent physical world surrounding mute things.

Interlaced as it is with the physical world and the body, sound engages and enlivens three-dimensional space in order to exist: without the resonance of space, there is no sound. For that reason, our sense of hearing is best described in sculptural terms—one literally hears “in the round,” not “from the front,” as with vision. Noé Cuéllar, for example, one of Chicago’s new generation of sound artists, likes to talk about “resculpting a room” with the surround-sound technology in *Stamen’s Patch* (2009), recently at the Pritzker Pavilion. Sound is tectonic, generating a sense of architectural structure: we gauge the dimensions of physical shapes by hearing the direction and location of their sound. Aural perception tells us how the world is ordered. “When you walk blindfolded into Grand Central Station and have a particular feeling, or you walk into someone’s cool storage room filled with potatoes, you have a sense of what that space is,” Mark Booth explains. “There’s a level of meaning that can be added by understanding the reverberation in a particular space.” In another example, Chicagoans Deborah Stratman and Steven Badgett recently collaborated

Deborah Stratman and Steve Badgett, *Caballos de Vigilancia (Surveillance Horses)*, 2008. Wood, papier-mâché, paint, rubber, felt, electronics, and audio, life size.



COURTESY THE ARTIST



Left: Sabrina Raaf, *Curtain Wall*, 2009. Steel, extruded plastic, LEDs, video tile display, and interactive light display, exterior view. Right: Paul Dickinson, *Sleep Talk*, 2009. View of elevator installation at MCA Chicago.

on *Caballos de Vigilancia* (2008), an installation of three fake listening stations in the shape of dead horses scattered around a Marfa, Texas, ranch. To access the artwork, viewers crawled into the stations (a reference to early 20th-century wartime surveillance techniques) to listen to—be surrounded by—historical chronicles and narratives about border patrols and ranching history.

Sound’s “roundness” lands an audience at the core of an art experience, its encompassing intimacy keenly triggering a sense of palpable space. Shawn Decker’s *Green* (2006), which appears regularly in various iterations around the U.S., for example, is a circular installation of slim, transparent horizontal bars with speakers that dangle head high, emitting the scratchy, arrhythmic clicks of cricket sounds. Inside the circle, *Green* reincarnates the call of insects welling up over a buzzing, humid meadow at twilight, while the horizontal span of the work calls forth the endless horizon line stretching across a prairie. Yet *Green* is not a field recording of a tangible location, but a pulsing medley of digitally constructed chirps from small circuit boards located on the horizontal bars. It stands as a succinct and lyrical statement about the power of sound—however synthetic—to evoke the “real.”

Even as sound amplifies corporeality and defines space, it pushes sculpture further into expansive, experiential forms. Its liveliness literally embodies the flow of passing time. Entwined in the fleeting moment, it hovers between being and non-being, collapsing the duality of the present and the absent. Mallozzi calls sound a “conduit to absence”: even as we detect a continuous sensation in the ear, “we never hear sound until after it’s gone.” Sound’s relationship to impermanence—with its accompanying shades of mortality—is ubiquitous: the daily use of loudspeakers and recordings ensures that most people never encounter the actual source of what they hear.

Making what is absent explosively present has been a continuing project for M.W. Burns. In his recent installations, *Reactor* and *Count-down* (both 2009), sounds of cheering, babbling crowds leapt out unexpectedly from behind closed doors at viewers strolling down the hallways at the Chicago Cultural Center. “You can put things in places with sound that aren’t there,” Burns says, “Sound makes things.” Don Ihde, however, explains sound’s process of sculptural making as “constituting,” rather than “constructing,” worlds.⁵ Sound models the concept of emergence, it prompts a sense of expectancy, and it heralds a potential reality that comes into being even as it fades away. These qualities all stand at the heart of several prominent Chicago sound sculptures. *Train Time* (2008), for example, commissioned by the Chicago Humanities Festival and organized by Mallozzi with Shawn Decker, Olivia Block, and Ryan Ingebritsen, appeared at the Pritzker Pavilion in 2008 and 2009 to commemorate Chicago’s historic railroads, some of which still operate on tracks located beneath the pavilion. The work is a submersive, byzantine cacophony of emerging and receding train sounds—chuffing, clanging, and whistling overlaying the shouts of railroad men.

Local artists also exploit sound’s mutable, fluctuating qualities by using improvisation—a technique with deep roots in Chicago’s free jazz scene—to create a real-time, multi-dimensional representation of the city. *Chicago Phonography* (2009), an installation of field recordings and video imagery culled from various urban locations is an ensemble work recently performed at the MCA by the sound collective Chicago Phonography with Eric Leonardson, Chad Clark, and Brett Ian Balogh. To “take in” the work, viewers stretched out on the floor of the museum’s atrium, immersed in a continuously tumultuous, collaboratively improvised soundscape synchronized by the artists at their laptops.

Sabrina Raaf's 40-foot-high *Curtain Wall* (2009), recently installed at the McCormick Place West convention center, offers an ambitious example of the powerful fusion of sound, interactive movement, and monumental public sculpture. The work pays homage to a distinctive Chicago architectural tradition popularized by Mies van der Rohe — the glass “curtain wall,” the edge-to-edge glass cladding that encases the exterior of many skyscrapers. *Curtain Wall* includes a hanging, interlaced, steel and light sculpture billowing out in the form of an enormous curtain. This overlooks a two-story video bank displaying a kaleidoscopic image of a curtain that flutters and flaps in response to ambient sounds and the voices of visitors speaking into nearby microphones. Raaf has described the work as an inquiry into metamorphosis, its oscillation among corporeal, spatial, fabricated, and virtual realms as an attempt to “write wind,” adding, “materiality is a slippery concept.”

Sculpture built up through sound offers the potential for a kind of art diligently pursued during the 20th century — art that locates the sublime within the tempo of ordinary life. Sound reveals what is masked by the world; its reverberation implies hidden depths and multiple levels of perceptual reality. Sound unfolds as the uncanny sonic undercurrent permeating quotidian human routine. *Sleep Talk* (1998), for example, Paul Dickinson's sound and video installation, mounted this year on the ceiling of an elevator at the MCA, is part of a continuing 10-year project to record what he utters in his sleep in various aesthetic forms. *Sleep Talk's* strange mumblings and oddly coherent outbursts, like spontaneous poems, provoke a sense of recognition and peculiarity and suggest a percolating subterranean world behind the clanging of an opening and closing elevator door.

Other Chicago artists have put forward the unapologetically raw, machinic qualities of everyday technology as a sculptural foil for the transcendent, labile, richly dimensional qualities of sound. Some — like

Alex Inglizian — have been influenced by Nicolas Collins, a professor in the seminal sound department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who pioneered the use of disassembled circuits in consumer electronics to build musical instruments and sound-based artworks. Inglizian has described his work as a search for authenticity through a “glitch aesthetic”: by incorporating the skipping, distortion, and hardware noise of malfunctioning, shattered digital machinery into his work, he explores “why the sounds sound like they do...People think that technology is magic. My intention is to explode all of that.”

In a glorious rumination on the louche concept of technological “magic,” Inglizian and six other artists (Mark Beasley, Jon Cates, Jake Elliott, Tamas Kemenczy, Nicholas O'Brien, and Jon Satrom) recently cobbled together *Magic Matrix Mixer Mountain* (2009) at Lampo, a Chicago presenter of experimental music and sound art. The 10-foot-high mound of junked but operative computers, microphones, surveillance cameras, and feedback loops produced a flickering, humming landscape as the artists sent audio, video, and data-streams circulating through the sculpture with their keyboards. Like so many of these multi-dimensional works of synthesis, *Mountain* points toward an art impulse just now beginning to model a contemporary world of both material inertia and virtual flow. Sound — in all its sculptural aspects — stands for that contemporary hybrid reality.

Notes

¹ All quotations from Chicago artists come from interviews by the author.

² Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 13–14.

³ Michael Heller, “Rethinking Rilke,” in *Uncertain Poetries: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, U.K.: Salt Publishing, 2005), p. 56.

⁴ Bernhard Leitner quoted in Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), p. 174.

⁵ Ihde, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Polly Ullrich is an art critic based in Chicago.



Mark Beasley, Jon Cates, Jake Elliott, Alex Inglizian, Tamas Kemenczy, Nicholas O'Brien, and Jon Satrom, *Magic Matrix Mixer Mountain*, 2009. Mixed media, 120 x 60 x 60 in.