

Art review: MECA makes more than noise with sound-art exhibition

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For “Air,” Audra Wolowiec mounted speakers on beams at one end of a gallery and peppered the three walls around it with commas. *Photo by Joel Tsui, courtesy the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art*

Sound art is one of those amorphous terms that can confound even a highly sophisticated art public. That it is referred to by so many monikers – sonic art, audio art, sound poetry, sound sculpture, et alia – points to the wide breadth it can encompass. Loosely defined by England’s Tate museum, it is “Art which uses sound both as its medium (what it is made of) and as its subject (what it is about).”

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Sonic Resonance”

WHERE: Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, 522 Congress St.,

Portland

WHEN: Through Dec. 11

HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday

ADMISSION: Free, though donations are welcome. Timed admission must be reserved online.

INFO: (207) 899-5029, meca.edu

An excellent way to understand it more fully is to visit “Acoustic Resonance” (through Dec. 11), an exhibition sponsored by the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art (ICA at MECA). Curated by Julie Poitras Santos, director of exhibitions at ICA at MECA, and Steve Drown, coordinator of the Bob Crewe Program in Art & Music, it presents works that can clarify the term, as well as others that may lead to more confusion. But it is always interesting.

Several sources attribute the first work of sound art to Luigi Russolo’s 1913 film of his “noise intoners.” It might be, however, that the genre stretches centuries before, possibly to a cave system in Malta dating to 3000-2400 BC that would indicate a very early human understanding of acoustics. Whatever its origins, it exploded onto the art scene in earnest in the 1970s and continues to trace a vital course through artists such as Janet Cardiff, Florian Hecker and Tarek Atoui.

The best sound art is deeply affecting, while less accomplished examples can just feel random and dissonant. The great majority of them are also highly conceptual, which means this is an exhibit that demands your time, and also some strategic planning (one work plays on the quarter of every hour, another at three-quarters). Required admission time slots are for 30 minutes, but it took me well over an hour to fully absorb the show.

Audra Wolowiec’s “Air” testifies to the extraordinarily mind-altering power of which this art form is capable. She mounted speakers on beams at one end of a gallery and peppered the three walls around it with commas. The latter were all that remained of the U.S. Constitution after words were removed, thereby signifying a sequence of visual pauses. In music, commas function as cues to performers to take a breath. So, she invited practitioners of yoga and Lamaze, as well as actors and singers, to interpret this “score” of pauses using their breath. Each speaker emanates a particular person’s respiring vocalization.

Walking around this installation, I found myself suddenly hyperaware of what was happening with my own breathing as I passed each speaker. It kept changing, sometimes struggling to maintain its rhythm in the presence of individual vocalizations, other times adapting that rhythm to be more aligned with them, still other times stopping entirely. In certain moments, I perceived the commas as invitations for us to pause and take a

restorative breath from the contemporary maelstrom we are living. At another point, they seemed to embody the way we hold our breath when we are anticipating some other, often calamitous, eventuality. The panoply of emotions this installation elicited was spellbinding.



Julianne Swartz's "Inhale Exhale Volume 2020" is connected to electronics that emit sound at frequencies humans cannot hear. *Photo by Joel Tsui, courtesy the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art*

Some exhibits deny us the sound they are either making or that inspired them. In the same gallery is Julianne Swartz's "Inhale Exhale Volume 2020" a pouch-like form made with copper wire and suspended from the ceiling. The sculpture is connected to electronics that emit sound at frequencies humans cannot hear, but that cause the wire pouch to vibrate at irregular intervals. In this way, it invokes synesthesia, a term that varies depending on the field it is referring to. Generally, it means that we can experience one sense through other multiple senses. In Swartz's work we "see" sound rather than hear it. Neurology regards synesthesia as an aberrant condition, while art simply interprets it as a deeper, more layered form of perception. Spiritualists consider it proof that perception goes far beyond mere intellect (which, of course, it does).

Andrea Ray's "Aspirational LPs Series" also makes no sound, instead presenting digital c-prints laminated onto album covers. Each represent music that – in the words of late Cuban-American queer studies author José Esteban Muñoz – "is not yet here" or "will have

been.” For instance, one is titled “She Will Have Been President.” The non-existent LP within is supposedly performed in some alternate reality by “Shirley Chisolm and the Equal Rights Party Chorus.” We can only contemplate what music that will eventually be (or would have been), but my mental soundtrack kept playing Nina Simone.

A very chilling work is “In the Fury!” a video by John Fireman that uses the 2018 “sonic attack” on the American Embassy in Havana as a means to explore the history of the weaponization of sound. It illustrates the many unsettling ways sound has been deployed in wars and other conflicts: from Native American “death whistles” to a crowd control tool called LRAD that a promotional clip boasts “fills the gap between bullhorns, tear gas, tasers, rubber bullets and pepper spray.” I noticed how grateful I was that LRAD, which can cause deafness, has not been inflicted on protesters across the country in our current highly charged reality.

“Fury” is one of those works that might produce some mind muddle around the term “sound art.” Sound is indeed the subject of the piece. But because it is not its medium, can we consider it more than video art? And its documentary format might make us question whether it is art at all, or just a video thesis about deep research into a controversial topic. The same confusion might arise from “Layers of the City,” another video that presents a song written by its authors, Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere, that is sung by a group of Latinx men, women and children. The work is ostensibly about transformation of place, yet it felt to me more like a filmed performance art piece than actual “sound art.”

Beyond the question raised about what exactly constitutes sound art, however, the show does have one problem – that of sound bleed. As incredible as Wolowiec’s “Air” is, I found that sounds emanating from other works intruded on my experience of it. That’s where an ironic strategy comes in; you’ll need to return to it in rare moments when the other galleries are actually devoid of the sounds of sound art.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland.

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