



Sounds Like.

11 May – 30 June 2019

Listening to art: Sound as an artistic medium

Traditionally, the act of engaging with visual arts has primarily been a visual experience. When we visit an art gallery or museum, our default expectation of our impending experience is that we will be viewing an exhibition of artworks. We expect to be able to take in, analyse and understand the exhibition via our sense of sight – by *looking* at the artworks themselves, by *looking* at the way they sit within the gallery space, by *looking* at the exhibition as a whole, by *reading* didactic texts and information panels.

To experience art by any of our other senses – touch, taste, smell and hearing – conflicts with how we have been trained to behave within the sacred walls of the art gallery. It is an unwritten rule that we do not touch a work of art; we would never be compelled to taste or smell a painting or a sculpture. A video work or a sculptural installation may produce sound, but more often than not this element takes secondary importance to the hero of the artwork, the visual component.

Thanks to the modern and postmodern artists who sought to tear down the barriers of what art can and cannot be, contemporary artists not only increasingly encourage the engagement of these other senses by audiences, but they also rely on a sense other than sight to communicate the meaning of their art. For example, artist Sissel Tolaas creates 'smell landscapes' composed of unique smells for her audience to experience individually and collectively, to build a picture of the landscape in one's mind. Understanding smell is a crucial sense, used and understood by people to trigger their memories of time and place. Tolaas uses smells in her artworks alone to stimulate memory and arouse emotional and intellectual responses.¹

The medium of sound and the act of listening is not a concept foreign to us; after all, music is an artform whose medium is sound organised in time. Using sound as a medium within a visual arts context, however, is an idea that can be far more challenging, particularly when we enter an art gallery fully prepared to look, to view, to understand via our eyes. This exhibition explores the use of sound as a medium for artistic expression, bringing together five artists who use sound as the principle vehicle for the construction of meaning in their works.

Vicky Browne is interested in the idea of making invisible forces tangible by their audibility. In creating her installation *Cosmic Noise* (2016-2019) she was inspired by the story of two scientists in the 1960s who were annoyed by a low, steady, mysterious noise that persisted in their receiver. They later realised they were listening to cosmic microwave background radiation emanating from the Big Bang, a sound that was 13.7 billion years old.² During the same era, cosmic vibrations became known to mainstream culture through the Beach Boys' song 'Good Vibrations', released in 1966. Browne's installation is full of these good vibrations, comprising an assortment of objects that have been engineered by the artist to produce an assortment of sounds disassociated from their appearance. In doing so, the known and expected sound of the object becomes unknown and unexpected.³ The installation evokes an astronomical explosion similar to the Big Bang, and the objects are given a voice to communicate something bigger than just their function and materiality.



In a similar vein to the good vibrations in Browne's installation, Megan Alice Clune invites audiences to experience her work physically first, then intellectually. The artist lists the audio phenomenon 'binaural tones' as a medium of her artwork, in which two sounds very close together in frequency are interpreted by the brain as one pulsating sound instead of two. Through the brain's inability to differentiate between the two sounds, the vibrations can be felt physically as they begin to subconsciously relax the body. Used as a New Age treatment for insomnia, pain relief and a meditation tool, binaural tones are an example of how music and sounds transform the physical body, and how the body changes the sound. From this point in her artistic process, Clune was drawn to the use of music in religious ceremonies, in which sound is used to transform in an

attempt to bring the listener closer to divinity, while smoke and scent are also used to purify and sanctify.⁴

The two works in this exhibition by Camille Robinson are part of a series the artist calls *listening art* – artworks about listening – that also use sounds. Rather than focusing on the aesthetic qualities of the sounds themselves, Robinson's works explore the process of perceiving them, highlighting the peculiarities of the act of listening itself. In a similar way Tolaas examines the connection between memory and smell, Robinson examines the connection between memory and sound. In *Memory Walk* (2014-2019), the listener draws upon their own memory of their physical journey into Town Hall Gallery while they listen to and watch a binaural audio and video work that overlays variations of that same path.

The listener is encouraged to compare the heard, remembered and anticipated sounds, and reflect on perception's relationship with time and sensation.⁵ *Don't listen to these words* (2018-19) takes two modes of engaging with written text – reading and narration – and explores the assumptions built into listeners' relationships with spoken language.⁶ In the work, the listener's reading and the narrator's reading of a text diverge and converge, guide and distract, inviting the listener to recognise the voices they use in their heads for themselves as they read, and to understand the role of imagination in listening.

Roger Alsop's work *Along the Riverrun* (2019), although sound-based, also engages with written text to explore ideas and convey meaning. The work explores the sound of the nearby Yarra River through the sound of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), a piece of written fiction which is renowned for its reputation as one of the most difficult works of fiction in the English language. With a similar degree of complexity, the Yarra has a history longer than can be known, and the life within it is hidden by the opaque surface that reflects the life around it. As Alsop explains, '*Finnegans Wake* is renowned for its opacity. Like the Yarra it can't be understood in any other way than through experience. It too holds a gentle urgency that ebbs and flows in ways that may seem imperceptible but are as vibrant as the river.'⁷

The works of Julian Day provide a more tangible link between visual art and sound. One aspect of Day's practice investigates sound's kinetic properties. His *Vibrant Matter* series (2016), when viewed from afar, appears to be a simple collection of monochromatic paintings. On closer inspection the audience discovers that the works are periodically infused with silent subsonic tones produced by hidden speakers. The surface of each work is dramatically energised, becoming a literal visualisation of unheard sound.⁸

Although materially elusive and invisible, sound has the power to engage us, move us and expand our imagination. Appealing to our ears rather than our eyes, sound art challenges us to experience art through the act of listening, or even challenge us to examine the act of listening itself. By doing so, it can encourage us to think about, hear, feel, see and understand the world in a way that is different to our own experiences – which is something all art should do, no matter which medium is selected by the artist.

- 1 Sissal Tolaas – NGV Triennial, 2017. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/sissal-tolaas/>
- 2 Vicky Browne, *Invisible forces made tangible*, artist statement, 2018. <https://www.visitpenrith.com.au/events/exhibitions/vicky-browne-cosmic-noise>
- 3 Vicky Browne and Caleb Kelly, artist statement from *Material Sound*, Murray Art Museum Albury, exhibition catalogue, 2018.
- 4 Megan Alice Clune, artist statement, 2015.
- 5 Camille Robinson, artist statement, 2019.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Roger Alsop, artist statement, 2019.
- 8 *Julian Day: Vibrant Matter*, Dominik Mersch Gallery, exhibition catalogue, 2016. <https://www.dominikmerschgallery.com/artist/julian-day/>



Above:
Julian DAY, detail from *Cold Front* (2018), installation view at Dominik Mersch Gallery. © Image courtesy of the artist.

Centre spread:
Julian DAY, *Red Heart* from the series: *Vibrant Matter* (2018), installation view at Dominik Mersch Gallery.
© Image courtesy of the artist.



Cover:

Vicky BROWNE, detail from *Cosmic Noise* (2018), installation view at Penrith Regional Gallery. © Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Silversalt Photography.

Above:

Megan ALICE CLUNE, detail from *Relating to Deep Inward Thought Rather Than Intellect; or This is What I'm Talking About* (2015). © Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Zan Wimberly.



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