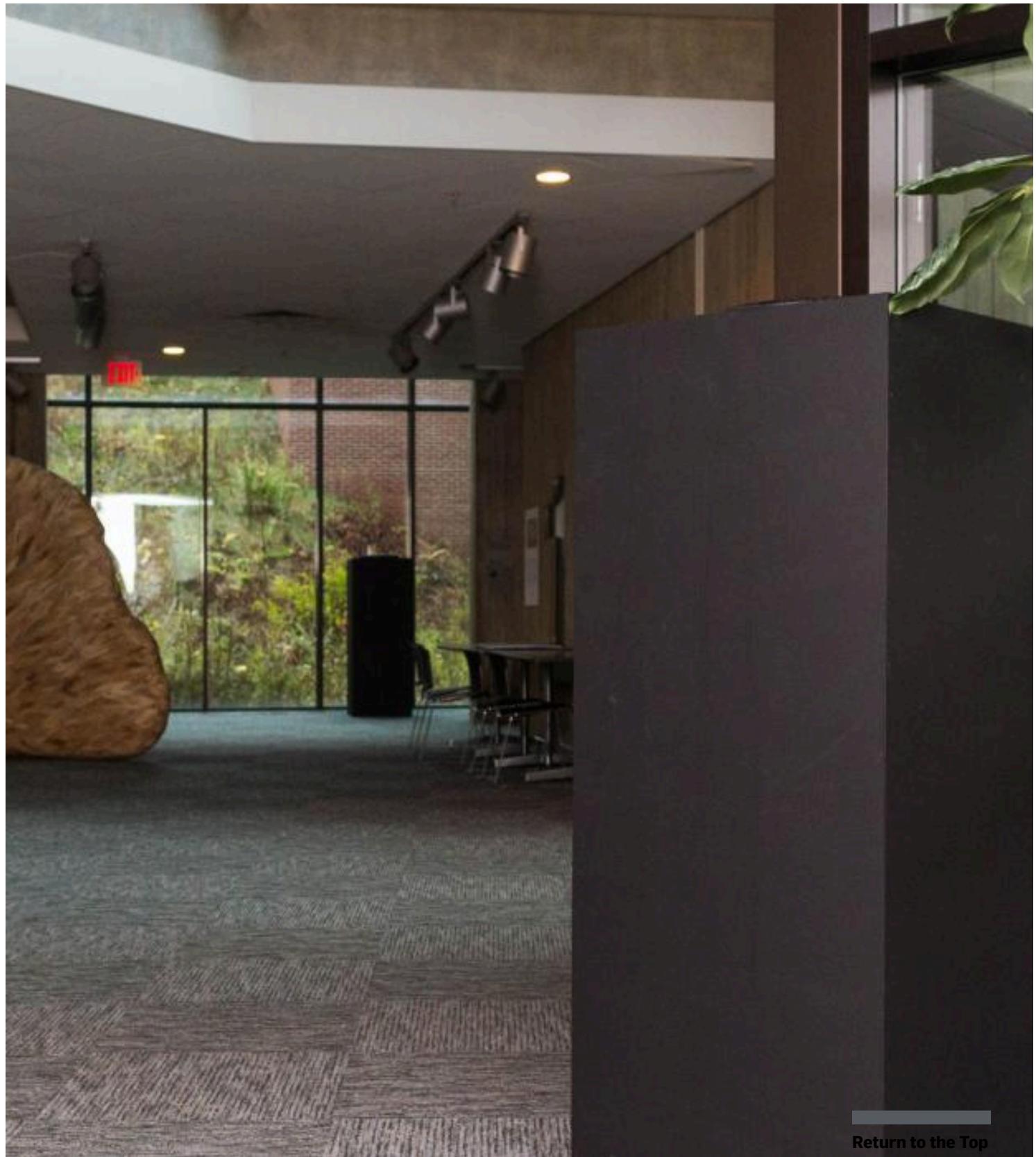


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WHY SOUND NOW?

By Brett Littman
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Some Background Music

It might seem odd that the curators of *Resonant Spaces: Sound Art at Dartmouth* would invite me—as the director of the Drawing Center in New York, a nonprofit that focuses on drawing—to write about a sound exhibition. I am not trained as a musician, I don't play any instruments, and I cannot read music.

These limitations, however, have not stopped me from exploring music-related programming at the Drawing Center over the past ten years. I have mounted four exhibitions that prominently featured sound (Iannis Xenakis, William Engelen, Louise Despont, and Rashid Johnson); produced *The Basement Performances* with John Zorn, which pairs musicians with experimental filmmakers; produced *Drawing Sound I, II, and III*, curated by Billy Martin, String Noise, and Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky), to provide multi-evening installation platforms for musicians to explore the relationship between sound, graphic scores, performance, and architecture; and hosted concerts related to our programming with the Jack Quartet, Bill Laswell, Lea Bertucci, Antenes, Thessia Machado, Ranjit Bhatnagar, FLUX Quartet, Pauline Harris, Courtney Lain, So Percussion, and the Talujon Percussion Ensemble.

My impulse to exhibit and work with sound in relationship to visual art probably comes from my own non-art background and training in science, philosophy, and poetry, and my continued interest in polymaths, collaboration, and exploring the gray areas of the visual art world and art history. I firmly believe that museums should be places that deal with contemporary culture writ large—not just visual culture, but writing, sound, engineering, architecture, illustration, and the natural sciences. It has been my mission to make the Drawing Center a meeting ground for people interested in learning about how this most universal medium of drawing operates in the contemporary world.

Going further back, my own love affair with music as a listener began early on as a child rummaging through my father's record and tape collection, which spanned everything from Neil Young and The Beatles to disco, with pretty heavy doses of the Modern Jazz Quartet, Dave Brubeck, Charles Mingus, and John Coltrane. In the 1980s and 90s, I spent most of my young adult life in New York, San Diego, and San Antonio going to classical, rock, punk, jazz, zydeco, and world music concerts, alternative music spaces, and roots music festivals, and frequenting record stores. Music was definitely more important to me than the visual arts and museums at the time.

When I was a student at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) in the mid-1980s, one of my jobs was working in the Central Library's music collection, which housed more than 200,000 albums, CDs, and videos. I would play songs

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for the music students that their professors had on their syllabi. I could also listen along and ended up learning a great deal about contemporary and avant-garde music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The job also afforded me the opportunity to befriend many of the composers and musicians on campus, since I was their personal DJ in the library. I asked them many questions about what they were listening to and why it was important, helping me to fill in gaps in my own musical knowledge and introducing me to composers like Dmitri Shostakovich, Alfred Schnittke, Arvo Pärt, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Edgard Varèse, Morton Feldman, Steve Reich, and John Adams, to name a few.

I also attended two major sound works at UCSD that had a lasting impact on me. One occurred during the Iannis Xenakis Festival, which took place April 3–9, 1990. The most profound concert of the festival took place outdoors on the grounds of Louis Kahn's incredible Salk Institute on April 9, at 5pm, right before dusk. I recall several pieces in particular, including *Voyage Absolu des Unari Vers Andromede* (1989) for electronic sounds and kites. Percussionist Steven Schick performed *Rebonds a and b*. The last composition, which was played as the sun went down, was *La Legende D'Eer*, which featured Xenakis at the mixing console, manipulating the faders as seven channels of electronic sounds dispersed from a circle of speakers that physically enveloped the audience. I had never heard music like this before—it was environmental, immersive, architectural, and its whole-body effect was almost physiological. At the end of the piece I think there were about forty people left, and I remember the total stunned silence as the audience contemplated and tried to process what they had just experienced.

The other important sound piece I experienced was the premiere, on May 22, 1991, of John Cage's "One 6" for solo violin, with Mineko Grimmer's untitled audible sculpture, which consisted of pebbles frozen in a block of ice suspended above bamboo poles and taut piano wires. The piece was performed in a small space on campus, with Cage present, and it took about 20 minutes for Grimmer's ice block sculpture to melt enough to start releasing the pebbles. My memory of the piece is that it lasted a little over one hour until all of the pebbles had been released from the ice block into the sculpture while the violinist played Cage's "One 6," which is essentially composed of long sustained tones lasting six to seven minutes each. It was magical.

The Xenakis and Cage pieces opened my ears to new possibilities for sound installations and the ways in which musicians, artists, architects, and environments could collaborate to create unique, ephemeral, and emotional experiences. I was able to incorporate these ideas into my own practice as a poet in San Diego, and often collaborated and worked with musicians and composers at UCSD to create site-specific, chance-derived poetry and sound performances on campus and at sites around the city.

In the 2000s, when I began to transition into my career in the museum world, I remained involved in the music and sound worlds. As the managing director of WPS1.org from 2004 to 2005 (now [Clocktower.org](#)) I worked with musicians, composers, and DJs like Elliot Sharp, David Weinstein, and Jennie Hopper. We also helped digitize large portions of the archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), which included important concerts and talks with sounds artists, and made them available to the general public. At MoMA PS1, Queens, I also was involved as a producer of Warm Up, our summer DJ/Music Festival, and the Young Architects Program, which provided a pavilion / architectural installation for the events.

It seems that, in retrospect, I have been very involved with music and sound for most of my life—maybe more than I even realized.

Why Sound Now?

Visual Music: Synesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900, an exhibition co-organized in 2005 by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (where I saw it), for me provides a bit of historical context for why so many museums are beginning to curate sound-related shows.¹ *Visual Music* primarily explored the relationships between fine art and music over the past one hundred years. It featured more than ninety artists ranging from Wassily Kandinsky, Len Lye, and Oscar Fischinger, and the Joshua Light Shows of the 1960s, to contemporary practitioners like Pierre Huyghe, Wolfgang Tillman, and Jennifer Steinkamp. This exhibition made a very compelling case for the centrality and influence of music on twentieth-century art, and I think influenced curators of my generation to continue to explore music as a vital area of further research and exploration in relationship to contemporary culture.

Since *Visual Music*, some other museums and nonprofit foundation exhibitions have focused on the interconnection between music and art / art history.

Soundings, curated by Barbara London at MoMA in 2013 featured both visual and aural works by: Luke Fowler and Tsunoda, Marco Fusinato, Richard Garet, Florian Hecker, Christine Sun Kim, Jacob Kirkegaard, Haroon Mirza, Carsten Nicolai, Camille Norment, Tristan Perich, Susan Philipsz, Sergei Tcherepnin, Stephen Vitiello, Hong-Kai Wang, and Jana Winderen. London's exhibition put these artists into dialogue with the legacy of the radical, experimental, and counterculture sound art practices that appeared in the 1950s and 1960s.

Art or Sound, curated by Germano Celant for the Prada Foundation in 2014, juxtaposed historical instruments, clocks, automata, paintings, scores, and sculptures to make a case that these objects have more in common than we might initially understand. By collapsing the boundaries between the disciplines of music and art and presenting these myriad objects as equals in the same curated space, Celant allowed the viewer to see the ways in which the paths of music and art have been intertwined for over four hundred years.

More recent projects like the Infinite Mix, organized by the Hayward Gallery and the Vinyl Factory in 2016 at The Store, an abandoned brutalist building in London, featured works by Martin Creed, Jeremy Deller with Cecilia Bengolea, Stan Douglas, Cyprien Gaillard, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Cameron Jamie, Kahlil Joseph, Ugo Rondinone, Rachel Rose, and Elizabeth Price. Taken together, these artists' works highlighted the effect that non-narrative compositional thinking, more akin to music than to visual art, has had on artistic approaches to documentary, theater, music videos, and performance.

In 2017 alone, there were three major sound-related shows in museums around the United States. Soundtracks at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), which opened in July 2017, was co-curated by Rudolf Frieling and Tanya Zimbardo. This exhibition approached the idea of sound as a form of delineating space. The layout and engineering of the exhibition forced the viewer/listener to move through different galleries to experience the works, and at times one might hear something well before entering the room that contained

the work. Special walking tour of works that were sited outside of SFMOMA also accompanied the exhibition as a way to refine the focus on how our acoustical experiences are conditioned by our man-made environments.

At the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York, *Sonic Arcade: Shaping Space with Sound*, which opened in September 2017, was curated by Shannon R. Stratton and included the work of Arjen Noordeman and Christie Wright, Louise Foo and Martha Skou, MSHR, Julianne Swartz, Naama Tsabar, and Studio PSK. Two smaller shows curated by Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe and Radius were embedded in the project. Stratton's exhibition for MAD highlights how artists understand the materiality of sound and the ways in which its physical manifestations can be transmitted, heard, and felt. Her exhibition moves fluidly between craft, technology, installation, activated performances, machines, vintage records, and audio.

And of course, *Resonant Spaces: Sound Art at Dartmouth* for the Hood Museum, the opening of which I was invited to attend in September 2017, was co-curated by Spencer Topel and Amelia Kahl. The exhibition included the artists Terry Adkins, Bill Fontana, Christine Sun Kim, Jacob Kirkegaard, Alvin Lucier, Laura Maes, Jess Rowland, and Julianne Swartz. For *Resonant Spaces*, the curators invited these diverse artists and sound practitioners to come and choose their own sites for their work on the Dartmouth campus and around the town of Hanover, New Hampshire. Sound exhibitions in museums can often suffer from poor engineering, sound bleed, bad acoustical environments, and static installations that limit the full potential for signal- and wave-based work that often is outside the range of our visual faculties, but *Resonant Spaces* was able to avoid this problem by siting the exhibition within fabric of the local geography. It became clear to me as I explored the various sound installations that all of the newly commissioned works had been deeply responsive to the specific architecture, landscape, and function of the buildings and spaces they inhabited—and this was very exciting and important. Alvin Lucier and Jacob Kirkegaard's soundscapes exemplified how well this strategy worked.

Lucier's new commission for this exhibition, *5 Graves to Cario* (2017), was based on the eponymous 1943 film by Billy Wilder. The piece was a subterranean soundscape sited at the Bema, an outdoor amphitheater on Dartmouth's campus accessed via a dirt footpath up a small hill. The work itself is like a tuning fork and cannot be immediately apprehended. It requires one's body to be sited in the space properly, and for one's ears to be "tuned up" to experience it.

Kirkegaard's *Transmission* (2017), sited in the atrium of the Sherman Fairchild Physical Sciences Center, was a soundscape made from recordings of seismic vibration in Native American tribal lands in Utah and Arizona. Speakers arrayed through the space projected different layers of the recorded vibrations from below and above ground, as well as ambient sounds captured at the desert sites—making the building, which houses geological research, into a time-based transmitter of the very nature of its primary inquiry.

So back to my question: Why sound now? As I have outlined above, many exhibitions over the past fifteen years have dealt with the relationship between art and music. Each of them has taken a slightly different approach in the way that it teased out how we can better understand contemporary art practice. Several shows in galleries and museums have also looked at the traces of material and popular culture that are embedded in music, and considered how

this has had an impact on our broader visual culture. The David Bowie exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Björk at MoMA, and the *Sun Ra: When Sun Comes Out: Ephemera 1956–1975*, which was mounted by David Nolan Gallery in New York and by Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago, would all fall into this category.

These exhibitions have had a definite impact on a younger generation of curators like Anthony Huberman, Jens Hoffman (who just opened *Sonic Rebellion: Music as Resistance* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit), and Trevor Schoonmaker (who is curating *Prospect 4* in New Orleans, and wrote a book on Fela and curated *The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl* and *Sound Vision: Art from the Collection* at the Nasher Museum at Duke), who share an interest in the areas of overlap between these two disciplines. For these curators and others, like myself, who are exploring sound as a medium that can be shown in a museum context, it seems that the dominant ideas have revolved around community building (concerts), personalized experience (headphones), politics (noise, subcultures, protest music), the visible/invisible (can sound be seen and does it have material presence?), and spatialization (site-specific works and forcing movement between spaces).

As museums move into new and complex discussions about engagement, diversity, experience, and modalities of display, sound and music definitely have become more prevalent in exhibitions and public programming. However, aural literacy remains somewhat limited. I find that my curators are generally interested in popular music but are not conversant in contemporary classical or avant-garde music. Hopefully, as more museums mount sound art shows and other exhibitions dealing with the history of music and art, more curators will become knowledgeable about contemporary sound practices and will begin to incorporate them into monographic and thematic exhibitions.

As such exhibitions develop and proliferate, it is imperative that the field move beyond just presenting video work of musicians playing music as a nod to sound art. As the *Resonant Spaces* exhibition demonstrated, there are so many other possibilities and ways of thinking about sound. It will be interesting to see, as audio and virtual technology changes, what next steps curators and museums will take in developing new ways of contextualizing sound into their missions and programming.

Biography

Brett Littman is the director of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum and was formerly the Executive Director of the Drawing Center, based in Soho, New York. His interests are multidisciplinary, and over the last decade he has overseen more than 75 exhibitions dealing with visual art, craft, design, architecture, music, science, and literature. Littman is also an art critic and lecturer, is an active essayist for museum and gallery catalogues, and has written articles for a wide range of United States-based and international art, fashion, and design magazines.

Notes

[1] For a list of films and videos screened at both venues in conjunction with the exhibition, see <http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/VMFilms.htm>. For the program of "An Evening of Visual Music Films" presented by the Center for Visual

Music in conjunction with the LA MoCA on March 24, 2005, see
<http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/VMMar24Show.htm>

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The Contributors



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