

"Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sounds"

by [Lina Dzuverovic-Russell](#)

MUSEU D'ART CONTEMPORANI DE BARCELONA

Given the meager attention accorded to sound art by museums, the fact that a large exhibition of the genre has been traveling to key European venues this year is a significant development. Originating at Barcelona's Museu d'Art Contemporani and currently at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, "Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sounds" examines the confluence of electronic music, sampling, and the visual arts during the past decade. The show's curator, Christine Van Assche, of the Pompidou, points out the difficulties of mounting a show devoted to the subject: "The exhibition of sound works runs up against museology," she asserts in her catalogue essay. "For the museum still remains a site principally conceived for the hanging of two- or three-dimensional visual works." Van Assche's method for bridging these disparate practices consists mostly of pairing musicians and visual artists in the hope that their collaborative projects will automatically give birth to a common language. As a result, "Sonic Process" boasts a spectrum of museum-friendly installations but barely dips its toes into wider cultural issues touched on by much sound-related art, such as the political ramifications of sampling and the radical potential of data sharing and distributed authorship. The exhibition offers a timely but timid consideration of the cross-fertilization between electronic music and visual art.

The compositional techniques involved in digital music have often been derived from postmodern ideas about the death of the author, and some works in the exhibition touch on the continuing importance of that connection. Mathieu Briand's impossibly titled installation `][SYS*II.MiE> AbE/SoS\][SYS*10.MeE/SoS\BoS][][` (all works 2002) invites visitors to create their own mixes and actually record them on vinyl using a custom-made engraving machine. Briand, whose contribution also included a weekly Friday afternoon lounge in the Barcelona museum, plans to incorporate the recordings into his DJing in the future. In the collective Coldcut/ Headspace's Gridio, visitors trigger video projections and audio samples by stepping on pressure pads on the floor. Flow Motion's Ghost Dance changes daily: Ambient street sound is fed into the installation through four microphones positioned outside the museum.

Those works provide only token glances at the shifting roles of author and audience. In his Mptree/Data Square, Marti Guixe addresses the fluidity of electronic music with greater insight. Presented as a backdrop for the exhibition's more formal installations, the piece is a combination artwork, educational forum, and media lounge. The space draws from networks of information consisting of a list of URLs written clumsily in chalk on the wall, a pile of magazines and books relevant to "Sonic Process," and fourteen computers giving audiences access to music, documentary videos, websites, and MP3 files. Renee Green's WaveLinks similarly samples ideas about electronic music, by featuring interviews with sound artist Christian Marclay, cultural theoretician Diedrich Diederichsen, and the art-activist collective Ultra Red, among others. Their thoughts regarding music, activism, and the relationship of the aural to the visual are edited into general-themed documentaries presented on seven video monitors and in one projection. Green's attempt, through fragments of text onscreen, to weave in a poetic layer of musings about media, communication, and spirituality feels forced and unnecessary, however: WaveLinks works precisely because its direct, slightly chaotic format mirrors the world it engages.

Doug Aitken's new skin, a mesmerizing four-channel video projection on specially constructed oval screens, is the most seductive and accomplished piece in "Sonic Process," although it is also the least relevant to the show's agenda. A loose narrative

emerges as the work's female protagonist moves through a number of public and private spaces while reflecting on reality, memory, and absence ("I straggle to be here now; I straggle not to erase," she proclaims at one point). As the piece continues, light is replaced by sound; screen images gradually disappear as the soundscape takes a leading role in the piece.

Sound Film in Eight Scenes, by David Shea, brings home the discrepancies between the means by which we take in visual and aural information. Audiences are invited to suspend their disbelief in Shea's "sound cinema," as they must adjust to an inverted sensory experience: In place of a screen, Shea presents a computer behind glass that generates a series of "sound films" consisting of a melange of aural moments collected from a host of sources, including Kubrick and Godard films, musique concrete, and the work of 1950s "exotica" composers. Left without any visual component to consider, visitors free-associate in an environment usually reserved for images and not sounds.

Esprits de Paris, a collaborative work by Scanner and Mike Kelley, comments most poignantly on the impossibility of adequately representing the evolving practices of sound art in a museum. On a number of monitors and screens, the duo present recordings made at Parisian locations of "spiritual" significance. Selected from a guide to "supernatural Paris," these sites include the death place of Isidore Ducasse, who was among the first to take up the techniques of appropriation; Jim Morrison's tomb; and the home of Tristan Tzara, father of the random cutup poem. Inspired by William Burroughs's idea for the "systematic recording and playback of everyday life," the piece is falsely presented as a live feed (its subtitle being Paris live by satellite on 14 channels). The gallery is commanded by one central projection, of people dancing in a club. The clubbers, filmed with an infrared camera, dominate the space filled with sounds brought in by the pair's "field recordings." The absurdity of Scanner and Kelley's ghostly feed, gathered at locations supposedly infused with the presence of their inhabitants across history, parallels the absurdity of attempting to capture ephemeral electronic music within a formal setting.

Every gallery in "Sonic Process" confronts viewers with some such dash. Van Assche's curatorial approach is grounded in the world of visual arts, but her enthusiasm for the "uncollectable" makes "Sonic Process" a show full of tensions. These head-on collisions raise vital questions about exhibiting, commissioning, and collecting work emerging out of sampling and electronic music. "Sonic Process" may have taken only a small step in bringing sound into the museum, but its acknowledgment of sound culture's increasing importance represents a giant leap.

"Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sounds" is on view at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, through Jan. 6, 2003; travels to Podewil, Berlin, Mar.-May 2003.

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