

## “TREBLE”

SCULPTURECENTER, NEW YORK

### CHRISTOPH COX

In 2000, sound-art pioneer Max Neuhaus responded to the tremendous resurgence of interest in his field by calling for a dissolution of the term that he himself had helped to coin. “Sound art,” Neuhaus contended, had become a sloppy catchphrase encompassing a slew of disparate practices whose only common denominator was that they bore some relationship to sound. “Sound Art,” he concluded, “has been consumed.”

Neuhaus’s declaration provided the springboard for “Treble,” a group show at SculptureCenter organized by independent curator Regine Basha. Though sound remained the thread that tied the exhibition together, “Treble” resisted the neo-modernist tendency to focus on sound as such and, instead, considered it one element among many in a postmedium aesthetic. Of the twenty-two artists and artist teams included, few are self-identified “sound artists,” but all deploy sound in their practice, often to highlight synaesthetic connections among media. Cleverly conflating two senses of the term (“high pitch” and “triple”), the show’s title referred to the ways in which sound can inform the three media of drawing, sculpture, and architecture (video appeared here too, but who’s counting?).

Its conceptual underpinnings notwithstanding, “Treble” was a rich and compelling exhibition that, in spite of its own premise, ultimately articulated a fine argument for the viability of sound art as a term and a practice. Just as metaphor engages the imagination and the senses more fully than does literal reference, the various approaches to sound featured in the show disclosed the nature and experience of the auditory more ably than do most bona fide sound-art shows with their stark rooms and prattling speakers.

Over half the pieces in “Treble” made no noise at all; and yet they were some of the most splendid and persuasive works on display. Neuhaus was represented not by one of his characteristic sound installations but by lovely minimalist sketches representing two such installations in image and word. The colored topographical lines and shaded boxes with which he depicted the timbres, movements, and layers of sound that inhabit these environments charged the sonic imagination and drew the viewer into their spaces. Two pieces by Dario Robleto made more oblique sensory connections but were even more deeply evocative. Displayed like artifacts in a natural-history museum, Robleto’s antiqued boxes of cello and violin strings were composed of the fantastical materials that are his trademark (“bone dust from every bone in the body,” “bullet lead salvaged from battlefields of every American war,” and so on). Though mute and inert, the objects exerted powerful, contradictory forces. Dead stuff was given the prospect of new life through sound, but at the

same time, the brittle forms threatened to crumble under the strain of history, memory, and their own grisly material origins. Like Neuhaus’s drawings, Robleto’s objects exploited the ambiguities between media, location, and sensory modality—the tremulous shuttling between this and that, here and there—to rouse the auditory sensibility and to mark its profound connections to time and place.

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More than a few pieces in the show explored the relationship between sound and sculptural form. Two works by Erik Hanson—a delicate sprig of blue clay flowers and a gray wooden coil topped by pointy peaks—offered three-dimensional translations of, respectively, “disco songs I liked when I was a punk rock DJ” and Kraftwerk’s electro anthem “Trans-Europe Express.” Steve Roden’s *Letter Forms*, 2003, rendered sound-wave images of spoken letters of the alphabet as crafty sculptural figures. And *Fuller’s Vintage Guitar*, 2002, by Brad Tucker, a makeshift geodesic dome built of thrift-store fabric and two-by-fours, made murky references

to guitar chords and music-shop names. In each of these pieces, the connection to sound was rather slim, and the allusions too private to engage the spectator. Much more successful was Stephen Vitiello’s magnificent *Fear of High Places and Natural Things*, 2004. From a distance, this ascending arc of suspended black speaker cones had a Calder-like elegance. Close-up, the speakers inaudibly but visibly throbbed, driven by a subsonic composition. The work both referenced and inverted the functional use of speakers in sound-art exhibitions, transforming these devices into silent kinetic sculptures that keenly elucidated the nature of sound. Its fragile, pulsing membranes figured the very vibrations of which sound is made and the auditory tympanum that registers them. Indeed, the floating, animated components had an uncanny corporeality, resembling not only eardrums but disembodied hearts or mechanical viscera.

Nicely mounted and orchestrated, the exhibition also deftly negotiated a notorious challenge faced by sound-art exhibitions: that sound is not easily contained but, rather, bleeds through barriers. For the most part, “Treble” simply allowed this to happen, conceptually underscoring a key premise of the show—the ways in which sound leaks across the highly permeable borders between media. The windy howls and wavering sine tones of Paulo Vivacqua’s *Sentinels*, 2004, and the ominous groans of Grady Gerbracht’s *viaDUCT*, 2004, reverberated throughout the venue’s cavernous space, curiously harmonizing with the enveloping urban soundscape and seducing the ear from one room to the next. *Fulgurites*, 2003, another work by Steve Roden, modeled in miniature this aspect of the exhibition. It ingeniously lined a long, narrow basement passageway with tube-like segments of cut wine bottles fitted with mini-speakers emitting an array of glassy tones and prickly sonic fragments that flitted to and fro. Across the eighty-foot span of the installation, sounds moved in and out of earshot, were remembered and anticipated, and, at either end, merged with noises from neighboring rooms.

Whatever its intentions and however many mediums it mustered, “Treble” thoughtfully and engagingly investigated sound and its vicissitudes. It demonstrated that medium-specific and postmedium approaches to sound are not antagonists but allies and that, contrary to claims of its exhaustion, sound art is a fitting label for a flourishing practice. □

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Left: Steve Roden, *Fulgurites*, 2003. Installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2004.



Right: Stephen Vitiello, *Fear of High Places and Natural Things*, 2004. Installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2004. Photos: Hermann Feldhaus.