

Artist Profile: Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon

[Ceci Moss](#) | Wed May 30th, 2012 2:01 p.m.



Our Best Machines are Made of Sunshine, 2009.

The notion of “feedback” is an important element for your sonic sculptures, where the viewer/listener is pulled into and directed by the work. As you stated in our visit, “What you hear affects how you move and how you move affects how you hear.” Your work [SA-3](#), which you developed as a MFA student at Stanford, is a prime example of this technique. Could you discuss this piece and your research going into the project?

Well, for that piece it really started with noticing the moment in which I would become conscious of a localized sound, and how that awareness would pull me into or out of a particular relationship to the space. You could say an in-body/out-of-body type mediation. Through research in sound localization I learned of various directional speaker technologies and I combined that with an ongoing interest in how and why speaker systems are installed and controlled.

I was already looking into military projects involving sound as well as new developments

in sound system technology. Talking with some folks at Meyer Sound in Berkeley, I was particularly interested in their Constellation system and their long-range speakers while I was also learning about spatial sound at Stanford's CCRMA (Center for Computer Music and Research in Acoustics). I came across the "audio spotlight" by HoloSonics and the LRAD speakers at the time made by American Technologies. These both use ultra sonic transducers that heterodyne into an audible frequency controlling the localization of the sound through the inherent directionality of ultrasonic waves. The police and military are using the LRAD as hailing devices and have occasionally used them for crowd dispersal, a technique which is super dangerous because the key component of these speakers is that the user can control them without affecting their own ears. The person in control of the sound can inhabit the same space with those that it affects, while remaining immune to its force. Never before has this been the case. There's a frightening disjunction in that control loop. So I was doing this research and I found a few really cheap small ultrasonic speakers on eBay and combined them into a hanging speaker array loosely based off of one of the Meyer Sound systems. I have always been attracted to the hanging speaker arrays and wanted to combine the ultrasonic speaker technology with the aesthetics of the stadium speakers to address the ways these more known systems control our bodily relationship to sound. In a theater or performance setting there's a loop between the performer, the sound engineer, the speaker system and the audience that returns back to the performer. With the LRAD system there's a different loop where the person controlling the sound (performer and the sound engineer) do not experience the sound, yet they could see their "audience."

Going back to *SA-3*, I wanted to play between those experiences by having the speakers of *SA-3* play the sounds that you as a viewer make in the gallery. A mirror of sorts where you control what the sound is but how you chose to place yourself inline with the directionality of the speakers decides how you experience that sound in space. The audience is the performer. And I guess, as the designer of this system, I am the sound engineer.

Archaeoacoustics is a topic that has come up a few times in some of our past conversations. Archaeoacoustics is concerned primarily with investigating the sonic properties of archaeological artifacts and spaces, and your work in a way could be read as an archaeoacoustics of cybernetic control. However, your focus on cybernetics and systems is very attentive to modalities of power, so perhaps this may not be "archaeoacoustics" as much as a genealogy (in Foucault's sense) of acoustics, where you examine how power is enacted through sound as situated in space or objects. What are your thoughts on this? Could you speak more about your research on cybernetics and how this fits into your practice?

Oh, absolutely. My interest in archaeoacoustics is really more like looking at genealogy though the sense of sound. I still think about *Discipline and Punish* quite a bit, particularly with the history of sound surveillance, the regulation of noise and silence and our own levels of tolerance. But I'm currently trying to think about it as more of an exchange of communication, trying to break down the hierarchy a little. Perhaps that is what I'm now trying to do by applying cybernetics to my work.

I got into archaeacoustics at Stanford, trying to wiggle my way into research groups such as Miriam Kolar's mind-blowing work at Chavin De Huanter or the amazing Bissera Pentcheva's group working on Hagia Sophia. But I am not an academic, nor an acoustics engineer, so I've been inspired by their research but I myself am not a part of it. I had to go back to the roots of why I am interested in it in the first place. Which starts with my interest in control systems, of the self and of bodies in space.

I guess I first got interested in cybernetics when I was researching the rational justification and irrational actions of fear and what I saw as the development of fear based technology. I came across the Cold War networked SAGE system, and then I learned of the Macy Conference and Wiener. I was circuit bending and trying to build my own instruments. The idea of interacting and having a physical relationship with an electronic interface was interesting to me (this was in the early/mid 2000's). Through experimenting, trying to build a difficult to control instrument with various sensors (basically fucked up electronics) I developed some sort of understanding of cybernetics as a personal bodily relationship.

I extended this learning from a personal experience into trying to understand larger perspectives. Through my relationship to various soundscapes and speaker systems, I saw architecture as a non-amplified example. And because I translate architectural acoustics into speaker systems, I am now trying to understand how these networks affect me, physically and/or emotionally towards or against a space.

An analogue architectural example would be standing in a large reverberant room but having it be extremely silent, so that I am self conscious of my every move and thought. An amplified digital example would be the audio systems found in some churches, which are designed to manipulate the space so that it sounds like the priest is right in front of each member with little speakers in the back of pews and digital effects to suppress reverb, enabling a more intimate relationship between the congregation and the speaker. Of course other major factors, such as language, are involved to affect the experience of these systems but on a strict acoustical level one can control and regulate emotions through these interactions. Ugh, that just got very dystopian. What I am currently trying to do is understand how the audience can have a role back in that system. Hopefully that will come though in future work.

You showed me photos of your piece [*I Want You to Want Me to Want You to Want Me*](#) (2011) – a large wall mounted sculpture using anechoic wedges of foam. When the viewer stands in front of it, the design and materials used in the sculpture quiet sound around them. We discussed some of your research into anechoic chambers, including the Benefield Anechoic Facility located at the Edwards Airforce Space, which was developed to test stealth drones. Silence in these spaces isn't mere subtraction, but an active absence. What led you to work on anechoic chambers? Could you talk more about your engagement with these spaces?

For me silence is never a subtraction. Silence makes room for another form of communication, it might not be audible but in the cross modality way we experience an environment, silence can communicate more than the most defining noise, for me it is always an active absence.

In 2002 I had an amazing opportunity to visit the Anechoic Chamber at Bell Labs in New Jersey. I was still painting at the time, going to noise shows, reading Cage, visiting La Monte Young's *Dream House*, etc. but the act of listening was still new to me and I had not started to work with sound yet. The experience was mind blowing. It was disorienting on almost every sensory level and it was the first time I had ever experienced real silence, but the amazing part was that I felt totally comfortable the whole time. We hung out in the space making noise and experimenting then turned off the lights and laid down on the metal fence floor for ½ an hour in complete silence. What that did for me was set a conscious barometer of stimulus between various similar and opposing sensory inputs. Anechoic chambers are as close to a non-architecture that I've ever experienced, they are total voids. Every once in a while I really like to think about that. How it felt to be in nothingness. This might sound crazy but it was as if I had no skin, my heartbeat was everywhere, my breathing was coming from everywhere, a sort of present self-surveillance. I recently went to into a sensory deprivation tank and it was a different sonic experience but was tactilely very similar.

The twist with the anechoic chambers is that they are visually stunning, immersive op-art rooms with a transparent floor so that you are floating in the middle of a perfect cube.

This juxtaposition of experiences is what first brought me to wanting to work with them, but I didn't know what to do besides make one to hang out in. When researching current uses of anechoic chambers, I came across the rooms that are mostly used today, which are for measuring RF radiation for Drones or cellphone antennas. These rooms still function in a similar way to the acoustic anechoic chambers, making sure something is communicating or not communicating, but for objects and more advanced technology that still involve communication and surveillance.

In 2009, you created an extensive 4-channel surround sound installation for Queens Nails Annex in San Francisco entitled [Our Best Machines are Made of Sunshine](#). Audio from two microphones fed into 24 speakers around the gallery, which were arranged according schematics you designed especially for the project. This space, too, had the feel of an anechoic chamber, especially the white wall structures that encased the speakers. As an environment, the installation seemed very attentive to its own architecture, from design to implementation. Could you speak about this project and your own approach to architecture?

That piece was an effort to redistribute and abstract the experience between a building/gallery and the soundscape patterns of the street. I'd been trying to figure out how to sonically move walls or make them disappear. Or create a different type of wall that reflected and amplified sound to sift the perception of the room.

Our Best Machines are Made of Sunshine is totally modular, so that every speaker and sculpture can be re-arranged to facilitate the movement of sound in any space. I would have loved to change the speaker arrangement every week and have the room sound totally different. The arrangement that I settled on was based completely on my own intuitive relationship to the visual and sonic requirements of the space, so that when you sat in the middle you would hear all sounds in surround. If you sat farther out from the center, the sound would become more cacophonous due to the standing waves that would mount in every corner and the narrowness of the space. The effect was felt most when the low-end kicked up, the room would resonate for quite some time creating a deeply sustained bodily boom. This was my first solo show in a “white walled” gallery, previously I had done more site specific work, so I wanted to play with the idea of that space with visual aspects of sensory disorientation. The film *THX 1138* was an influence (sound design and visually) as well as Brutalist architecture, which, due to the concrete and dramatic angles has crazy amounts of standing waves and strange acoustical properties.

I built the piece pretty intuitively and the schematic drawing actually came after the installation. I was trying to understand more about what I made and visualizing it that way made the most sense. That drawing enabled me to refine my own perspective and relationship to systems. It’s interesting how installations can turn back into drawings.





Gordon looking up at *SA-3* (2011). *I Want You to Want Me to Want You to Want Me* (2011) is on the wall in the background.

Age: 29

Location: Los Angeles

How long have you been working creatively with technology? How did you start?

The first digital technology was probably MacPaint. My grandmother was a painter and when she had to stop due to health reasons, my Aunt got her a Mac and tried to teach her to use it. She hated it, but I had fun, I think I was 7 or 8. I also went to an arts tech magnet junior high where I learned how to make and edit videos, use HyperCard and run DMX lights in a black box theater. But I think of technology outside of digital terms. I remember teaching myself perspective drawing at 6 and modifying kit craft looms for weaving around the same time. I come from a family of hackers so taking things apart and DIY stuff was just normal.

Describe your experience with the tools you use. How did you start using them?

I use anything to get the job done. My tools range from pen and paper to software or a laser cutter, or hell, my own ears are tools. I think a lot about how and what I use but I'll use anything.

Where did you go to school? What did you study?

LA County High School for the Arts, Painting

San Francisco Art Institute, BFA in Photography but worked in Digital Media and New Genres

Stanford University, MFA Studio Practice

What traditional media do you use, if any? Do you think your work with traditional media relates to your work with technology?

Absolutely, and my work with technology relates to my work with traditional media. I do not make a distinction between traditional and technological media. They relate back and forth and back again. To me, traditional media uses technology, and technology uses language from traditional media. They have different modalities and methods, but so does each genre of “traditional art” and I have always worked in a cross disciplinary manner. Also, with the digitization of production in the past 15 years, everyone blurs those lines. Who cuts stone now? It’s done by a CNC router over in China, or if you do it by hand it’s because that is the only way to realize it. Process and production are linked.

Are you involved in other creative or social activities (i.e. music, writing, activism, community organizing)?

I am in a music/performance collective called [Oth](#) whose members include Amanda Warner, Canner Mefe and Caryl Kientz, and I’m working on an object oriented audio label with Marijke Jorritsma called Physical Release.

What do you do for a living or what occupations have you held previously? Do you think this work relates to your art practice in a significant way?

Before graduate school, I was working as a studio manager for an artist and as an on-call media tech at SFMOMA. I learned a ton from both of those jobs in regards to managing production and various ways media is installed and runs in a museum setting.

Who are your key artistic influences?

Yoko Ono, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, LaMonte Young, Yayoi Kusama, Louise Bourgeois, Lee Bontecou, John McCracken, Robert Morris, Judy Chicago, Mike Kelly, RuPaul, Eliane Radigue, Maryanne Amacher, David Tudor, Walter De Maria, Dan Graham, Anna Halprin, Lawrence Halprin, Ryoji Ikeda, Xenakis, Stockhausen, Harry Parch, Harry Smith, Cluster, Throbbing Gristle, Pauline Oliveros, Octavia E Butler, Phillip K Dick, JD Ballard, Ursula K. Le Guin, Arthur C. Clark, Stanley Kubrick, Bella Tar, Ridley Scott, Adam Curtis, Delia Derbyshire, Robert Bresson, DIS magazine . . .

Have you collaborated with anyone in the art community on a project? With whom, and on what?

Not yet. But I hope to.

Do you actively study art history?

I actively study lots of history. I go in and out of art history. Though recently I've been reading up on female surrealists and tantric paintings.

Do you read art criticism, philosophy, or critical theory? If so, which authors inspire you?

I read critical theory when I'm researching some particular aspect of what I am doing in the studio. In undergrad, I loved Virillo and Foucault. Now, it's hard to say. I do pay attention to the writing in Grey Room and MIT press, such as the Technologies of Lived Abstraction series. And I've been reading up lots on perception and listening. There's so much out there, and I'm a very slow reader.

Are there any issues around the production of, or the display/exhibition of new media art that you are concerned about?

Sound in galleries and museums. There are ways to control it. Maybe not completely without compromising the visual experience, but a little more attention to how installations and buildings are designed could go a long way.

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