

On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc



Stephen Vitiello, *A Bell for Every Minute* (2010)

Soundings: A Contemporary Score

Museum of Modern Art, New York, US
New York has never been a generous host to sound art. The city that never shuts up (to borrow a line from Ani DiFranco) has seen a few quiet rooms come and go. Diapason Gallery or the long since closed Engine 27 prove the rule both by being the exceptions and by being defunct. So a much touted exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art is a welcome turn of events.

Soundings is the first exhibit delving into sound art by a major institution in New York. The majority of the works by 16 artists are housed in one gallery, subdivided into smaller sound spaces, with a few more peppered through the building. The corridor approaching the main gallery is literally a wall of noise, distinguished by subtle variations in the 1500 small, wall mounted speakers comprising Tristan Perich's *Microtonal Wall*. Before that, however,

Sergei Tcherepnin's *Motor-Matter Bench* has trouble getting past its utilitarian role even while an analogue synthesizer track plays through the wood and into the spines of smartphone-checking patrons.

The problem with the show is the sound bleed. The sub galleries constructed within the space have open doorways and, given the noisy surroundings, patrons don't observe the hush like they do in the painting galleries. As a result, the social works are the most successful. Richard Garet's *Before Me* is a turntable, microphone and speakers, and a suspended lightbulb. A marble on a tray on the spinning turntable provides the sound. The piece calls back to a shared setting – the living room – and even if the low rumble isn't what a hi-fi generally produces the small gathering chatting around it seems perfectly natural. Jana Winderden's *Ultrafield*, however, is promptly and sadly drowned out. Haroon Mizra's

oddly named *Sick* benefits from anechoic chamber acoustic tiles on two walls, creating one of the quieter sub-galleries for its buzzing and chirping even if the relation between the 8-bit score and the Piet Mondrian painting framed in blue LED lights is a bit mystifying.

In a secluded end of the gallery lies the most pleasant part of the show. Susan Philipsz's eight channel installation *Study For Strings* is a lovely piece of music, although it might work just as well on record at home. Philipsz separates out two of the 24 instruments in Pavel Haas's 1943 work of the same title, creating a stark impression of an orchestra being exterminated. The eight speakers mounted on a wall five metres long don't do a lot to differentiate it from a nice stereo set up from the bench designated as a sweet spot.

The most successful use of space is outside the exhibit. Florian Hecker's

Afterdance fills an open stairwell with sound (sharing space with an Alexander Calder mobile) and meets museum goers on its own terms, allowing them to stop or move through. It's a busy electronic sound piece with thin pulse patterns echoing artificially across the environment by virtue of the speaker placement at the top of the stairs and two landings on the way down.

Stephen Vitiello's church bells in the outdoor garden don't do much to alter the city's soundscape (other than to seemingly speed up time with its too frequent peals) but upon sitting closer to the speakers at the centre of the courtyard subtler changes become apparent. As with many visual works, it takes a little time to sink in. But in a curious way, by seeming to go nearly unnoticed by many in the garden – a popular midday respite in Manhattan – it may be the most successful piece in the show.
Kurt Gottschalk

Gretchen Bender

Tracking The Thrill

The Kitchen, New York, US

This posthumous mini-retrospective at The Kitchen for video artist Gretchen Bender (1951–2004) restages two of her important installation works from the 1980s, *Total Recall* (1987) and *Wild Dead* (1984), along with a selection of music videos produced or directed by the artist. Bender's work in the 1980s was quite prescient in its critique of computerised networks, while also blasting television's mind-numbing mediocrity.

With scores by New York musician Stuart Argabright (Ike Yard, Death Comet Crew), these two works activate an enormous wall of screens in order to totally inundate the viewer. As noted by art historian Jonathan Crary in 1984, Bender appropriated images to draw attention to the flattening of all images as they become data flow. While Bender is sometimes lumped in with her

contemporaries in the Pictures Generation, like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, Crary argues that in striking contrast to these artists' reassembled but discrete images, Bender's layers of processing remove their singularity, pushing them towards a homogenous overdrive. Bender's work is distinct in its intense magnification of the unthinkable immensity of information, dependent on a profit-minded corporate infrastructure. On that point, her re-entrance into the limelight could not be more timely.

The poster for *Total Recall*'s original production, also at The Kitchen, in 1987 aptly billed it as "electronic theatre". Orchestrated to convey the troubling sedation offered by the entertainment industry during the height of the Reagan era, *Total Recall* is ominous and pulsating. Run through 24 monitors and two rear projection screens, Bender carefully

sequenced custom computer animations by artist Amber Denker with reworked logos from giants like GE, AT&T, Thorn EMI, and Mercedes-Benz and stolen television excerpts. Like a choreographed ballet, the animations dash across the screens and television clips flicker in unison. *Wild Dead* (1984) is no less dystopian, looped on 27 monitors, the two minute video deconstructs the original AT&T logo (which the artist referred to as the "Death Star") with intermittent computer animations.

Bender made a living doing commercial work and music videos, where she translated the fast editing and pace of her installations to videos like Megadeth's "Peace Sells (But Who's Buying?)" and New Order's "Bizarre Love Triangle". Notably, Bender directed the opening credits of *America's Most Wanted*, also shown here. As the catalogue's interviews and essays make clear, the fertile junctures existing in NYC

at the time gave Bender the opportunity to critique the media and operate within it simultaneously. As a result, the artist found many venues for her work, from the legendary nightclub Danceteria to the forward thinking East Village gallery Nature Morte to MTV.

On the exhibition entrance's wall, Bender's 1986 manifesto "Perversion Of The Visual" proclaims that artists "run interference patterns in order to perceive structures; in order to transcend them; in order to explore fascisms". Almost 30 years later, this statement still resonates. As numerous artists and musicians address the current schizophrenic liquidity of contemporary information flow, Bender's work is a reminder that artists must continue to find ways to elaborate interference patterns to create within, without and through.

Ceci Moss