

RESONANCE AND REVELATION:

MAYA DUNIETZ AND THE SUBJECTIVITY OF SOUND

[Sound] flows through the environment as temporal material lending dramatically to the experiences we have of being in particular buildings, and with particular people.

—Brandon LaBelle, *Overheard and Interrupted*

A space always resonates—when full, when empty, and in all states in between. Space and sound are inexplicably intertwined; we cannot have one without the other. This is the basis for work by many artists, composers, and musicians. Historically, John Cage (in *4'33"*, 1952) and Alvin Lucier (in *I Am Sitting in a Room*, 1969) both investigated ideas related to resonance and architecture, and how sound is experienced within a particular space. But even before these two artists, and the many others who have followed them, we as humans can look back on using sound to map our surroundings and to respond to situations. It is both part of our nature and part of our anatomy.

In Maya Dunietz's exhibition *Root of Two*, sound travels across and through the Bemis Center building—meeting with timber, air, bodies, and concrete. Throughout the exhibition, a sonic pulsation exists; it is both *heard* and *felt* in a multitude of ways across the galleries. Sound is influenced by the shape or conditions of the space in which it vibrates.¹ In *Root of Two*, seven individual works and room-sized installations come together in collaboration with the space and the bodies of the visitors, engaging in an ongoing spatial and auditory four-month long performance.

¹Toshiya Tsunoda, "Luke Fowler & Toshiya Tsunoda," in *Soundings: A Contemporary Score*, 25 (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 2013.

I first met Dunietz in 2016 at her studio, after her first major solo exhibition, *Sound Requires a Medium* at the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv, concluded. Works from that exhibition were installed throughout the studio's large, airy space. As *Thicket* (2016) hung partially installed, tweeting and twittering sounds from thousands of iPod headphones above us—the digital tones of the composition flittered between my ears and inside my head. By placing a metal rod in my mouth and covering my ears, I listened through my teeth to *Sound Requires a Medium* (2016);² it reminded me of summer games of my youth where we would yell at each other underwater, trying to decipher each other's words. And I was introduced to the original *Trembling Piano* (2016), originally acquired from a brothel in Chicago and drilled with a butt kicker.³ It emitted vibrations that I felt physically through my bones, skin, and ears. It was a warm and harrowing voice, almost lost and calling out for its family and friends. Experiencing these works was the beginning of what has become a prolonged curatorial foray into sound art and experimental music, and the ways it can exist within and outside of the gallery space.

As a composer, sound artist, and musician, Dunietz explores notions related to psychoacoustics, resonance, and the embodied experience, which changes depending on an object's location within a given architecture and the viewer's proximity to it. *Root of Two* collaborates with visitors, who feel their influence as their movement through the galleries and their engagement with each work has an effect on the space and the sound. The movement of sound between the interior and exterior of each designated gallery creates links between the bodies moving through and spending time in these spaces. Following in the footsteps of those who came before her as

² The exhibition was titled after this work.

³ A butt kicker is a transducer that many gamers install in their gaming chairs, to simulate a racing experience through vibrations.

well as expanding upon her own practice as a visual artist,⁴ Dunietz's work has grown in dimensionality. *Root of Two* is both a complex introduction to the sensory impression of sound and an expansion for the artist in terms of materiality and scale.

Within the seven works on view in *Root of Two*, only one physically and visually engages the wall of the gallery. *25Hz–25fps* (2022) is the first work experienced, and as a silent work, it emits movement in lieu of sound, asking the audience to listen physically. Through a large-scale silent projection, Dunietz explores the physicality of sound by removing the auditory elements and emphasizing rhythm. The title of the piece, *25Hz–25fps*, refers to the moment in which the speed of the sound wave (25 hertz) meets up with the film rate (25 frames per second). At that point, synchronization occurs, creating an illusion of stillness and exposing a blind spot in the medium of video. Though this illusion was unplanned, it makes a not-so-accidental reference to historic works that also play with what we are referring to as a “blind spot” of a film medium. In Tony Conrad's film piece *Flicker* (1966), he wove together alternating frames of black-and-white film stock, creating a flashing sensation of light that strobos out from the screen. This work's formal properties made it a key film for the subsequent development of structural film during the 1970s.⁵ Additionally, in relation to frame rate and physical feeling, it was typical for Andy Warhol to incorporate a slower frame rate of 16 frames per second instead of the usual 24.⁶ At this speed, film is not slow enough to be called slow motion, but slower than normal speed. Through the experimentation with speed within the mediums of film and video, these three

⁴ This is only Dunietz's second major exhibition of her work in a visual arts context.

⁵ John Dale, “The Flicker,” 4:3 by Boiler Room, accessed April 23, 2022
<https://fourthree.boilerroom.tv/film/flicker-tony-conrad>

⁶ Readers may be confused about why Dunietz's work refers to twenty-five frames per second (fps) while Warhol's refers to twenty-four. Twenty-four fps is most commonly used in North America while twenty-five fps is more common internationally.

works by Dunietz, Conrad, and Warhol create aesthetic distance for the viewers, expanding what is happening in reality versus in display.

The exploration of the sound-body relationship continues with *Brain on a Plate* and *Mechanical Lungs*, both from 2022, which emit sound while creating meditative spaces that reference nature, improvisation, and interdependence. *Mechanical Lungs* invites the viewer to listen to three unique breathing rhythms recorded by Dunietz, while *Brain on a Plate* asks: where is sound located in space? In objects? In our bodies? Inside the brain? These two works, which function as kinetic objects, reference bodily organs through look, motorization, and title. In a sense, they aim to awaken the viewer's senses in a different way from other works in the exhibition. They act as a mirror emitting sounds and movements that are both organic and nonorganic. In winter 2022, artist Anicka Yi presented new work for the Tate's Turbine Hall, an exhibition titled *In Love with the World* comprised of motorized sculptures she refers to as aerobes that slowly hover and move through the cavernous space. Yi has spoken about "biologizing" her work, as the aerobes reference jellyfish, amoeba, and fungi, and the work is there to be "rewilded and co-exist as a new kin species." *Brain on a plate* and *Mechanical Lungs* function in a similar way—they relate to biological aspects of the human body yet are machines that "perform" scores that Dunietz has written. Within the exhibition, they set the stage for active, deep listening that continues with the remaining works.

But, as the music left my home and went from piano to piano and from pianist to pianist, it became clear that not only are two pianists essentially different from one another, but two pianos are not the same either. Instead of the possibility of repetition, we are faced in life with the unique qualities and characteristics of each occasion.

—John Cage, *The Well-Prepared Piano*

In 2016, Dunietz, who has had an ongoing relationship to the piano since the age of five, drilled a piano with a butt-kicker, changing it by physically altering its body and its voice. This launched her investigation into creating and exhibiting $\sqrt{2}$ (2022), which was first proposed to me in 2018. $\sqrt{2}$ was preceded by *Trembling Piano* (2016), and *Mammoths* (2019-21), which had five pianos; $\sqrt{2}$ has seventeen pianos—the largest number of pianos yet, with which Dunietz felt she had conjured a herd—a herd who spend their second life humming, roaring, shaking, and radiating the composition out through their bodies. When a visitor walks through the installation or places their body on or against a piano as it speaks, the body of the visitor mixes with the sound of the pianos, which mixes with the architecture of the space, creating an entirely new experience and unique sound. Since the square root of two is an irrational number, the title suggests that this work deals with the impossible and the unreachable. In reality, the work allows for sound to penetrate one's psyche, allowing each visitor space and time to reflect on past, present, and future.

At Bemis the pianos dot the gallery, grouped as families and couples. Beginning at a young age, Dunietz performed a contemporary repertoire on piano; with $\sqrt{2}$, she expands on her personal history while also referencing seminal experimental sound works by John Cage, and his pioneering work with prepared pianos, Joseph Beuys's *Infiltration for Piano* (1966), and Annea Lockwood's *Piano Transplants* (1968-72). A prepared piano has sounds temporarily altered by placing objects on or between the strings, such as bolts, screws, or rubber erasers. Lockwood's *Piano Transplants* are iconic compositions and site-specific installations that also expand on the history of the piano as an object and instrument. Taking pianos that were beyond repair, the artist burned, drowned, and planted them in English gardens, focusing on elemental and natural sound sources and interdisciplinary interventions, where the piano became played by its environmental

and contextual circumstances.⁷ With Beuys, *Infiltration for Piano* became about silencing. Covering the instrument with gray felt, he condemned it to silence. In $\sqrt{2}$, Dunietz removes the shackles from the instruments and frees their voices. An algorithm makes the pianos' frequencies perpetually move back and forth in search of the ultimate musical middle point, a process that leads them to be in constant movement due to the nature of this irrational number. Dunietz rethinks the pianos' usage to create a complex microtonal sound, to find each piano's unique raw sound—the sound of its resonating wooden body—roaring with all its might. She resurrects each piano and by removing the human element from the equation, the pianos are free to express themselves and speak to each other, and we are free to interact with them in new, unimagined ways.

One of the aims of experimental music is to break convention. It must be done (again and again) to dislocate this rigid way we adopt when listening to music. To make new sound is not experimental unless it opens a new way of listening.

—Taku Sugimoto, *Musical Composition Series 2*

Air Sculpture (2013)—the only work here that was presented previously—returns us to the idea of using our primal instincts to map space with sound. Entering first into an almost pitch-black room, the viewer adjusts to the darkness by using their hearing. Through a collection of sounds and tones, the visitor enters a constantly morphing auditory landscape. The darkness in the room enhances the visitor's continuous attempt to define the seemingly changing dimensions of the physical space. A five-way sound system emits field recordings from Algeria, Morocco, India,

⁷ “Anne Lockwood: Piano Transplants—Piano Burning, Piano Garden & Piano Drowning,” Issue Project Room, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://issueprojectroom.org/event/annea-lockwood-piano-transplants-piano-burning-piano-garden-piano-drowning>.

and France that were created by Dunietz and her late friend Ghedalia Tazartes; these are juxtaposed with a geological narrative, taking the visitor on an imaginary journey to the world outside this room. Playing with auditory perception, the work evokes physical dimensions and qualities that play with and invoke memories.

From Dunietz's first visit to Bemis in 2019, she was enthralled with our "thrift store," a space that contains a grand mixture of domestic, industrial, and technological materials available to all artists-in-residence. From this visit and her subsequent residency with her partner, David Lemoine, *Bemis Surprise* (2022) emerged.

Inspired by their time at Bemis and their personal relationship, *Bemis Surprise* acts as an autobiography of two artists, who not only collaborate and inspire one another, but in fact share lives and children together. On one side, a teapot skitters and sputters, emitting water and bubbling with potential. On the other side, a chapel-like cage created from electrical pipes amplifies the humming of electricity that creates a space of reflection and immersion. Working with free improvisation as a methodology, the artists created two stand-alone works that mimic their personal tempos. Bridging them is an old answering machine, which acts as a mediator and a missed connection. Visitors are privy to messages Dunietz and Lemoine leave each other throughout the duration of the exhibition.

The final work in the exhibition first stemmed from Dunietz's hope of creating an anechoic chamber, a place where one could be shut off from sound and perhaps only hear the sound of your own pulse. Instead, *Boxes* (2022) only *alludes* to emptiness, to a subtle silence that exists in between the stages of creation. Six plywood boxes of different sizes resemble a casually arranged sound system, and pulse with powerful, loud, energetic music and natural soundscapes.

Visitors are invited to engage with the work: to touch, stand inside, and crawl into the display. The sound flows from within the box as if from a void, with each box playing a layer of a recorded live set by Possibilities of Milk, the new band comprising musicians Haggai Fershtman, David Lemoine, Daniel Meir, and Maya Dunietz, recorded in Kibbutz Haogen in Israel for the purpose of this work. *Boxes* (2022) was built during Dunietz and Lemoine's residency at Bemis. The simple materials and construction mixed with the intensity of the music speak to Dunietz's interest in combining visual minimalism with auditory maximalism.

Root of Two is a durational exhibition and an ongoing live performance, one that is experienced over time and through the body. Maya Dunietz has mixed improvisational techniques with the magic of found objects, and digital technologies with collaboration between creative minds. The exhibition traverses her oeuvre, highlighting the minimalist and maximalist sensibilities that she continually navigates. The galleries are inhabited in ways that have not occurred before. Dunietz's work invites visitors to a deep, active listening experience, expanding how each truly engages with sound and space.