

Bill Fontana: Landscape Sculpture with Foghorns

San Francisco Art Institute—Fort Mason Campus
Main Gallery and Gray Box Gallery: February 16– April 22, 2018
Pier 2, Fort Mason, East Wall: through Spring 2019

Music is continuous; it only stops when we turn away and stop paying attention.
—John Cage

For the past four decades, noted Bay Area sound artist Bill Fontana has invited his audience to explore the act of listening as a creative practice. Spanning a variety of experimental media and traversing several continents, Fontana’s installations and multimedia artworks play with the perception of sound, time, and space to question: how can heightened perception—deep looking and listening—change the way we experience the world?

Fontana’s 1981 work *Landscape Sculpture with Foghorns* is re-presented as part of the year-long opening celebration of San Francisco Art Institute’s new Fort Mason Campus. First installed on the eastern wall of Fort Mason’s Pier 2 during the New Music America ‘81 festival, the work was a live acoustic map of San Francisco Bay. Microphones installed at eight different positions around the Bay picked up sounds from the five fog horns on the Golden Gate Bridge, which were broadcast via telephone lines to speakers on the eastern facade of Fort Mason’s Pier 2. Listeners were able to hear various locations simultaneously, delayed by the distances the sound had to travel.

Fontana’s 2018 iteration of *Landscape Sculpture with Foghorns* is reinstalled in the same location as the original and again designed as an acoustic map of the Bay that translates topography into sound. Instead of a live feed, audiences will hear the original 8-channel recording. This temporally-specific audio work layers and overlaps with the contemporary soundscape of the San Francisco waterfront, which has undoubtedly changed in the intervening four decades.

Alongside this “sound sculpture”—Fontana’s preferred term for his work, for the ways sound can define space and immerse the viewer—Fontana presents recent audiovisual artworks, which he refers to as “acoustical visions,” within SFAI’s Fort Mason Galleries. An extension of his decades-long practice of concentrated attention, these deceptively simple video pieces utilize seismic accelerometers, one of Fontana’s most frequent tools. These highly-sensitive devices are designed to monitor large structures such as bridges, dams, and pipelines for damage. When applied to a smaller object such as a bell or a sailboat’s mast, they can be calibrated to capture vibrations and sounds imperceptible to human senses. Fontana has used advanced “listening” technologies to attune the viewer to normally imperceptible sounds in the world around us.

In the Main Gallery, *Space Voyage* (2015) layers three moving images in a collage of observations of the waterfront. Filmed at the harbor neighboring Pier 2, this work immerses the viewer in the ambient sounds of gently lapping waves, seagull calls, and clanging rigging, with collaged images mimicking the overlapping sound elements.

In the Gray Box Gallery, two additional audiovisual works—recorded several years and thousands of miles apart and never exhibited publicly before—are shown as a diptych. In both instances, dynamic and powerful audio recordings accompany stationary video images of bells, not in active use and seemingly silent.

Resonant Silences (Southern facing bell, MetLife Tower, New York) is a study for a project in which Fontana attached accelerometers to the bells at the top of the MetLife Tower in Manhattan, modeled after the Campanile San Marco in Venice, Italy, and completed in 1909 but now a luxury hotel. For nearly 100 years the historic tower's four bells sounded the time, but they fell silent when the building changed ownership in 2001. Fontana utilizes accelerometers to amplify the constant inaudible reverberation of the bells which is intensified by ambient sounds of the city and weather conditions at the top of the tower.

Resonant Silences (Temple bell, Nanzen-gi, Kyoto) was filmed at a 13th-century zen temple in Kyoto, Japan, whose large bell is rung only during traditional New Year's tolling bell ceremonies (*joya-no-kane*). Fontana again employs seismic accelerometers, along with acoustic microphones in the bell's cavity, to record the innate resonance of the bell, whose tones are largely inaudible to human ears. In the resulting audio recording, the inherent sound of the bell is a droning, wind-like roar that overlays sounds of birds, hushed human voices, and footsteps through gravel. The artist has described his process as capturing the "acoustic energy" of the bell to enter the hidden sound world of the material:

"Modern measurement technology reveals a hidden world of perpetual acoustic energy within an apparently dormant bell. The bell is always listening and is a physical mediation on the world around it. These bells are portals to the acoustic energy around them and they have never been silent." —Bill Fontana

The works in the two galleries combine to immerse the viewer in a space designed for deep attention—where filtered out noise becomes magnified and sounds we take for granted can become music. We are reminded of the limitations of human perception and the generative possibilities of stillness and concentrated attention.

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Bill Fontana: Landscape Sculpture with Foghorns is curated by Katie Hood Morgan, Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Bill Fontana (b. 1947, United States) is an American composer and media artist who has developed an international reputation for his pioneering experiments in sound. Since the early 1970s, Fontana has used sound as a sculptural medium to interact with and transform our perceptions of visual and architectural spaces. He has realized sound sculptures and radio projects for museums and broadcast organizations around the world. His work has been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Museum Ludwig, Cologne; the Post Museum in Frankfurt; the Art History and Natural History Museums in Vienna; Tate Modern and Tate Britain, London; the 48th Venice Biennale; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; MAXXI, Rome; and MAAT, Lisbon. He has done major radio sound art projects for the BBC, the European Broadcast Union, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, National Public Radio, West German Radio (WDR), Swedish Radio, Radio France and the Austrian State Radio. He is currently working on new commissions for the Kunsthaus Graz, the International Renewable Energy Agency, and the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale.

ARTWORKS ON VIEW

Landscape Sculpture with Foghorns, 1981/2018
8-channel, digitally remastered sound sculpture; Duration infinite

Space Voyage, 2015
High definition video and sound; 21:40 mins.

Resonant Silences (Southern facing bell, MetLife Tower, New York, and Temple bell, Nanzen-ji, Kyoto), 2015
High definition video diptych and sound; Duration infinite

Red Pylon Study, 2014
High definition video and sound; Duration infinite

Black Sea Study, 2014
High definition video and sound; Duration infinite

All works are shown courtesy of the artist.

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