HOW ARTISTS ARE USING MUSIC TO SEDUCE, CONFOUND (AND ENTERTAIN) US

BY ***Elizabeth Fullerton*** POSTED **04/23/14**

From primordial incantations to operatic melodrama to hip-hop beats, artists are exploiting the elemental language of music to communicate across cultural boundaries

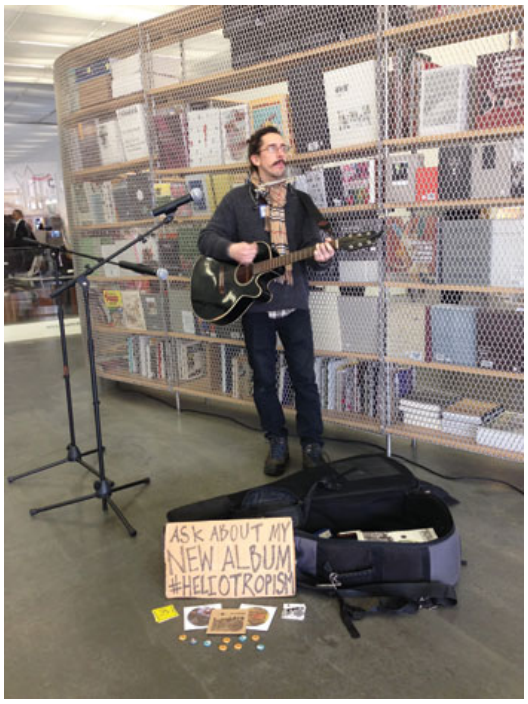
Next month, the chants of an imagined ancient lament will echo around a soundproof structure occupying one floor of the New Museum, transporting visitors from modern-day New York back across millennia to Assyria in 612 b.c., a time when the empire was under attack and on the brink of collapse. The song's composer, Italian artist Roberto Cuoghi, will sing his *Šuillakku Corral* while playing an eclectic selection of instruments including a ram's horn, an African lute, coconut shells, and an Indian elephant bell that will assault the senses in turn.

On another floor, ten guitar-strumming troubadours will sit or stand on furniture scattered throughout the gallery as they sing the dialogue of a sex scene from a 1977 Icelandic cult film. Those performers are part of Ragnar Kjartansson's spatial music piece *Take Me Here by the Dishwasher—Memorial for a Marriage*. The actors in the sex scene, which will play in a loop on one wall, are Kjartansson's parents, and his piece is an ode to their now-ended marriage. "Ragnar uses music as a manifestation of emotion and seduction," says Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum's associate director and director of exhibitions. "It's the idea of spectacle, a way to get to the viewer more sensually."

For "The Neighbors," Paweł Althamer's current show at the museum, the Polish artist arranged for a rotation of more than 50 street musicians to perform at the building's entrance, providing a constant soundtrack to his work. And Jeanine Oleson's upcoming exhibition there, "Hear, Here" (opening April 23), will examine uses of the voice, culminating in the creation of an experimental opera at the end of her four-month residency.

The riot of sounds bursting from every floor of the New Museum reflects the tremendous breadth of music that visual artists are incorporating into their practices right now. From primordial incantations to operatic melodrama to the beats of the street,

they are exploiting the elemental language of music to communicate across cultural boundaries. This sonic diversity also echoes the multifarious tastes of Gioni, who curated last year's acclaimed Venice Biennale show "The Encyclopedic Palace."



Gio Andollo, one of the 50-plus street musicians providing a soundtrack to Paweł Althamer's current show at the New Museum.

COURTESY NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK

Starting in May, the contemporary vernacular of hip-hop will pulsate from Camille Henrot's kaleidoscopic video *Grosse Fatigue* (2013), which will be a feature in her solo show at the New Museum. The French artist won the Silver Lion at Venice last year for the work, which explores systems of taxonomy and cultural production in an information overload reflective of the digital age.

"Hip-hop is the new Esperanto," says Gioni. "It's more universal even than rock and roll."

Hip-hop and street culture figure prominently in "Art Into Music" at BRIC House in downtown Brooklyn (through April 27). That show is devoted to 12 artists—from Ward Shelley to Rashaad Newsome to the duo Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere—whose multimedia work takes inspiration from a wide range of music. "There's a big group of artists who really want to make their work relevant, and so they're using music as a way to deal with the real world and address everyday issues," says Elizabeth Ferrer, BRIC's director of contemporary art. A specially designed stage serves as a listening station for visitors to access the artists' playlists.

The New Orleans–based performance artist Tameka Norris, who trained in fine art at UCLA and Yale after becoming disillusioned with her efforts to become a superstar rapper, says her entire visual practice is rooted in the structure of rap music, with its emphasis on sampling, appropriation, and remixing.

Norris uses rap to critique gender roles and racial politics in many of her music videos, which knowingly quote from art history and popular culture. In *Back to Black* (2011), for instance, she plays three versions of Amy Winehouse simultaneously. "I'm this woman of color co-opting a white British musician who's co-opting a black musician. So it's multiple levels of removal to get back to the same thing or to get to a new thing," she explains.

Tameka Norris as Amy Winehouse in *Back to Black*, 2011.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LOMBARD FREID GALLERY, NEW YORK

And *Licker* (2010) depicts Norris in a bikini and a fur coat gyrating around nude statues by Matisse and Rodin on the UCLA campus. She alternates between the stereotypes of "sexy video vixen" and macho rapper as she sings, "I'm that black Cindy Sherman and that little Kara Walker."

The artist is now making a feature-length film for this fall's Prospect.3 Biennial in New Orleans centered around her rapping alter ego, Meka-Jean, as she reconnects with her hometown post–Hurricane Katrina. To kick off her current show "Too Good for You (Introducing Meka-Jean)" at Lombard Freid Projects, Norris enacted an in-character performance of songs from the film's soundtrack, which she hopes will bring her full circle and launch her music career. "I've taken the most ass-backwards route to becoming a pop celebrity," she jokes.

There is, of course, an august tradition of visual artists making music and collaborating with avant-garde musicians. In New York, the Guggenheim Museum's survey of Italian Futurism and the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "There Will Never Be Silence: Scoring John Cage's 4'33"" demonstrate that curators are looking back at history to assess the impact of such innovators as Futurist composer Luigi Russolo and modernist Cage on visual artists, which remains strong today.

Cage's influence was prevalent in the recent exhibition "Music" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut, especially in a five-hour, three-part endurance performance conceived by Brooklyn-based artist Xaviera Simmons. The piece consisted of a "system controller" holding up images based on chance, while Simmons splattered paint and other materials onto a canvas. At the same time, a vocalist created a "soundscape" by building up and breaking down sounds and juxtaposing vocal exercises with samples of rock, folk, jazz, and gospel.

The avant-garde allure of Cage's 1952 "silent" composition 4'33" has been particularly irresistible to artists over the years. "I think everyone has to have their 4'33" piece. It seems like a rite of passage," says Jennie C. Jones, whose work often sets up dialogues between avant-garde composers, jazz musicians, and visual artists to highlight their shared concern with the language of abstraction. Jones's own 4'33" piece, titled *Slowly, In a Silent Way, Caged* (2010), consists of the opening chords to Miles Davis's album *In a Silent Way* digitally slowed to run for the exact time of Cage's iconic work. "Something that comes up again and again for me is how Miles Davis and John Cage don't get put in the same conversation but they are at the same historic intersection," Jones says.

In her solo show "Tone," at the New York gallery Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (through April 5), Jones carries into that cultural conversation the little-known but influential jazz arranger and trombonist Melba Liston, who toured with Dizzy Gillespie and Count Basie in the 1940s and '50s. Jones selected a snippet of Liston's trombone playing and stretched it out to create an atmospheric work. These haunting notes were devised to play in a loop in the gallery to accompany her minimalist paintings made from industrial sound absorbers.

For multidisciplinary artist Sanford Biggers, however, music legends such as "Godfather of Soul" James Brown and saxophonist John Coltrane have been at least as important to his artwork as Cage, whose followers have produced sound pieces that are challenging to the ear. "There's this attitude that if artists make music that is somehow appealing and too accessible, it diminishes the validity of the practice, which I think is rubbish," says Biggers, who regularly performs a blend of funk, punk, sci-fi, and Asian influences in art spaces with his band, Moon Medicine. The artist, who has a site-specific performance this month at Lincoln Center in Manhattan, interweaves layers of reference from African American history, Buddhism, and art history using music, sculpture, video, and painting. He defines his work as "both/and—not either/or—music or art."

Dinos Chapman—known for the penis-nosed child mannequins and sculptural tableaux of human savagery that he makes with his younger brother, Jake—has also started making music, though his has

Sanford Biggers's band, Moon Medicine, at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York. Shown here is guest vocalist Imani Uzuri.

MICHAEL PALMA

translated into commercial success. Chapman released his four-song EP *Luv2H8* last October, and the Britart provocateur has quickly become a fixture on the electronic-music festival circuit. He has several gigs lined up this year, including a slot at the storied English festival Glastonbury in the summer. "It's quite nice performing," he says. "Normally, you do something and you run away from it as fast as you possibly can. So actually being pinned down on stage with a spotlight is quite different."

After years of "fiddling around" on his computer in his basement, Chapman was discovered by Sean Bidder, creative director of the independent British record label The Vinyl Factory. Chapman's debut album, *Luftbobler*, a dance-y mixture of ambient and techno sounds, was met with critical acclaim when it premiered last year, confounding expectations of an audio version of the Chapman brothers' brutal art. Jake now wants to make a record with his rock band, Heimlich, whose music he describes as "loud, noisy guitars with feedback." A fraternal collaboration may follow.

The cover of Dinos Chapman's album *Luftbobler*.

COURTESY THE VINYL FACTORY, LONDON

As well as managing Chapman's music-industry trajectory, Bidder has a raft of other artist projects. These include a recording of the artist-musician Christian Marclay (of *The Clock* fame) jamming in a café with Swedish saxophonist Mats Gustafsson, a venture involving live performances by four musicians responding to a moving robot sculpture by Conrad Shawcross, and an electronic remix with Haroon Mirza. "It does genuinely feel like there is quite a crossover and there is a lot of collaboration going on," says Bidder. "It's quite a creative time."

Digital technology has played an enormous role in democratizing the music-making process, dispensing with the need for expensive instruments, mixing boards, tapes, and amplifiers since anyone who owns a laptop can make music at home. Mirza regards the Internet as a catalyst for society's eventual return to a primeval way of being in which boundaries between disciplines and between the senses are broken down.

"There's this tribalism that comes with the Internet," the British installation artist and sound composer says. "One of the undercurrents in my work is this idea that visual space and acoustic space could be perceived as one thing instead of two separate things." Mirza's whirring, popping, fizzing sounds created on myriad electrical appliances have a primal rhythm that transitions seamlessly from the gallery to the nightclub, and he has collaborated with various DJs to produce savvy remixes, as well as deejaying himself.

Mexican artist Pedro Reyes taps into the emotive force and broad appeal of music as a vehicle for social change. As part of his ongoing project "Disarm," Reyes has reshaped hundreds of firearms into otherworldly instruments, which still resemble weapons yet produce credible music, from metallic rock to hard-edge electronica.

"That physical transformation of a tool for killing into a tool for music triggers also a psychological transformation where our violent instincts are sublimated," says Reyes, who has staged numerous exhibitions and concerts to reach as wide an audience as possible, most recently at the University of South Florida's Contemporary Art Museum earlier this year. While Reyes says his interest is not in obscure musical innovation, he and the other artists fusing music into their practice understand the visceral power of sound and the immediacy of performance.

A concert of Pedro Reyes's musical instruments made out of firearms.

WILL LYTCH

"There's something very attractive about just being in a space with other human beings," says David Toop, a sound curator, musician, and author of several books on sound and music. "And sound is a strong statement—it still upsets and affects people. I think that's one of the reasons there's such an interest in noise at the moment."

For artist and musician Martin Creed, known for such pared-down artworks as a piano opening and slamming shut, the appeal of performing with his band lies in getting an instant reaction from his audience—and the vulnerability that that entails. "There's something to be learned from actually being in your own work. It's about trying to get real," he says.

In conjunction with his retrospective at London's Hayward Gallery, on view through April 27, Creed has released a new album called *Mind Trap* with The Vinyl Factory/Telephone Records. He also composed two works for the show—an organ piece and a ballet set to music played by his band—to be staged at nearby concert halls. "You cannot separate sound from the visual," Creed says. "I feel like if I don't work on the sounds, it would be like pretending something wasn't there. It would be fake."

In line with the music/art zeitgeist, Bidder is looking to bring still more visual artists into his fold—he is eyeing Trinidad-based painter Peter Doig and San Francisco graffiti artist Barry McGee—and aims to forge intriguing crossovers between the pop and avant-garde realms. "We're inspired by that whole New York downtown scene of juxtaposing things like Warhol next to a street artist or Christian Marclay next to a Blondie and seeing what comes out of that," says Bidder. "Maybe that's an interesting melting pot."

Elizabeth Fullerton is a freelance writer based in London. She is working on a history of Britart to be published by Thames & Hudson.

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ARTICLE TAGS

ALDRICH CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM
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ELIZABETH FULLERTON
FEATURED
GUGGENHEIM
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HAYWARD GALLERY
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RAGNAR KJARTANSSON
ROBERTO CUOGHI
SANFORD BIGGERS
SEAN BIDDER
SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO.
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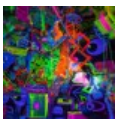
THE VINYL FACTORY
XAVIERA SIMMONS

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



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