

The Subtleties of Sound

Written by Anne Tschida, BT Arts Editor
November 2018

At ArtCenter, learn the art of listening to art



The listening room on the second floor of the 924 Building on Lincoln Road (the remaining ArtCenter/South Florida home on South Beach) is extremely dark. It takes a while for the eyes to adjust, to realize there are square sitting couches and speakers placed all around. This is how it should be -- the goal here is to experience *sound*, to adjust not the eyes but the ears to an art form that is gaining recognition as a new frontier.

For audiotheque 2.0, a Knight Foundation-funded project, every Saturday afternoon through December, sound artist Gustavo Matamoros will be playing his amazing, aurally stunning *Four Audible Experiences of Movement of Sound in Space*. The four pieces include “Everglades: Applied Universal Force for Charles Recher.” Recher was a Miami experimental filmmaker who died in 2017.

Another is “String Solo for Vito Acconci,” for the famous boundary-breaking performance and installation artist who also died in 2017. Matamoros worked with both.

To complement the Saturday events, various guest “sound artists,” both local and international, are also on hand to perform their own works and describe what the visitor is hearing. This in-person interaction is essential to the afternoons, as Matamoros says that audiotheque 2.0 really is about learning how to listen -- very few visual accoutrements are involved.

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So for a piece such as “Everglades,” one can hear familiar sounds that emanate from the River of Grass -- bugs, the wind, birds, and so on. But slowly the ears start to pick up other sounds; the narrative is not as linear as a walk in nature might be.



Same with “String Solo” -- we all know what typical string compositions sound like, but these are atypical, forcing you again to concentrate on the various sounds, not really the music. The audience can sit on the couches or sit against the walls or move around on the floor, trying to get different perspectives on the speakers’ sounds.

Matamoros knows that this new terrain of sound art can be intimidating -- “this experimental stuff is so confusing, isn’t it?” he quips. Which is why he wants this latest series from the long-running Audiotheque program to be more accessible.

“Each Saturday audiences will hear the four [set] pieces,” he explains, “plus a new featured work. They can also request to listen to full versions of excerpts of material that we’ve already presented.” The audience will be able to hear something new, prepared for the sound system that same week. New material, according to Matamoros, that is the result of artist residencies.

“When people walk in here...I greet everyone and create an on-the-spot custom tour of the installation. It isn’t a situation where people are let alone -- unless they want to be. It’s very

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friendly and open.”

Those artist residencies that Matamoros mentions are part of the world he has created in South Florida for well over 30 years, sometimes under the annual series of experimental music he has been hosting, titled Subtropics (now known as isaw+subtropics), where he has invited artists from the across the globe to participate in the festival and to stay for a residency to create some of these new sound works. Through the Audiotheque listening studio and the Subtropics fest, Matamoros has carved out a unique niche, making South Florida one of the innovators in sound art the world over.



Much of what Matamoros has done has gone under the radar, however, and sound art itself has only relatively recently gained respect. MoMA in New York had one of the first U.S. exhibits dedicated to the genre in 2013. Closer to home, the Margulies Collection exhibited a powerful piece by Turner Prize-winner Susan Philipsz in 2015, a sound piece based on snippets from composer Hanns Eisler, a German refugee who was hounded in the United States during the Red Scare. But even here, a visual was incorporated, with 12 prints of the FBI files compiled on the man.

In reality, some form of sound works have been part and parcel of the contemporary art scene for almost a century, often as an interdisciplinary piece. Performance artists, filmmakers, even architects have used sound, sometimes to highlight a more visual work. Dadists and Surrealists played around with sound, and in the 20th century, especially in Europe, experimental sound art

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took root. Still, an element of the visual is present, maybe through text, technological imagery, or instruments themselves.

In Matamoros's listening studio, the visual has all but disappeared, although even here not entirely. There can be projections against the wall, and the guest artists may choose to "illustrate" some form of their sounds. For instance, Wolfgang Gil, a former Audiotheque resident who hosted the October 27 Saturday, used a shimmering blue rectangular sculpture for his multi-channel "Aural Fields 0."



But the emphasis is supposed to be on the ear, and not really the way we have been trained to listen traditionally to music. As Matamoros explains, just as we learned to observe and appreciate modern, abstract, and contemporary art, we can learn to hear sounds in all their subtle and varied nuances. One visitor to audiotheque 2.0 suggested that the room be even *dar ker*, to make the cocooning listening experience all the more intense and informative.

In the first months of the programming, "so far we have premiered pieces created here with John Driscoll and Julio Roloff," says Matamoros, and presented pieces from the archives.

"Currently in the queue are residency pieces with [locals] Edward Bobb, Rene Barge, and José Hernandez-Sanchez," he adds, although nothing is set in stone. "This being an experimental project, we'll advertise them when I see them!" says the always enthusiastic Venezuelan-born

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artist who has worked tirelessly to bring such sounds and boundary-breaking music to the aural attention of Miamians and to the world.

But as he knows, the nature of the experimental beast means perpetual movement, including physically. Although the Audiotheque Listening Studio has been housed and supported by ArtCenter, its time there is coming to a close at the end of December. This program and Subtropics will be looking for a new home or maybe becoming nomadic for a stint. Now's the time to catch this artistic genre in a sophisticated but public-friendly atmosphere, guided by a tried and true mastermind of the field.

Four Audible Experiences of Movement of Sound in Space, Saturdays in December, 1:00 to 6:00 p.m., Audiotheque, 924 # 201, Lincoln Road, Miami Beach.

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