



Julianne Swartz

Josée Bienvenu Gallery

By Yulia Tikhonova

In *Terrain*, an audio installation by New York- based, multimedia artist Julianne Swartz, a delicate network of 100 bell- shaped speakers hovered just under the ceiling. A tapestry of voices woven from a range of pitches wafted around the gallery, presented as a unique cluster of sonants that negotiated the architecture of space and navigated the viewer through a sonic landscape.

Swartz asked 38 volunteers, both male and female, to speak as though addressing a beloved. She recorded their voices, redirected through 12 channels, to create a web of sound impregnated with tenderness. Similar to the chant of a dream- catcher, the tune is melancholic: “I love you” echoed along the gallery walls and resonated with the audience. Taboo or meaningless in everyday usage, the word “love” assumes a different tone in Swartz’s hands. She considers awkwardness—when, for instance, both the recorded participants and the audience feel embarrassed to speak or hear this intimate word uttered in public— to be a productive state, blurring the boundary between private and public, audible and mute.

Not only is the tension between public and private at stake in Swartz's works, but spatial organization as well. Walking into the gallery, visitors stepped into a network of voices, surrendering to their multi-directional origins and grappling with the intense phenomenological experience of being inside a sound.

For Swartz, the dynamic and self-reflective relationship between listener and installation is essential: the listener hears and, in this sense, acts. She worked with acoustic effects for a number of years, shifting the perception of space by inserting devices into rather unexpected places. In the installation *Somewhere Harmony* (commissioned for the Whitney Biennial in 2004), Swartz framed the museum's forbidding stairwell with nostalgia and the thrill of unexpected discovery. Her recent site-specific project, *The Sound of Light*, displayed at the Jewish Museum, transformed its space through evocative recorded tunes, mapping the historical path of the Jews. These works transform the high-tech nature of the sensory devices regulating the distribution of sound into sensuous and delicate-looking assemblages.

Terrain was originally commissioned by the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and only a segment of it was displayed in New York: it is a costly production. Swartz builds up her robotics to embody fleeting substances such as sound or light. She explains that "these elements instill presence without physicality," disguising what we hear for what we see. She learned her craft from the composer Maryanne Amacher (her neighbor in upstate New York), who derives her musical compositions from spatial acoustics. By exploring the broad threshold of perception, Swartz's works often function in a liminal field between the perceptible and the evanescent. She transforms the tonal into the visual, the unremarkable into the magical.