sculpture

May 2017
Vol. 36 No. 4

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

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The Shape of Sound

A Conversation with

Julianne Swartz

OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST / THIS PAGE: ROBERT FRITH

Opposite and this page: *Blue Sky with Rainbow*, 2015–16. Solar collector, sunlight, fiber-optic cable, custom PVC cladding, prism, lens, and acetate. Exterior and interior views of installation at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.

BY JOSHUA REIMAN

There is a certain truth that "plain sight" offers us as visual thinkers and explorers of life. Sound, however, is often overlooked, though it is a major contributor to how we understand our surroundings. When sound and vision mix, our senses are ignited, and an emotional response occurs. It is rare that an artist is able to take the viewer's senses to a place beyond what is visible.

Julianne Swartz knows how to bridge these instinctual landscapes within our mind's eye, with work that is an elixir to the senses. Her research and resulting sculptural forms take on a physiological stance and provide numerous entry points to experiencing light, architecture, tone, resonance, and touch, all leading to a feeling of deep play. I spoke with Swartz about expression and was left awestruck by the depth of thought that goes into her immense and simply beautiful projects. It is a profound statement made by an artist, when, as a viewer, you realize that the root of the work is locked within your body. Swartz is attempting to reveal something that is inside all of us—a dynamic, expressive, intimate feeling felt through the shape of sound.

***Re-Sounding Vessels*, 2016. Blown glass, unglazed porcelain, electronics, and sound generated from the objects, dimensions variable.**

Joshua Reiman: *Do you make an object that makes sound, or is the sound made first and the object afterward? Are you creating the shape of sound?*
Julianne Swartz: I would say that I give sound a body. The objects are the embodiment of the sound, and the sound extends the body of the object. They give shape to each other and provide context to one another. The relationship is different in each piece. In projects that are only sound, I use the sound sculpturally in order to embody it. For example, perhaps sound is spatialized within an architecture or perhaps it reverberates within a viewer's own body.

An installation that I am currently making, *Re-Sounding Vessels,* more literally performs the shape of sound. Sculptural objects are made first, in order to produce the sound. I make vessels out of glass and ceramic and then use a feedback process that reads the air mass in the vessel to amplify the harmonics of that form. The objects produce their own ideal frequencies—pure sine tones. There is no additive sound. That body of work is very literally about the question that you ask.

Another body of work that I am developing translates sound to movement. Sculptures made of wire, paper, ceramic, and magnets act as speakers that output recorded sounds as vibration and gesture. The series is called "Bone Scores." Older bodies of work have shaped particular sounds to particular ends, for example, as a vein through a building, or a conduit between one body and another, or as a circulatory system.
JR: *What does it mean to you for your audience to hear your work before they see it? I experienced* Terrain *at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, where I heard it before I looked up.*

CHRIS KENDALL

JS: I'm glad that *Terrain* got your aural attention first. I started using sound in my work in 2005. Before that, I was working with visual perception in order to bring consciousness to the act of looking. I started to use sound because it furthered my inquiry into perception. We become alert to the distance and proximity of objects and people through hearing. There were other reasons as well. Sound activates emotional memory. Sound seems close to the subconscious. It is a less privileged and more pervasive sense than sight. You can't look away or turn away from it. Sound infiltrates space, like water or air. So your experience of hearing *Terrain* before seeing it is a process of infiltration. Listening can raise a viewer's awareness even before any visuals come in.

JR: *It seems as if you're interested in sound creating the space for viewing, a process of viewing through sound.*

JS: Sound draws attention, and listening can both focus and stretch out an experience. Prolonging the duration of a piece is really important. That is something I am going for in every work—not an instant read, but an understanding deepened through time. The more time you spend with it, the more is revealed. The closer you get to it, the more it has to offer.

JR: *Your new work,* Blue Sky with Rainbow, *shines a rainbow into the wall.*

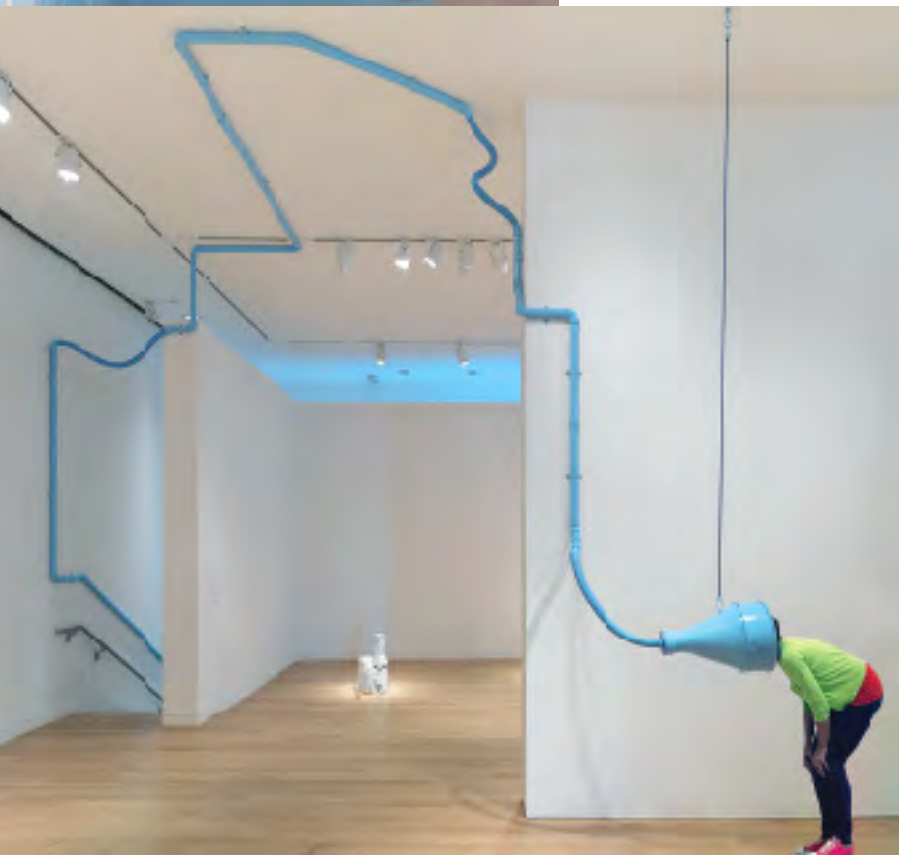
JS: Yes, that is the conclusion of the piece, but the process of making it happen is essential. A device on the roof follows the sun and uses lenses to funnel sunlight into fiber-optic cables that penetrate through the roof to the interior of the building. The cables, clad in a sky-blue casing, meander visibly through the building for hundreds of feet. One cable ends near the entry door, where it simply emits a bright beam of sunlight; the other inserts into a cavity behind a concrete wall. Inside the wall, the sunlight meets a prism and fills the interior space with a rainbow. The rainbow is dynamic. It fades, brightens, wavers, disappears, and reappears, depending on what the sun is doing in the sky. The viewer can just glimpse this through a chiseled-out orifice in the wall.

JR: *Do you see this work as a guide for image or light through architecture? Is*

Above: ***Bone Scores*****, 2016. Stainless steel, abaca paper, unglazed porcelain, magnet wire, magnets, latex amplifiers, soundtracks, and wood, view of installation at MASS MoCA. Below:** ***Terrain*****, 2007–08. Speakers, wire, electronics, computer, custom software, and 12-channel soundtrack, view of installation at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2008.**

BOTTOM: COURTESY THE INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART

Above: *Blue Sky with Rainbow*, 2015–16. Solar collector, sunlight, fiber-optic cable, custom PVC cladding, prism, lens, and acetate, interior detail. Left and below: *How Deep is Your*, 2012. PVC and plastic tubing, Plexiglas, funnel, mirror, record player, records, LEDs, and 2-channel soundtrack, 2 views of installation at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum.



this a quest of some sort in which there is a reward of magic at the end?

JS: I intend the magic at the end to point to the unseen magic inside the cable. It's carrying sunlight. Inside that blue line, sunlight is a solid, a trackable entity. It punctures the architecture to bring light to a dark and marginal space. The work opens up the skins of wall and ceiling in order to bring energy there, literal energy, the energy of the sun. I call it "archipuncture." It is a transmutation—of sun to prismatic color—but also a pathway. I like to guide viewers in a journey, sometimes literally.

JR: *Many of your works ask us to take a closer look. They activate us to lean in, crouch down, and position our ears. You make bodies work. Why are you doing that?*

JS: I've had amazing experiences that are purely visual, but I believe that the untapped possibilities of sculpture are in the body. So, activating the body in some way gives an intimate, immediate relationship with that piece. Physical investment, be it postural, quiet listening, or waiting for something to happen, means the viewer is actively participating. I want viewers to develop an intimacy with my work. The work doesn't happen until they look into, or listen to it, and complete the work.

JR: *So is your work a proposition for viewers toward their own embodiment?*

JS: Certainly, if you are aware of your body, then you are more present to the experience, to the site, and to the moment.

JR: *Do you consider sound as a material? Is sound of equal weight to your other materials?*

JS: In the "Bone Score" series, the sound is essential, but it also becomes visual and tactile. The sounds of breathing or of a heartbeat produce distinct movements, but they also carry the content of the sounds they are. The movement demonstrates the attack and release of the sound. When you hear breathing, you are seeing the movements created by the sound of breathing. The content of the sound and the physical wavelength are equally important. I consider both sound and movement crucial components of my sculptures, even though they are immaterial. That's a paradox I love—shaping, sculpting, and crafting the immaterial.

JR: *The work that you exhibited in "How Deep is Your" (deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, 2012) all displayed a sparse quality that guided the viewer. It seems to me that you are using the term "minimal" in your work, but not necessarily in the way that it has been used historically to describe sculpture.*

JS: I definitely feel a relationship to the Minimalist movement. Those were some of the first works that moved me deeply, especially the work of Fred Sandback. His ability to suggest substantial presence using the least amount of material really struck me. That equation—

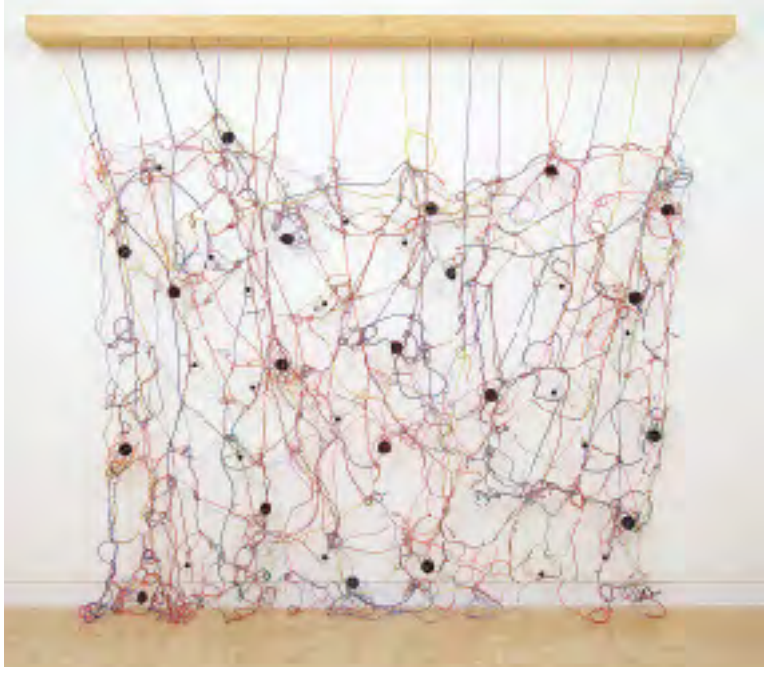
TOP: ROBERT FRITH / CENTER AND BOTTOM: STEWART CLEMENTS

Loop, 2010–11. Speakers, wire, electronics, and 8-channel soundtrack, 158 x 140 x 10 in.

density of presence with a total paring down of material—is an activation of space as energy. Even though some Minimalist work was all about mass, I feel like the way Minimalism brought the body into a relationship with an object is similar to how I work. If I can reduce the experience to the sparest material element, then I will. I appreciate and strive for reduction, concentration, and a focusing of gesture, but I see what I do as both minimal and maximal. Some of my works are not minimal at all; they're more expressive, like *Loop*.

JR: *There is a gentleness or empathetic gesture that you deploy that is different, too. This is a striking departure from something like a Tony Smith sculpture, which can be part of the same movement. Sandback is a great reference. Some of your works are barely there. I can tell what that proposition is, but you make work that seems like you are touched by air. There is a physiological presence that may outweigh any material that is there. How do you get to that point?*

JS: I'm grateful for what you're saying, because it is my intention to propose exchanges of vulnerability between object and viewer. Vulnerable materials invoke empathy and an instinct to protect. I struggle with materials, through many failures, to get to that ephemerality. I find solutions through constant experimentation and sometimes by accident. I can use *Lean* as an example. I had this image of a steel rod leaning toward a wall, but not touching it, and I had tried



many ways of expressing it using different combinations of magnets. For years, I could not get it right. Then one day, I tossed a wire toward a wall, and it just hung there. It did not touch the wall, because there was a magnet stuck to the wall above the wire, which balanced out its weight. I had spent so much time trying to repel or sustain forces magnetically that I had not looked at the possibility of lifting the material to make it weightless.

Lean is in material dialogue with large steel sculptures, such as the works of Serra or Smith, in which steel is monumental and architectural. But with a slight magnetic intervention, that same material becomes weightless, vulnerable, and hovering. It does not need the support of the floor or the wall—it's just floating there, sustained in the act of trying to lean.

ANDRES RAMÍREZ

JR: *I love the idea of re-contextualizing steel, but how do you then come to using the other materials you use?*
JS: In all of my sculptures, I choose materials that do a job, thus there is neutrality to their use. Functionality is key, so the choice of material is not arbitrary. I am interested in how I can work or expand or subvert the function of the materials I choose. The symbolic or literal association attached to the material is also important.

Steel has inherent qualities—structural, magnetic, conductive—that I can access. I can also work it as I need, to make subtle bends or file it down to a pinpoint. It also has a history in sculpture. I have used PVC piping because it is used for plumbing, so it makes me think about water or waste running through a building, but it also has amazing acoustic properties. It conducts and reverbs sound in a fascinating way, and the material is not customarily used for that. I can also choose different sizes and fittings that allow me to shape it and draw lines through a space. Plumbing is a utility system, a circulatory system, and it can carry sound instead of water. When the functional, aesthetic, and symbolic qualities line up, I know that it's the right material.
JR: *Did you come up with the word "archipuncture"?*
JS: I have not heard it used before. When I was talking with the Art Gallery of Western Australia about *Blue Sky with Rainbow*, I used that concept in the proposal—the idea of bringing energy from one point to another and inserting energy where there is none.
JR: *Obviously, you spend a lot of time thinking about moving the outside in, or the inside out, moving spaces, and reimagining the building envelope. Do you work directly with architects?*
JS: For *Blue Sky with Rainbow*, I am responding to the existing architecture, but for the Hunters Point Library in Queens, New York, I am working directly with the architects, because the building is being built from the ground up. I like the term you use, "building envelope," because it echoes my instinct that buildings can be softened—as in perforated. Yes, that is a reimagining or reassigning of priorities. Some works are a playful commentary on architectural binaries, hierarchies, and expectations, displacing what is public and what is private, what is elevated and what is diminished, what's revealed and what's concealed in a building. I gravitate toward marginal spaces—storerooms, basements, insides of walls. I always want to illuminate or activate those places. It excites me to rupture unspoken rules of architecture and upend the expectations of a site.
JR: *I love how you are pushing a perspective, especially in the Hunters Point project.*
JS: That has been in the works for a while now. When I saw the plans and models for the building, designed by Steven Holl, I responded to the transparency and permeability between inside and outside, which was already built into the fantastic design. The site was also beautiful—right on the water in Gantry Park. That awareness and appreciation of building and site led me to design four optical pieces, we call them *Occuli*, that will be built into the exterior walls and a ceiling. Each one focuses attention toward a view and constructs a novel perspective of that view with lenses. The *Occuli* frame, but they also subvert. They offer viewers a chance to actively reflect on where they are.
JR: *It seems to me that your interests are seated within shifting a viewer's perception away from everyday experience.*
JS: Yes, a slight shift, in order to notice the everyday differently. We see and hear so much that we need to turn down sensitivity in order to filter things

Lean, 2012. Steel, magnet, and wall, 69 x .25 in.

ANDRES RAMÍREZ

***Surrogate (JS)*, *Surrogate (KRL)*, and *Surrogate (ARL)*, 2012. White and gray cement, mica, and 143 clock movements inside the blocks, 3 elements, 68 x 18 x 12 in., 72 x 24 x 14 in., and 40 x 17 x 8 in.**

out. A goal of my work is to induce people to see, hear, and feel with a different quality of attention than what we are usually accustomed to.

JR: *I would hope that art could allow us to be here in the now and to show that we are alive. Your work is really about systems, the nervous system and being embodied. Do you watch people watch your work?*

JS: Yes, absolutely. One of my favorite things to do is just hang out and watch people with my work and pretend I am not the artist. To watch people have experiences teaches me. I learn about the approach, interaction, attention, and duration. What makes someone able to look or listen longer? More acutely?

JR: *How would you describe your work?*

JS: I make art to induce feeling, inseparably physical and emotional. I propose an exchange of vulnerability and empathy between me, the artist, and you, the viewer. I want my works to feel alive and accentuate your aliveness—your senses of perception, hearing, seeing, and touching. I hope that you leave that experience inclined to walk more gently in the world.

Joshua Reiman is an artist living in Portland, Maine, where he is also an assistant professor in the MFA in Studio Art and Sculpture programs at the Maine College of Art.

ANDRES RAMÍREZ