

Chronogram

Julianne Swartz’s “Attunements” at Al Held Foundation Explores the Sound of Objects

The Hudson Valley artist’s sound sculptures invite deep listening in Boiceville through August 15

by Deborah Kapchan July 11, 2026



In “Attunements,” Julianne Swartz asks viewers to slow down and listen—to objects, vibrations, and the spaces between.
Credit: Alon Koppel Photography

When I entered the [Al Held Foundation](#) in Boiceville, I was all ears. As a writer about sound, I was here to experience sound art. The show was called “Attunements” after all. I was prepared to let the boundaries of my skin loosen and be inhabited by a sonic landscape. I had been to many sound exhibits before. And in fact, there was a lot of sound in the air. But very quickly, I realized that [Julianne Swartz](#)’s work was much more

than sonic. The clay sculptures, covered with a copper patina, sat on wooden platforms in round pairings. There was an intimacy in the way the empty vessels circled and seemed to embrace one another. Swartz calls them intervessels, as they are both spatially and sonically connected. She records the vibrations inside each and plays them back, producing loud and low hums that might have been the music of the spheres. My body kept time with the vacillations of notes, a percussive staggering of overtones produced by sine waves in close proximity. The beats in the air echoed those in my chest, a sound beat, a heartbeat, the beating of clay and earth.

If sound is life, these sculptures were alive, not only because sounds emerge from within the copper-burnished clay forms, round and themselves touching, but because the sounds themselves are organic to the vessels. Whereas some sound artists have used technology to alter the human voice, transforming public architectural spaces into numinous fields of novel human feeling (Susan Philipsz), and others invite participants into the tactility of sound (Christine Sun Kim or Janet Cardiff, among others), in this show Swartz animates what usually passes for the motionless and mineral: objects. Walking into an exhibit of Swartz's work is to reconsider the limits of the animate. Her work stands apart for its ability to sonify the non-sentient world.

There were other pieces in the show, ones that provided a stark counterpoint to the earthy clay and copper forms. *Void Weave, lost grid (8 warps)*, hung on the wall like a spider's web, a delicate weave of filaments. This, and three other pieces, were not "wired for sound," so to speak, but nonetheless stood as conductors, fragile bodies attuning to others in space. Indeed, the curator of the show, Liz Munsell, noted that Swartz "works on the edge of invisibility" and told those present at the opening to "pause and embrace the quiet, to feel the vibrations in your own body."



Julianne Swartz's *intervessel* sculptures are coated in a copper patina and paired to create resonant chambers whose recorded vibrations are played back through the vessels themselves, inviting viewers to experience sculpture through sound as well as form. *Photo: Radient Gradient Photography*

This “pause” happens of its own accord in the presence of Swartz’s pieces; when they speak, even softly, they command our attention. At the opening, and in our interview afterwards, Swartz often referred to the agency of the inanimate: the clay “found its *own* form,” sounds emerged from particular shapes and their configurations. Swartz “harvested” the sounds, creating with them a recorded composition that she then re-embedded in their birthing vessels. The vessels spoke to each other, emitting bass sounds and barely audible vibrations, vacillating between vessel and vessel, a symphony of interlocking breaths.

When making the sculptures, Swartz said in her artist talk, she covers them with thin copper that “seeps into the surface [when firing] and drips down, making a kind of drawing in the clay [that appears] like electrified lichen.” Copper has conductive properties, and thus the works, hybrid metal and clay, hollow, but with holes and openings, become instruments that produce their own sounds.

In *Bell*, we are invited to listen to a tall piece of oxidized copper, its blue-green patina itself an artwork that changes in timespans longer than human perception. In all her pieces, Swartz asks us to question the enigmas of space and time, the breath of the intervessels, and the way they share space with other vibrating bodies, sentient and non.

I asked Swartz to tell me about her relation to sound and the pieces in the show.



Installation view of "Attunements." Photo: Alon Koppel

Deborah Kapchan: How did you begin to work with sound?

Julianne Swartz: The first works I made with sound used tubes to hold and direct sound through architecture. I was interested in exploring sound because it could be both immaterial, and perceptually and emotionally dense.

That's an interesting paradox. By emotionally dense, do you mean layered?

Emotionally dense refers to how sounds trigger memory or sensation.

What role does chance play in your work? Did you expect to hear the sounds produced?

I can't pre-determine the sound the vessels will make. I understand some parameters—for example, larger volume, fewer holes make a lower frequency resonance. So I make the sculptural form first and only know what it will sound like when it is fully finished. The objects always surprise me with the sounds they make.

In talking about your sculpture, you talked about an “interference pattern.” What does that refer to and how do you compose with such a pattern?

“Interference pattern” is a physics term. It refers to a physical interaction of two waves (in this case sound waves, but it could be applied to light and other waves too) that reinforce or cancel one another. The interference pattern I am cultivating here are beat frequencies that occur when two or more sound waves played together create a wobble in the intensity of the sound. The effect is percussive and visceral. I was looking to cultivate that highly physical sensation of sound. By layering the two distinct tones of each intervessel, I get the beat frequency of that pair, and then I get additional interference patterns by layering the tones of several pieces together in the room. When you have one or more of these happening at once, it can get very intense. I compose the layering so the composition also includes silence- areas of rest.

So there is a vibrational density which produces an emotional density. I certainly felt that in the room. Each piece creates its own environment. Would you say more about the “auditory fingerprint” of these works?

The sounds in the room are the auditory fingerprints of the physical forms of the ceramic sculptures. The interference patterns are the auditory fingerprint of their interactions.

And each fingerprint, each work has its own “resonant sound”?

The sound the vessels make is a frequency that most efficiently resonates their volume, so they are emitting their own resonant sound.

You often collaborate with creative sound technologist and inventor, Bob Bielecki.

Yes, Bob was my teacher in the Bard MFA program and then later I brought him in as a consultant or sound engineer on several museum projects. In addition we designed and taught a class together at Bard called Sound as a Sculptural Medium. We love to talk about sound, light, electronics and electricity. We have a lot of fun together brainstorming ideas and experimenting with these forces. We have worked on many projects together and are about to start a new one in a huge dome at Yerkes Observatory in Wisconsin.



One of Julianne Swartz's *intervessel* sculptures. Photo: Radiant Gradient Photography

I love the idea of sound, the invisible, being a sculptural medium. Of course this is also true of human voices, which you have also used in previous work. How different is it to record objects?

These objects are inanimate and not human, but I am still recording their voices. The voice is a sound trace of a body that travels and projects outside of that body. In other work where I record human voices, the vocalization includes that person's preference, volition, history, experience, etc., expressed through tone and language. The "voices" of the vessels are nonlinguistic, but also made distinct by the physical characteristics of the forms. I'm working on a new project with animal voices filtered through handmade ceramic speakers.

I'm so looking forward to experiencing that. I'm starting to understand the relation between immateriality and emotional density that you mentioned. In a way, sounds carry history, in their tone and their timbre. Is that what you are going for?

The objective of my work is to sustain attention, open perception and increase sensitivity: to notice and feel the delicate, the subtle, the invisible. My work foregrounds embodiment, attention and sensitivity as a "resist" to dissociation, overwhelm and brutality. I am asking my audience to walk more gently in the world.

"Attunements," by Julianne Swartz, can be seen at the [AI Held Foundation](#) in Boiceville, by appointment through August 15.

[River Valley Arts Collective](#), which organized the show, is an arts organization that supports Hudson Valley artists and is also "attuned to the ecology of our region." Alyson Baker, the founder of River Valley Arts Collective, is intent on art and artists with a "connection to the landscape around them." Liz Munsell, the curator of "Attunements," is also part of this collective.

Theorizing Sound Writing. *Her latest work is a spiritual memoir titled [Taking Leave](#).*