

ARTFORUM

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DIURNATIONALE

“Invisible Geographies: New Sound Art from Germany”

THE KITCHEN

Apart from the obvious, contemporary German sound art has—at least on the evidence of curator Christoph Cox’s recent roundup at The Kitchen—a lot in common with contemporary pop music. Almost without exception, the works in “Invisible Geographies” exhibited an awestruck fetishization of science and technology and a nebulous conception of “the future” that will be all too familiar to devotees of electronica from Kraftwerk on. The preoccupation is not inherently negative, and in this show it made for a satisfyingly clean installation—or, as my companion had it, “the best-looking sound art show I’ve ever seen”—but did leave one with a slight sense of a genre in danger of painting itself into a thematic corner.

The stated aim of the show was to introduce the work of artists whose project is to “trace the topography of the audible world, revealing the contours and patterns of the generally invisible electromagnetic networks and sound waves that pervade our daily lives.” By including just four artists (plus an excellent related musical performance by Carsten Nicolai), Cox avoided the clutter and bleed that could have scuppered an exhibition in which almost every work makes use of some sort of speaker, though visitors were still occasionally required to loiter in wait for headphones. Still, the notion of sound as key to a sense of place did, ultimately, emerge clearly enough.

The most immediately striking work was Jan-Peter E. R. Sonntag’s *GAMMAgreen/x-sea-scape*, 2006, an installation exploring the “poetic confluence of wave phenomena.” Its impact was due in part to the eerie green light (a reference to the “green ray” observed on the marine horizon at sunset) that emanated from a lamp at the work’s center, though the low-frequency “standing wave” that rumbled from a bass speaker added to an ominous atmosphere that distinguished the piece from its neighbors. The other audible component of the work

Jan-Peter E. R. Sonntag,
*GAMMAgreen/
x-sea-scape*, 2006,
dimensions variable,
uranium-nitrate-
developed photo-
graph, x-ray meter,
sine-wave generator,
lamp with HQI green
gas bulb, transformers,
LED flash, interfaces,
amplifier, isophone
speaker, sound wall.
From “Invisible
Geographies.”



was an intermittent blip, accompanied by a tiny flashing light, indicating that a snapshot of a seascape hanging on the adjacent wall remained radioactive, having been developed using uranium nitrate. The picture was no more dangerous than the glow-in-the-dark hands of an alarm clock, but the idea of suffusing a space in unseen frequencies retains an edgy poetic.

The mood of Christina Kubisch’s tripartite contribution was not quite so easy to identify. Focusing her attention on the show’s Manhattan location, the most established artist of the four exhibited an enjoyably delicate musical composition and a set of stark graphic prints, both based on recordings made in Times Square. And for adventurous visitors, her *New York Electrical Walk*, 2006, was available on loan. A kind of alternative audio guide to Chelsea, this consisted of a set of headphones modified to amplify electromagnetic fields generated by the neighborhood’s ambient technology, thus making the usually inaudible audible. (Instructions like “In the station, walk along the row of ticket vending machines. Put your head close to the scrolling LED tickers and to the screens” also have abundant comic potential.)

Stefan Rummel’s *Schattengemeinde* (Shadow Community), 2006, a sprawling, rough-hewn construction of wallboard and silicone, also required the visitor to adopt some ungainly positions. Speakers, dispersed throughout the nooks and crannies of an installation that suggested the early stages of an architectural construction project, emitted a variety of rustles, creaks, swooshes, chirps, whistles, and scratches, all apparently recorded in the gallery’s storage area. The atmosphere—and this work seems to be all about atmosphere—is slightly claustrophobic, subtly creepy.

Finally, Jens Brand’s *G-POD/G-P4*, 2004, the main element of which resembled a high-end stereo, “played” the topography of the earth by translating information relayed to orbiting satellites into electronic sound. It’s an intriguing, if highly abstract, idea, but the results don’t quite measure up to the principle. Brand gets all fired up about the technical specifications (an accompanying flyer lists “sampling frequency: 44100 Hz” and “crosstalk: 95 DB”) but, like a true audiophile, he seems to have forgotten that the content’s the thing, and that to align the orbits of science and art remains a tough task.

—Michael Wilson