

Tristan Perich



AUDIBLE SPACES

Zarouhie Abdalian



[The User]

DAVID WINTON BELL GALLERY, BROWN UNIVERSITY



Sound artist and theorist Brandon Labelle

argues that “sound is intrinsically and unignorably relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating.”¹

This notion has permeated sound art since its inception and has driven artists to continually explore both the formal properties of singular sounds and the conditional nature of listening.

In the 1960s, minimalist musicians in particular took up this cause.

They developed radically simplified compositional structures to experiment with the spatial and temporal apperception of sound, in the hopes of expanding the horizons of aesthetic experience.

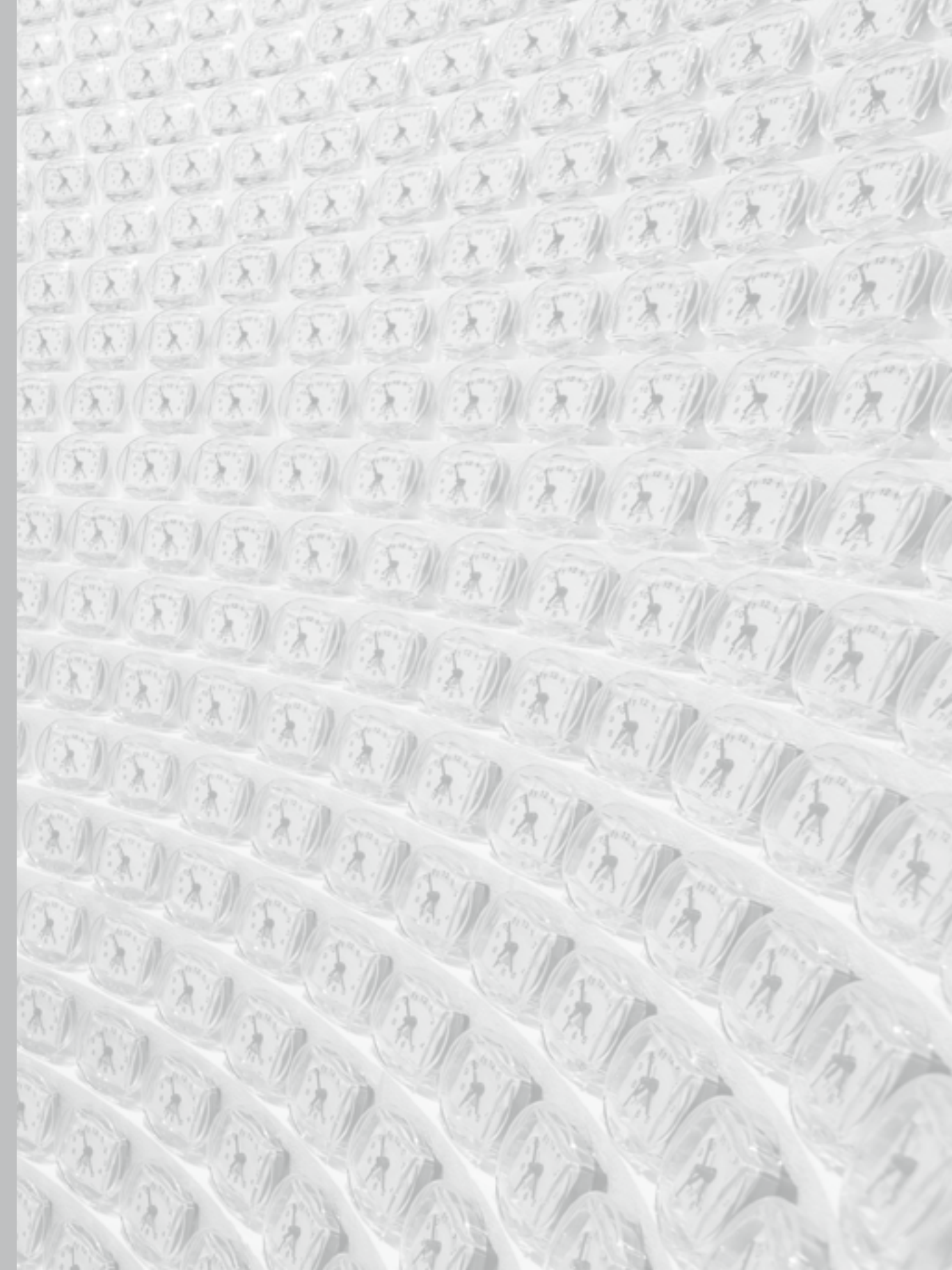
The impact of these sonic innovations is still being negotiated today, as artists continue to explore the phenomenology of sound.

Audible Spaces presents three recent sound installations that encourage participants to explore the subtleties of listening.

Drawing on the critical strategies of minimalism, the artists in *Audible Spaces* use monotony, seriality and repetition — both visually and sonically — as they consider both *what* and *how* we hear.

Tristan Perich, **Zarouhie Abdalian**, and **[The User]** have each created immersive environments using seemingly uniform sounds that dissolve into tonal, tactile, and temporal variations as participants engage with them.

Unified by a shared economy of means, all three projects prompt participants to consider the dynamic relationship between sound, space, and personal subjectivity while addressing a range of historical, social, and sonic concerns.



Tristan Perich

Tristan Perich uses binary code (written with 1s and 0s) to demonstrate the extraordinary complexity that can be generated from the most basic electronic instruments. His *Microtonal Wall: 1,500 divisions of four octaves from C3 to C7* consists of 1500 small, black speakers neatly arranged into a rectangular grid, spread across twenty-five feet, and held in place with a metal armature. From outside the Cohen Gallery, looking in through its glass façade, the *Microtonal Wall's* crisp lines and regular arrangement evoke the rigid configurations of minimalist sculptors — from Sol Lewitt's matrixed wall drawings, to Carl Andre's checkered plates. However, this visual

association is quickly superseded by the audible, once inside the gallery.

From a distance the speakers emit a low droning and evoke La Monte Young's early attempts to extend sound through time and place. Up close, this white noise breaks apart into 1500 unique frequencies. Moving across the sonic field reveals slight fluctuations from speaker to speaker. What the listener hears is entirely dependent on her physical position relative to the *Wall*. As a result, a kind of theory of sonic relativity is articulated. As Perich explains, "The piece functions according to the inverse square law in physics: the volume of a

sound drops off over distance from its source. Since the speakers are arrayed across a flat surface there is no location from which listeners can hear all pitches equally."²

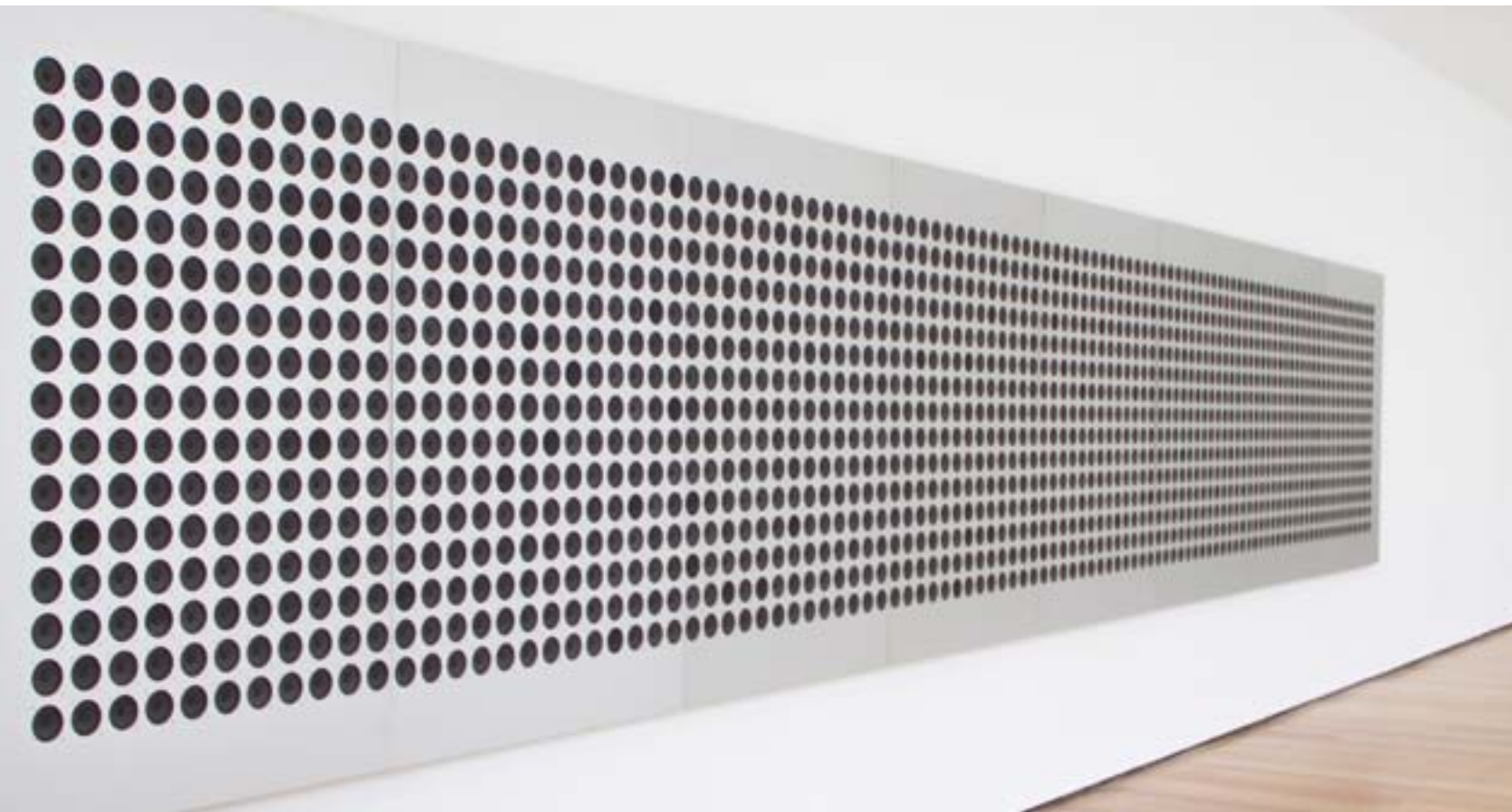
Until quite recently, sound art has been historically marginalized in relation to visual arts. In particular, the essential role that minimalist musicians played in precipitating the phenomenological, conceptual, and site-specific turn of the 1960s and 1970s has often been sidelined.³ Perich's *Microtonal Wall* engages this historical dilemma, using a signifier of painting (the gridded plane) to claim a space for sound in the gallery.

Zarouhie Abdalian

Zarouhie Abdalian's site-specific commission, *In Unison* (2014), draws attention to each individual's uniquely embodied experience of listening. Parametric speakers are embedded in the Bell Gallery's ceiling, each emitting sine waves of the same frequency, and concentrating sound into linear paths. In the gallery, these sonic avenues are reflected and diverted as they bounce against the surfaces of the room. While each speaker is itself in unison with the others, the sound reaches participants at varying intensities and from seemingly unfixed locations. Movement through the space modulates the effect of binaural beating, which is felt as rhythmic pulses between the ears. As a result what each person hears is determined by the size and shape of her body and her movement within the gallery. Here participants are literally *in unison* with each other, immersed in a constantly tuned environment, yet never synchronized as their experiences are necessarily circumscribed by their own physicality.

Glass vessels placed throughout the gallery further delineate pathways that visitors must negotiate. Each of the vessels is distinct, but filled with just enough water to produce the same tone as the others. Despite this ability to sound they remain mute, recalling Carl Andre's famous idiom that "a thing is a hole in a thing it is not."⁴ Their negating presence makes visible the silent background against which sound is perceived.

Like Perich's *Microtonal Wall*, Abdalian's installation makes reference to Young's early experiments and particularly to his interest in "getting inside" sound.⁵ However, where Young hoped to direct listeners towards the spatialization of individual sonic events, Abdalian focuses her audiences inward, to their own psychoacoustics.



Tristan Perich *Microtonal Wall: 1,500 divisions of four octaves from C3 to C7*, 2011. PHOTO: Tristan Perich

In *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, Don Ihde writes, "phenomenology allows us to belong to our experience again but hopefully in a more profound way."⁶ Abdalian's work often probes the nature of experience by challenging what we expect from our senses. As with her project for the 2011 Istanbul Biennial, *Having Been Held Under Sway*, which used tactile transducers to transmit infrasonic test tones that were felt rather than heard, *In Unison* forces listeners to reconsider both the physical phenomenon of hearing and the psychological process of listening.



LEFT, FLAP Zarouhie Abdalian In Unison, 2014 PHOTO Matthew Clowney

[The User]

[The User] is a Montreal-based collective that consists of composer and sound artist Emmanuel Madan and architect and installation artist Thomas McIntosh. Their *Coincidence Engine One: Universal People's Republic Time* (2008) uses alarm clocks to make the entropy of time audible. This is the first in a series of sculptural installations Madan and McIntosh produced that pay homage to composer Gyorgy Ligeti's *Poème Symphonique for 100 Metronomes* (1962). Ligeti developed this performance during his brief association with the Fluxus movement. Ten participants wind 100 metronomes and set them off simultaneously. The metronomes lose time at different rates and the performance slowly unravels.

Like their Fluxus predecessor, Madan and McIntosh are interested in interpreting quotidian sounds aesthetically. More specifically, they continuously explore the residual presence of obsolete technology in society today, raising the possibility of a productive afterlife for such antiquated objects as dot-matrix printers and analog clocks. By transforming these objects into musical instruments, they engage with the "Cagean precept that all sounds can function as music," while highlighting the material casualties of technological progress.

Despite their interest in technological excess, Madan and McIntosh rely on the non-compositional aesthetic strategies of minimalism. They often place objects in sequences, grids, and repetitious formats. *Coincidence Engine One* is an amphitheater-like space, just large enough for a single occupant, which is neatly lined with thousands of ticking alarm clocks. Mass-produced in China, each clock is identical, but not necessarily synchronized. The seemingly regular beating of the



LEFT, BACK COVER [The User] Coincidence Engine One: Universal People's Republic Time, 2008 PHOTO Matthew Clowney

clocks is complicated by millisecond delays that create a densely layered sonic field. Madan and McIntosh direct these regimenting instruments of time against themselves, as it becomes impossible to isolate a single unit of time. The diverging voices of the clocks undermine the uniformity imposed by International Atomic Time, the system by which we measure the passage of time. Set in a theater of public address, *Coincidence Engine One: Universal People's Republic Time*, may be read as deploying these non-conforming clocks in a critique of public debate today.

Alexis Lowry Murray

- 1 Branden Labelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc. 2007), ix.
- 2 Tristan Perich, "Tristan Perich" in *Soundings: A Contemporary Score*, ed. Barbara London, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 59–60.
- 3 See Labelle's *Background Noise*, xii.
- 4 Carl Andre at Bradford College Symposium in 1968; cited in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1997), 40.
- 5 Young once explained, "By giving ourselves up to [sound], I mean getting inside of them to some extent so that we can experience another world." La Monte Young, quoted in Labelle, *Background Noise*, 70.
- 6 Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 18.

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