

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Pioneering Sound Artist Bill Fontana on Fog Horns, the Future of Car Noise, and His New Haunch of Venison Show

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Photo by Stuart Davidson
Sound artist Bill Fontana



"Tower Bridge Road Gap," 2010,
high definition sound with video / Courtesy the Artist and Haunch of Venison

Bill Fontana is a pioneer of sound-based art. He's been working since 1976, and recently his audio environments exploring the urban soundscape have been spotlighted in a few high-profile venues: At the **Tate's Turbine Hall**, he filled the space with sounds from the nearby Millenium Bridge, while his work "Acoustical Visions," a site-specific piece that incorporated video and live audio recording of the Golden Gate bridge, is a prominent feature of "**International Orange**," a show about the iconic span's 75th anniversary in San Francisco. Last week, Fontana opened a show of his recent work, "Liquescent," at **Haunch of Venison** in New York. Commissioned by **Somerset House** in London, the new video installation harvests the sounds of the Tower Bridge Road Gap on the Thames. **ARTINFO** spoke with the artist about his newfound penchant for using video, exhibiting in public spaces, and what his favorite sounds are.

Your work seems to combine sounds from the man-made and natural worlds at the point where they collide, i.e. waves crashing against the pillars of the bridge, along with still video images.

With video projects, like those that will be shown at Haunch of Venison, I was interested in having a video camera focus on some very unusual situations in London along the Thames. With the addition of the camera's perspective, I'm using sound recording to reveal unexpected sounds occurring in everyday situations.

Once recording is set up, I have to be absolutely still, and I can't do anything because if I move around or make a sound my movements will become part of the recording. I've found over the years that my presence will often be heard in something I've made, but very subtly.

What relationships do the video recording elements in your work have with the sounds they capture? Can you talk about the video part of the "Acoustical Visions" project that was shown alongside the audio components?

It was a project that was created for the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge, and it's installed in a historic national park property – a Civil War-era fort. That project involves recording live sound from multiple locations, which is common in many of my projects, but it's also the first time I've ever included a live video camera component in an installation. I had been working with video for the past year, so I was of course intrigued by having a live camera on the bridge, but I wanted a view that no one had ever seen. The Golden Gate Bridge is a really difficult structure to do an art piece with because it's been so photographed and so viewed. How do you do something new and surprising? I felt that the view that I got on the bridge was something I'd never seen before.

Do you feel the work is different when exhibited inside vs. outside? Is there an ideal setting for certain pieces, or does that grow out of the site-specific nature of certain artworks you've done?

I think the works are really site specific in nature even when I do projects in museums, like the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, or the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. They're really kind of specific to an architectural space. Living in an urban environment buildings inhabit urban spaces and bear witness to all the life that goes on around them. They're very interesting places for me to put sounds, and make that kind of juxtaposition, so that the architecture can take be in an acoustical dialogue with its environment.

When you relocate and superimpose recorded sounds into new landscapes, do you believe this adds to or changes them?

I hope that it can add a new experience, because I think that one of the issues we have in our culture with listening is that we learn not to pay attention to sounds in the city and the environments we're in. Throughout my career the act of listening has been a way of making music, and I guess I like to make projects that cause people to increase their acoustical awareness of their environment and engage in some way.

What sounds most inspire and interest you?

All of them! It's kind of a case of loving the one you're with. When I was working on the Golden Gate Bridge a few weeks ago I installed microphones at a place called the South Pier, which is the base of the southern tower. Very often the bridge gets clouded in fog, and because of that you've got these two large compressed air foghorns. They're really vintage foghorns. Beautiful. They're like large trombones, and they're really the acoustic signature of San Francisco. When they're sounded you can hear them everywhere along San Francisco Bay, and to me it's a very beautiful sound.

When I was installing my equipment, I could call up the electrical staff and ask them to turn them on, so I could test my levels and there were times when the fog would actually come in. It was so exciting to be working on the bridge and to have that sound come on. I think that sound is one of the reasons I moved to San Francisco. It's an amazing sound to have in your life.

Do you think the world is naturally musical, and does man's presence make it more so?

I think the world is naturally musical if someone has the ears to hear it that way. I think there are also acoustic problems in cities. Often sound is not thought about by architects and designers very much.

I think the sounds we've heard historically are going to change in the next 25 years because the largest source of noise in the city is automobile traffic. The noise level from this traffic is going to gradually diminish as electric cars and hybrid vehicles become more and more commonly used. As the internal combustion engine becomes a thing of the past, it will really change the scope of sound in cities, and in way it will really open up space again.