The New York Times

FRIDAY, MAY 21, 2004

ART REVIEW

At Shows Painted With Sound, Be Prepared to See With Your Ears

By ROBERTA SMITH

Sound happens. In art as in life, in movies as in bars, it is increasingly diverse, unavoidable and at times severe. One of the notable benefits of this expansion is "New Sound, New York," a sound-art festival overseen by the Kitchen and Cooper Union and presented by Time Out New York. It has recently reached critical mass in terms of what might be called listening-looking opportunities: two engagingly dovetailed exhibitions, complemented by two outdoor installations in Lower Manhattan.

The shows approach their subject from opposite directions, exposing many of sound art's amorphous possibilities and some of its history. At Art in General in TriBeCa, the artist-composer Ron Kuivila has organized "Rock's Role (After Ryoanji)," which pushes music out of the recital hall toward spatial and sculptural installation; its all-in-one presentation questions the autonomy of the individual ego. The show is also part of the Buddhism Project Consortium and is intended to examine the influence of John Cage's interest in Buddhism on subsequent artists.

"Rock's Role (After Ryoanji)" is at Art in General, 79 Walker Street, near Broadway, TriBeCa, (212) 219-0473, through June 26. "Treble" is at the Sculpture Center, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 361-1750, through Aug. 1. Shirazeh Houshiary and Pip Horne's "Breath" is at the Ritz-Carlton New York, 2 West Street, at Battery Place, Battery Park, through January, and O+A's "Blue Moon" is on the waterfront at the World Financial Center Plaza, through Aug. 29; both are presented by Creative Time, (212) 206-6674.

Concurrently, "Treble," the new show at the Sculpture Center in Long Island City, Queens, concentrates primarily on visual artists whose works use a range of mostly sculptural materials and techniques to generate or refer to sound. (Not everything here makes noise.) "Treble" has been organized by Regine Basha, an independent curator who has recently become adjunct curator at Arthouse at the Jones Center, in Austin, Tex.

Each show has its particular delights, partly because each makes outstanding use of its architectural setting.

"Rock's Role (After Ryoanji)" is one of the most beautiful shows ever mounted at Art in General. It seems tailor made for the gallery's clean, well-lighted loft space because it is, as Mr. Kuivila writes in the introduction to the show's CD, "an exhibition of sound works that embrace overlap." Selected mostly from an open call for submissions, the show melds 17 sound works and musical compositions into a remarkably effective installation piece without destroying their individual characters.

Guided by the intricate, seemingly random capabilities of the SuperCollider computer program, and grouped according to playing time, these pieces eminate at irregular intervals from 15 speakers arranged on an expanse of white cellulose packing peanuts. The visual effect is of a Japanese rock garden, like the famous one at the Ryoanji temple in Kyoto that Cage visited on his first trip to Japan in 1962.

Cage had already established that any sound, and even silence, could be considered music. The Japanese gardens clarified his concept of indeterminacy by suggesting that the sounds of a musical composition could function as either sand or rocks; they could be either continuous or isolated episodes, a concept that could greatly increase the play of chance in a work.

Bernhard Gal's "Three Whites" is the primary sand in "Rock's Role." Whenever the show is switched on, "Three Whites" punctuates whatever else is happening with the sharp snap of colliding billiard balls at irregular, maddeningly nonrhythmic intervals (also evoking Cage's use of the I Ching). Much finer sand is provided by John Hudak's "Breathe," whose gentle whispering sounds, close to breathing or the lightest of winds, sometimes emerge during moments of extreme quiet.

The various rocks, which can last anywhere from 27 seconds to 30 minutes, offer a short history of avant-garde music. There are pre-electronic pieces, most prominently Rilo Chmielorz's work, which aggressively uses and misuses an electric guitar, and there is also a range of found-sound works. You will hear sounds both local and synthesized that may remind you of thunderstorms, people talking, an off-key flute (actually being played by the wind), or a bloodhound on speed madly sniffing for clues.

As different works emerge from different speakers, your sense of the gallery's spatial volume can expand and contract, the effects further modulated by whether you walk around or take advantage of the freshly made, unfinished-wood garden benches. Either way, you may emerge with a clearer understanding of space, aural perception and the ways and means of post-Cageian music.

One qualification: the information about which piece is playing where should have been projected above the installation rather than sequestered in an adjoining gallery. It would be great to know what you're listening to as you listen.

At the Sculpture Center, sound art is fragmented into conventionally discrete artworks that take advantage of the building's idiosyncrasies, especially the vaulted, nearly soundproof catacomblike spaces in the basement. But there is also a strong ensemble effect, an exploration of the fluidity with which sound art overlaps not only with installation art, but also with sculpture, Conceptual Art and performance.

Like "Rock's Role," "Treble" is a spare, unusually beautiful show, with the main gallery dominated by Brad Tucker's homage to Buckminster Fuller — a colorful geodesic listening shell made of triangles of found nylon — and by Jude Tallichet's "It's All Good," a bit of feminist transgression that consists of a pink and white pearlescent snare drum set hanging upside down from the ceiling like a chandelier.

The show's standout is Jim Hodges's "Untitled (Bells)," a set of 18 white blown-glass bells, each with its own shape, size, pastel-colored interior and, when rung, sound. For humor, there is Mungo Thomson's tribute to Bob Dylan — all the applause from Mr. Dylan's career-spanning 15-volume collection of live recordings — and Euan Macdonald's "Poor Blumfeld," matching videos of two blue plastic balls that bounce in and out of sync with each other. The title refers to Kafka, but Bruce Nauman or Jasper Johns may also come to mind. A wonderful pure-sound piece, by Joseph Grigely and Amy Vogel, consists of a hanging cluster of small speakers that play different people saying the name of the artist Ed Ruscha. The pronunciations vary wildly, and it is something of a relief when a man shouts, as if from the background, one of the more widely accepted versions: "Ed roo-SHAY!"

There are interesting connections here with the Art in General show; for one thing, you see regular signs of Cage's influence. A video by Francis Alÿs and Rafael Ortega shows a restaurant full of people being quiet for one minute, in other words, about one-quarter of "4' 33"," Cage's classic homage to ambient sound. Steven Vitiello's "Fear of High Places and Natural Things" presents silence in another form: a half-circle of suspended speakers that vibrate and tremble visibly, transmitting sounds that the human ear can't hear.

Paulo Vivacqua's "Sentinels" converts the Sculpture Center's courtyard into a rock or gravel garden where synthesized sounds are emitted by eight speakers positioned around the Zen-like space. For her equally Zen-like "Ishalatorium," Andrea Ray has outfitted one of the basement's long, narrow spaces with facing benches, yellow fluorescent lights and a floor covered with coarse and very crunchy solar salt. The sound of two voices, one male and one female, holding a middle tone for as long as possible, completes the therapeutic effect.

There is an admirable consistency to this exhibition of 22 artists and artist teams, with further contributions made by Eric Hanson, Max Neuhaus, Dario Robleto, Steve Rodee and the Argentine artist Jorge Macchi, whose "Incidental Music" uses a collage of newspaper reports of gruesome deaths and accidents to form a score for a piano solo.

Outdoors, in Lower Manhattan, Shirazeh Houshiary and Pip Horne's "Breath" might be said to turn Ms. Ray's piece inside out. "Breath" is a 20-foot, double-helix column made of white enameled brick and wired with low-frequency sounds of Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and Islamic chants and songs. Audible only when you move close to the work's shimmering surface, the sounds seem to give voice to its towerlike structure, while also suggesting the common source of faith.

Charlie Samuels/Creative Time

"Breath," an outdoor sound work by Shirazeh Houshiary and Pip Horne, in Battery Park.

Like several of the works in "Rock's Role" at Art in General, the other piece, at the World Financial Center, synthesizes found sound into abstraction, but in real time. "Blue Moon" by O+A (as the sound artists Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger call themselves) harmonizes sounds gathered by tuning tubes, wired with microphones, suspended above the harbor. The sounds of helicopters, waves, sea gulls and passing boats are instantaneously transformed and relayed to five bright blue cube-shaped speakers on the waterfront, where they emerge altered beyond recognition but still imbued with the thrum of urban life.