

...might be good
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AMODA's Sound Performances by Stephen Vitiello and Holland Hopson
A review of Vitiello and Holland's May 20, 2006 Performances

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Austin's itinerant Museum of Digital Art (AMODA) touched down at Ballet Austin's Guadalupe Street location last weekend for an evening of sound. The 7th installment of AMODA's Performance Series paired Holland Hopson, an artist based in Austin, with Stephen Vitiello, a visiting artist from Richmond, Virginia. Vitiello, whose work was featured in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, headed from Austin directly to appearances in London, Australia and New Zealand.

Sound art has found its way into contemporary art spaces, but the integration of the aural and the visual hasn't always been graceful. For a museum of digital art, however, music and sound are natural inclusions. The great virtue of digitized information, after all, is logistical: once transformed into compatible electronic files, it's easy to juxtapose a picture with a sound, or one sound with another recorded under different circumstances. Artists like Hopson and Vitiello take these possibilities to extremes and modern audiences can be forgiven for resembling their forebears at a magic lantern show when witness to the sort of splendid parlor tricks that were on view and in earshot last Saturday night.

In the first act, the standout was a reprise of a piece Hopson conceived for the Austin New Music Co-op's Rock Music in December 2003. Standing calmly in front of a microphone, Hopson knocked two small white rocks together at a constant pace for the duration of the piece. The simple sound of the rocks' collision seemed to incite a battery of mysterious clicking and searing noises that echoed throughout the room from the quad speakers. The personable white rocks were front men, of course, for Hopson's use of the Max/MSP program as a medium for organizing performed sounds with previously recorded material. A bank of pedals provided the invisible controls, which is why Hopson, joining the ranks of shoegazers, seemed to be staring at his feet the whole time.

Like Hopson, Vitiello uses computer-based digital programs to store and organize sounds. But Vitiello rarely gives a show like the one he put on for AMODA last week. More commonly, he makes installations and recordings that do their own work in his absence and that may be displayed alongside traditional forms like paintings and sculptures. Vitiello's work investigates the great variety of places where sound waves become audible, often in places where we aren't usually listening to, like (as in a piece he

first exhibited in early 2001) the surface of the World Trade Center in a high wind. Time constraints replaced physical ones for his performance in Austin and moment-by-moment composition became a primary factor in form.

Before the show last Saturday, Vitiello half-joked about the possibility of basing a piece on the imperceptible sounds made by paint peeling off the walls of the old fire-station-turned-ballet-studio where the AMODA performance took place. Outlandish as it sounds, that kind of engagement with physical space would have been more everyday for him than his live performance with a bevy of processors, a modular synthesizer, and a laptop. Nonetheless, the flair for stagecraft that Hopson had introduced earlier in the night was evident in Vitiello's work, too. At one point, Vitiello produced a child's toy that whirred with rainbow lights. With all other lights extinguished, a photo cell held up to the toy translated the rainbow into aspects of sound. Though the light's alterations of the sound were apparent to the audience as aural analogues of the simultaneous light patterns, it wasn't as though the light itself created a new sound. Rather, it altered the qualities of sounds that had already been introduced into the composition.

If sound art has any one effective goal, it might be to change the things we pay attention to as listeners. Vitiello's sounds weren't idiomatic. They didn't operate in symbols or melodies or anything that compels conscious interpretation. Instead, the performance was suggestive of certain moods and feelings of air—a subtle aural inventory of being in a place, one conjured by Vitiello as his listeners, somehow, “watched.” There was a steady rush of water and what might have been a child's voice, but no words. The sound suggestions of that place became more convincing than the dimly recollected walls of the darkened room.

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