

Sound Art



Sumerian Lyre

Sound and art have been linked since the advent of humanity. Artistry and decoration have been employed in the creation of musical instruments for centuries. Musical instruments are considered works of art not just for the beautiful tones they produce in the hands of a skilled musician, but are also considered works of art themselves for the beauty of their design and embellishments.

Visual artists have sought to represent music throughout the ages, from ancient Greek vases depicting musicians, to paintings of concerts and diagrams of musical instruments. Some have even gone as far as attempting to illustrate the sound itself.

Most famously, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a Russian painter who thought of his paintings as symphonies and talked of harmonies of color. He used these analogies so often that some art historians think he had a condition called synesthesia, where senses become confused and one can hear color or see sound.

In modern art, the lines between visual art, music and performing arts may be blurred. Sound can be incorporated into visual art, or interpreted and implied. The acceptance of sound in works of visual art has its roots in the movement of Conceptual art. In Conceptualism, which was popularized in the mid-1960s, even ethereal ideas can be considered art.

Conceptual art values ideas over the visual components of artworks. Beauty and skill are no longer criteria for judging art. This expanded the boundaries of art, as Conceptual artists are now widely accepted by collectors, galleries, museums and the artistic community.



Kandinsky's 1924
"Contrasting Sounds"

Conceptualism has its roots in the artistic movements that came before it, most notably Dadaism. Dada was an artistic and literary movement that began in the early 20th century in Switzerland. Dada was avant-garde and it influenced not only Conceptualism, but also early 20th century movements including Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism.

Dada included performance art, poetry, photography, sculpture, painting and collage. The artists mocked materialism and nationalism, and the movement spread through major Western cities in Europe and America.

Dada artists published an anti-war, anti-art magazine. Dada posed difficult questions about art and its position in society as well as questioning the validity of bourgeois culture.



Cabaret Voltaire, 1916 Dada Performance

As serious as some of its ideas may appear, Dada did not take itself seriously. Dada even went as far as saying, "Dada is anti-Dada." The aesthetic was irreverent, nonsensical, and anti-authoritarian.



Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" 1917

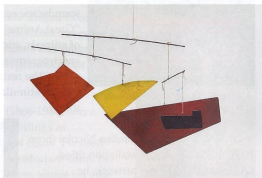
Dada was Conceptualism in its infancy. Dada incorporated chance into the creative process, using readymade objects. One of the movements most famous icons is Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain," which consisted of an unaltered urinal turned upside-down. Dada is also famous for its experimental theatre referred to as, "performance art surrealism," or the, "theatre of the absurd."

4 Minutes 33 Seconds



emphasize the ambient sounds of the concert hall, a decidedly Conceptual piece of performance art.

20th century sound art is not limited to the performing arts. Alexander Calder (1898-1976) is most famous for is kinetic mobiles, but he also experimented with adding a sound element to his work.



Alexander Calder's "Clangors" 1942

In modern art, it is common to see (and hear) sound incorporated into works of visual art.

German photographer, Martin Klimas (born 1971), created a series in 2011 called, "What Does Music Look Like?" Over a six month period he used a speaker to vibrate paint, capturing the images with his camera. The works are titled by the song used to produce them.

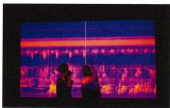


Klimas's "Beethoven's Symphony No. 5"

English artist, Luke Jerram (born 1974), made a sonic sculpture in 2011 called, "Aeolus – Acoustic Wind Pavilion." Aeolus was the ruler of the four winds in Greek mythology. Jerram's "Aeolus" is located outdoors, and is a stringed instrument vibrated by natural wind. It consists of a series of metal tubes attached to an arch. The tubes focus the sound to the person or people standing beneath it. A viewer can also look through the tubes at the reflected landscape, making it simultaneously a visual and acoustic work of art.



Luke Jerram's "Aeolus"



Krause's "Great Animal Orchestra"

Bernie Krause (born 1938) is an American soundscape ecologist. For his 2016 exhibition, "Great Animal Orchestra," he recorded the sounds of animals, and United Visual Artists created spectrograms of the recordings to fill the gallery walls. The result is an immersive experience for the viewer, stimulated by sight and its corresponding sound.

In 2017, German artist Carsten Nicolai (born 1965) made a gallery installation titled, "Autonomo." For this artwork, he suspended nine huge aluminum disks and used a tennis ball machine to project black tennis balls into the space. This allows for both a visual component that includes movement, and an auditory concept: the sound of tennis balls randomly hitting the ground, walls, disks, and ricocheting between them.



Carsten Nicolai's "Autonomo"

As sound art has become more mainstream, and a receptive audience seeks experiences that integrate all of their senses, we can look forward to seeing and hearing much more of it in the future.

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