11 Essential Sound Artworks, from Reviled Noise Orchestras to Protest-Minded Installations

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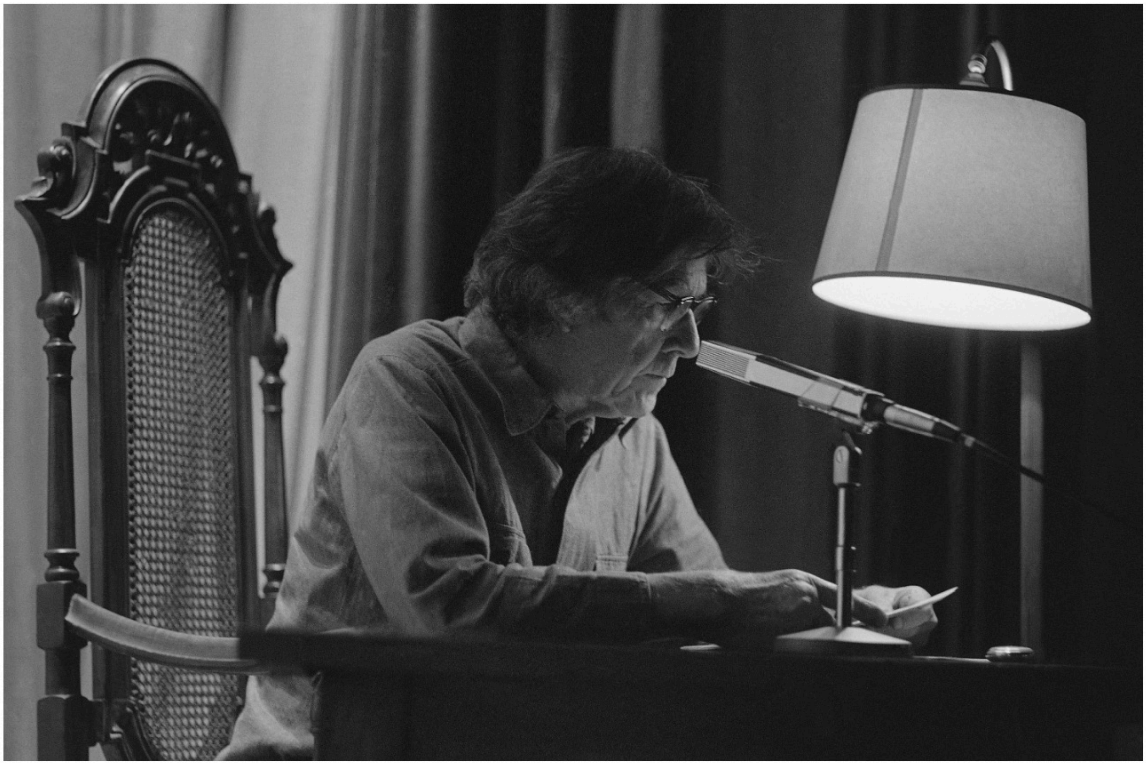
Christine Sun Kim, *Closed Captions*, 2015.
PHOTO BY JEFF MCLANE/COURTESY FRANCOIS GHEBALY

In 1979, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented a modest exhibition called "Sound Art." The museum's small media art gallery could only accommodate one artwork at a time, so the three works in the show, by Maggi Payne, Connie Beckley, and Julia Heyward, took turns on display. "'Sound art' pieces are more closely allied to art than to music, and are usually presented in the museum, gallery, or alternative space," the exhibition's curator, Barbara London, said in a statement at the time.

In essence, London had helped define a medium that was newly emergent back then, but her explanation offered few parameters—which was exactly the point. Anything aural—radio art, spoken word poetry, the chiming of clocks, even silence itself—was game. The 1983 show "Sound/Art" at the SculptureCenter in New York City helped expand the canon of sound artists, and since then, new technologies have brought in new artists, who have helped make the medium one of the defining ones for right now. Below, a look back at 11 essential sound artworks.

Luigi Russolo, *Gran Concerto Futuristico* (1917)
Luigi Russolo is may be best known as a painter associated with the Futurist movement in Italy, but he's also considered one of the first experimental noise artists, if not the very first one altogether. He invented and built acoustic noise-generating devices called Intonarumori (meaning "noise makers" in Italian) inspired by the factory clatter and the booming of guns from World War I. In 1913, he released the manifesto *The Art of Noises*, in which he argued that the evolution of the urban industrial soundscape has necessitated new approaches to music. To Russolo, melodic music was limiting the human potential to appreciate more complex and dissonant sounds. In 1917 he sought to remedy that with his piece *Gran Concerto Futuristico*, for which he assembled a noise orchestra that played sounds unpleasing to the ear. (Classical-sounding music, this was not.) Undeterred by the widespread criticism he faced for the piece, he continued to perform well after World War I. Today, his manifesto is considered one of the most important texts in 20th-century music theory.

Marcel Duchamp, *Erratum Musical* (1913)
Marcel Duchamp was fascinated by the potential to visualize sound, and he was even once quoted as saying, "One can look at seeing; one can not hear hearing." Though lacking in any training in the medium, he dedicated much of his time between 1912 and 1915 to musical composition. The end result marked a radical departure from the Dada readymades with which he had made his name. He devised one purely conceptual piece and two conceptual exercises capable of performing, including *Erratum Musical*, a score written for three voices and arranged by chance. Duchamp created three sets of 25 cards with a single note per card, ranging from F below middle C up to high F. The cards were mixed in a hat and then drawn from it one at a time. The series of notes were then recorded based on the order in which the cards bearing them were removed from the hat. The performers themselves were allowed to decide how they performed the piece—Duchamp didn't offer them a score on that front.



Composer John Cage.
AP PHOTO/BOB CHILD

John Cage, *4'33"* (1952)
American composer John Cage and Marcel Duchamp were artistic collaborators, both fixated on redefining the boundaries of music. For his masterpiece, Cage mined the potential of silence, revolutionizing sound art and performance in the process. He's best known for his composition *4'33"*, a three-movement composition consisting of four minutes and 33 seconds of silence. Reportedly inspired by a visit to an anechoic chamber at Harvard University, the piece involves a whole lot of nothing—performers are invited not to play instruments or make any noise. But no silence is truly silent, and spectators are made acutely aware of the sounds of their environment during the pause. That koan-like paradox was based on what Cage heard inside the chamber at Harvard—he was found he could hears his own heartbeat. "Until I die there will be sounds," he wrote of the experience. "And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music."

Bill Fontana, *Distant Trains* (1984)
By the 1960s and early 1970s, advances in electronic media had expanded the potential for visual artists and composers working at the intersection of sound and sculpture. Bill Fontana was a pioneer in deriving sculptural sound maps from urban environments. In *Distant Trains*, exhibited for one month in Berlin in 1984, loudspeakers were buried in the site of the former Anhalter Bahnhof, which had been one of the busiest trains stations in Europe prior to World War II. Devastated by bombing during the war, it was formally decommissioned in 1952. Live microphones had been placed in Köln Hauptbahnhof, which transmitted real-time acoustics from the bustling station to the abandoned Anhalter Bahnhof, recreating a phantom sonic environment.

Pedestrians walk over Max Neuhaus's *Times Square*.
JOHANNES SCHMITT-TEGGE/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES

Max Neuhaus, *Times Square* (1977–92)
Max Neuhaus's best-known work features a pulsating drone that emanates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from a subway steam escape hatch at the north end of the triangular pedestrian island in Manhattan. (Thanks to the MTA and the Dia Art Foundation, the work is on permanent view near Times Square.) In it, the noise shifts in pitch and tone as passersby move about the block. "Its sonority, a rich harmonic sound texture resembling the after ring of large bells, is an impossibility within its context," Neuhaus has said. "For those who find and accept the sound's impossibility though, the island becomes a different place, separate, but including its surroundings."

Carsten Nicolai, *Reflektor Distortion* (2016)
Berlin- and Chemnitz-based artist Carsten Nicolai has been working at the intersection of sonic media, science, and visual art since the 1980s. A cofounder of Raster-Noton, the influential electronic music label dedicated to "sound and not sound," Nicolai has exhibited his sound and video installations at Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, and two editions of the Venice Biennale in Italy. Most of his work seeks to make sound and light phenomena perceptible to the human eyes and ears. In 2016, he presented Reflektor *Distortion* at Galerie Eigen+Art Berlin, in which a rotating water basis was hit via speaker by low sound frequencies. Ripples on the water's surface mirrored the wave frequencies, making the shape of sound visible, if only for a brief time.

Jem Finer, *Longplayer* (1999)
On December 31, 1999, just as the world was about to head into a new millennium, the British musician and artist Jem Finer began playing a piece of ambient music that will finish in the year 3000. Provided humanity endures another 1,000 years, *Longplayer* will be the most epic piece of music ever performed, outstripping John Cage's 639-year-long organ concert currently taking place in a church in Halberstadt, Germany. *Longplayer* is housed in a lighthouse in London and processed by a computer algorithm that mechanically extends the sound of a single instrument consisting of 234 Tibetan singing bowls. The sound is without repetition or break. "The intention [of *Longplayer*] is that its droning and parping will, like this year's eclipse, make the hearers ponder the passing of time in a way that makes you feel both mortal and insignificant," wrote the Evening Standard on the night of its commencement in 1999.

Christian Marclay, *Recycled Records* (1980–86)
For nearly 40 years, Swiss-American sound artist and experimental DJ Christian Marclay has manipulated sound into physical form through photography, sculpture, installation, and performance. The artist is credited with pioneering an experimental form of turntablism, in which sound is altered through multiple turntables. Inspired by the noise experiments of composer John Cage and early hip-hop DJs, Marclay began incorporating prerecorded dissonant sounds produced by vinyl records in motion into his turntable performances. In the seminal series "Recycled Records," the artists sliced apart vinyl records and reassembled the pieces to create new arrangements.

Artist Susan Philipsz inside her sound installation *Lowlands*.
DOMINIC LIPINSKI /PA WIRE/AP IMAGES

Susan Philipsz, *Lowlands* (2010)
The Scottish-born, Berlin-based artist Susan Philipsz uses site-specific sound installations to probe the link between sense and memory. "Sound is materially invisible but very visceral and emotive," she once said. "It can define a space at the same time as it triggers a memory." In 2010, she was awarded the Turner Prize for the sound installation Lowlands, the first work of its kind ever to earn an artist the famed award. In the winning iteration of the piece, Philipsz performed three variations of a Scottish lament about a drowned lover who returns to her lover's dreams, beneath three bridges over the River Clyde during the Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art. The Turner judges also considered Long Gone, in which a recording of the artists singing the eponymous Syd Barrett song played at the entrance of the Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo in Spain. Her win attracted criticisms from detractors who argued that she should be classified as a singer, not an artist. The judges, however, insisted otherwise.

Samson Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls: A Journey Into the Sonic History of Conflict*
The Hong Kong–based artist Samson Young is at the forefront of a new vanguard of sound and performance artists driving the mediums in political directions. A traditionally trained composer, Young has been on the rise since he won the inaugural edition of Art Basel's BMW Art Journey Award in 2015 for his project *For Whom the Bell Tolls: A Journey Into the Sonic History of Conflict*. Over two-months, he documented the chime of iconic bells across five continents. He then crafted responses which explored the bells' status as musical instruments and political, social, and religious representations of their communities. In June 2016, he drew critical acclaim at Art Basel Unlimited for a similar exploration into the militarization of sound. Seated atop a booth-sized cube and dressed in police uniform, Young performed with a Long Range Acoustic Device, a sonic weapon used to disperse crowds at protests. A low level form of the weapon is also used to repel birds from private properties, which Young represented by recreating distressed bird calls.

Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings* (2015)
Through video installation, textual drawings, and interactive performance, California-born, Berlin-based artist Christine Sun Kim centers the systemic barriers attached to deafness. Kim was selected for the 2013 MoMA exhibition "Soundings," the museum's first major show dedicated to sound art, and in 2019, a group of charcoal drawings by Kim were included in the Whitney Biennial. The hand-drawn charts graphed different degrees of what she calls "Deaf rage," caused by the privileging of able-bodied individuals over the d/Deaf and hard of hearing community. In a similar vein, her 2015 sound and video installation *Close Readings* manipulated film captions to reflect the limitations of captioning for the deaf community. The work, along with the piece *One Week of Lullabies for Roux* (2018), became the first sound art installations acquired by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2020.

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