

ARTS

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Noise from the Outside

Bill Fontana and the Disappearing Duwamish Industrial Area

By [Jen Graves](#)



Alice Wheeler

A view from Bill Fontana's *Objective Sound* (2007).

You're not supposed to consider the visual aspects of a sound installation, but it's sort of glorious how lonely Western Bridge looks this summer. There are no art objects in any of the galleries, and throughout the two-story contemporary art center, the lights are dim. There are benches, so it's all set up for you to look at nothing.

What you're meant to do is listen. And to consider three material facts: that the noise from outside—trucks, trains, planes, car horns, voices on loudspeaker—has come inside; that the noise has been changed along the way; and that, on a related note, there's a locked, soundproofed room at the back of Western Bridge (you can see into the room through a window) that contains a bunch of wired objects sitting on the floor, and, in a far corner, an amplifier and a digital sound mixer.

The artist responsible is Bill Fontana. His installation, *Objective Sound*, is a commission from Western Bridge, and the first solo show ever hosted here. It relies on concepts and techniques Fontana has been employing for 30 years, derived from his studies with John Cage at the New School.

In Cage's famous work *4'33"*, the score is blank. The sounds that ensue while the "performer" sits still for the given four minutes and 33 seconds are the composition, not any music written in advance. Music *happens*, in Cage's philosophy. It is an event, not an object. Fontana's sound is live, but it is also displaced and dislocated, separated visually from the objects that create it. He doesn't make music; he makes live sculpture.

In the past, Fontana has piped sound from a natural location to a built one, creating in the process something like a surrealist object, the critic Stefan Beyst has written. For instance, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the landing at Normandy and the liberation of Paris, Fontana piped the sounds of the waves from the Normandy beach onto the Arc de Triomphe in the middle of the city.

Fontana told me he originally intended to import sounds from other locations in the city, but changed his mind while he was staying at Western Bridge in preparation for the exhibition. At that time, he became preoccupied not only with the sounds in the Duwamish industrial area surrounding Western Bridge, a neighborhood making the transition from heavy industry to what Bridge director Eric Fredericksen calls "boutique industrial," but also with a nearby industrial surplus yard called Pacific Industrial Supply.

Considering the absence implicit in Fontana's work—the gap created by transposing sound from one location to another—it's no surprise that he was drawn to Pacific Industrial, which he visited during a closing sale. The artist picked up a ruddy steel float, an I-beam, glass jugs, and metal pipes, conduits, and wheels. The detritus of a mass disappearance underway.

He'd tested the objects to see how each carries sound, and selected them for their acoustic properties. He set them in the back room at Western Bridge, giving it the look of a recording studio with old rusty objects as the band.

Sound from outdoors enters that back room through two microphones on the roof. It plays on two speakers. Those piped-in sounds are trapped in the room with the objects, and they pass through the objects, each of which is wired. The wires pick up the vibrations—combining the neighborhood's current sounds with the neighborhood's castoff objects—and they carry the new hybrid sounds to the mixer. Following a time structure set by Fontana, the mixer sends the sounds out into the galleries.

"Over the course of an hour, the objects will slowly shift acoustic positions in the building," Fontana writes in an introduction to the piece. "At first a room is an I-beam, then a buoy, then a bottle, then a pipe." Listening closely, you begin to recognize—you think—when a sound has passed through a glass jug and become more windy, or through a metal conduit, which acts like an organ pipe, or through an I-beam, sounding as if it were passing under a faraway band saw.

But it is the tension between visual and aural effects that powers the installation. Fontana has not made the building transparent as Cage might have done; he has turned it into a mimetic threshold and a blindfold. The window into the soundproofed room becomes a framed portrait of the neighborhood's history in still life. The aural portrait that hovers in the galleries—antiqued sound that's nonetheless spontaneous—is a ghost. And the variously shaped rooms are

second-wave resonators, instruments also in this symphony of time.

The gallery vitally influences the piece. Housed in a warehouse built in the 1950s by a contracting company called Western Bridge, this new Western Bridge is a subject of this work, not just a container for it.

At this point in time, the installation itself feels like "boutique industrial." The estrangement between the old objects and the current sounds—still largely the sounds of an industrial zone—is not sufficient to produce a surrealistic clash. In fact, it is the gallery that seems to be the interloper, the art that is the facsimile. Unflattering as that may be, it's a timely accomplishment. It's only too bad that more people from the neighborhood—who typically stay away from Western Bridge—aren't experiencing it. ★

Ballard.

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