

# SEATTLEWEEKLY

## Bill Fontana's New Sculpture at Western Bridge Is Barely Visual

Think about it.

By [Carrie E.A. Scott](#)

Though this review is indeed running in the Visual Arts section—visual being the keyword here—there's not actually much to see in the latest show at Seattle's favorite contemporary art space, Western Bridge (a space where I once interned). Rather, Bill Fontana, a living legend in the field of sound art, has installed a sculpture that has, almost literally, no visual components.

This is not unusual for the artist, who has, since the 1970s, been making art that we hear but don't see as a means by which to explore how live-ambient noise can be both musical and sculptural. Whether recording cars crossing a wooden bridge or the cacophony of a rain forest affected by a solar eclipse, his early projects displaced sounds from their indigenous environments and foregrounded them in new situations, causing his audience to recognize the beauty inherent in background noises we usually tune out.

Fontana's latest piece at Western Bridge, *Objective Sound*, is similar in that it does profoundly call attention to the musicality of the sounds our city makes, but the piece is also a shift for the artist. Rather than displacing natural sounds and playing them outside their original settings, Fontana embellishes the industrial soundtrack that surrounds the gallery and then amplifies it back inside the renovated warehouse.

His impressive system captures the ambient SoDo noise in real time and then filters it through objects he found at a nearby surplus store. Microphones hover over an iron buoy and I-beams that add their own timbre to the outdoor sounds. The eerie tone of the combination is then mixed against a 37-minute soundtrack Fontana composed, and piped through loudspeakers placed in each of the Bridge's rooms.

With few visual distractions, puddles of noise collect in the empty gallery spaces. The low hum of industry—police sirens, train whistles, the endless drone of truck engines—competes with remnants of the Duwamish Waterway: Birds, wind, and, on occasion, raindrops trickle into our ears. Yet *Objective Sound* will also heighten all of your sensory perceptions. Once Fontana has got your ears' attention, there's something of a biological domino effect that occurs: Your eyes focus, your noses smell. As we listen to the groan of the world around us, soft light creeps across walls where paintings once hung and intimate galleries become cavernous, deserted spaces. The concrete underfoot becomes a raw reminder of the building's industrial days.

All of which is to say that Fontana has orchestrated an experience that is at once calming and startling, and one that creates an aesthetic experience out of what might otherwise be annoyances of modern life. Which is exactly why I urge you to go to the Bridge, park your car just outside the front door, set off your car alarm, and then head on in with the



Industrial detritus adds its own timbre.  
*Mark Woods*

### EXTRA INFO

**Objective Sound** Western Bridge, 3412 Fourth Ave. S., 838-7444. Noon–6 p.m. Thurs.–Sat. Ends Aug. 4.

alarm still blaring. Erik Fredericksen, the Bridge's director, made me do just that, and let me tell you, never will something that is normally so irritating sound so damn good. Fontana certainly got me to recognize the beauty in that particular racket.

[visualarts@seattleweekly.com](mailto:visualarts@seattleweekly.com)

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