

News & Features

[Today's News](#)
[The AI Interview](#)
[Artists](#)
[Columns](#)
[Art After Dark](#)
[Galleries](#)
[Museums](#)
[Discover New Talent](#)
[Fairs & Events](#)
[The AI Notebook](#)
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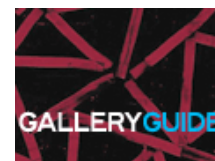

NEWS & FEATURES

May 01, 2007



Bill Fontana recording the Metropolitan Life clock tower bells

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AI Reviews: Bill Fontana's "Panoramic Echoes"

by Jacquelyn Lewis

NEW YORK, April 25, 2007—A few bystanders looked confused last month at an unveiling of **Bill Fontana's** latest public art project, *Panoramic Echoes*, in the north end of New York's **Madison Square Park**.

"I don't understand the sculpture," one frazzled-looking woman admitted as she scanned the soggy landscape.

Maybe that's because there was nothing to see. Fontana's work is to be explored with the ears, not the eyes. The San Francisco-based artist, who has exhibited his "sound sculptures" in public places and museums all over the world—including a 2006 exhibition at **Tate Modern's** Turbine Hall—uses acoustics to challenge our perceptions of everything from space to history.

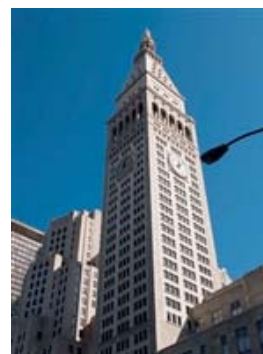
His latest project drowns out the usual din of city life with the sounds of soaring birds and ringing bells. Emitted from speakers on nearby rooftops, the pre-recorded birdcalls come from both native and exotic species. The bells, on the other hand, are live. They chime every 15 minutes, resurrecting the toll of the four bronze bells atop the adjacent **Met Life Tower**—which have been silent since the early 2000s. Microphones attached to the bells transmit the ringing sound to a mixing system that incorporates echoes and delays.

"This is a really unique project," Fontana told ArtInfo. "I was interested in using sound as a way of playing with people's perception of architectural scale."

The installation seems spot-on in that regard. The viewer's eyes tend to dart upward, his or her gaze bouncing off the surrounding buildings, in search of the source of Fontana's "music."

"You'll see people turn their heads," the artist says. "It just awakens that curiosity."

Even more striking is the sense of layering the sculpture conveys. One experiences this in the multivalent sounds themselves, of course, and also in the ways they interweave into our daily routines and our history. It's evident, for example, in how the bells hearken back to the



View of the Metropolitan Life Tower



The sound of the Metropolitan Life Tower's bronze bells are part of Bill Fontana's sound sculpture, "Panoramic Echoes"

Met Life Tower's status as a historic landmark and its short-lived heyday as the tallest building in the world, from 1909 to 1913. It's also there in the sound of the chirping birds, whose pleasant songs evoke the sensation of the spring, intensifying our experience of this one, but also awakening nostalgia for so many springs gone by.

Context is always at the forefront of Fontana's projects. Each work seems to ask how the meaning of a sound transforms once it's transplanted to a new time and place. For his *Distant Trains* (1984), an installation in Berlin, the artist buried speakers underground at the site of a once-bustling train station, which was abandoned after it was bombed during World War II, and piped in live sounds from the busiest station in the area. The installation stopped stunned passersby in their tracks, but it was most powerfully experienced by those who remembered the site before the bombing. "I felt the place was haunted," Fontana recalled. "It was kind of extraordinary."

Ten years later, to mark the 50th anniversary of D-Day, he created *Sound Island*, which used underwater microphones to transmit the sounds of waves crashing on France's Normandy coast to the central Parisian plaza that houses the famed Arc de Triomphe. Much as in his most recent work, the artist transported a meditative natural sound to the center of a bustling city. *Sound Island*, however, also linked two significant war memorials, a sort of acoustic bond between violent moments in France's history.

If such somber undertones are not present in *Panoramic Echoes*, the piece still packs a considerable punch by evoking memories of New York's past and, for each individual, the distinctive emotions that come along with those memories. And it represents a notable and refreshing departure from more traditional visual public artworks, as it is seamlessly integrated into its surroundings.

"Without changing appearances, [*Panoramic Echoes*] totally changes your perception," the artist explains.

The work remains at the park through May 4. Then, appropriately, its echoes fade into New York history.

Jacquelyn Lewis is the assistant editor of ArtInfo.com. She has written about art and culture for publications across the United States.



An aerial view of Madison Square Park, where the sounds of "Panoramic Echoes" are projected from neighboring rooftops

Images courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy

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