

ON THE EDGE OF VISION

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Shadow Soundings is a remarkable development in the work of the sound artist Bill Fontana. With this piece he is taking our eyes and ears right to the edge of our senses. It is no accident that he calls this piece his “Gesamtkunstwerk”.¹

For the first time, Bill Fontana is turning both our notion of sound and our sight upside down and inside out. Ten channels of live sound, two channels of live video, and five channels of recorded video are all mixed up and not necessarily connected with each other. What is happening in real time and past time on Lisbon’s iconic 25 de Abril Bridge is blown apart, with multiple visual perspectives of the bridge projected on panels suspended in the gallery, and with different audio perspectives, both inside and outside the gallery. Fontana has never worked on this scale before: he states his wish to induce a sense of ecstasy and truly blow our minds.

Yet, what isn’t new in this work is the subject of the bridge: it is one, which the artist returns to time and time again. He is fascinated by bridges, describing them as living, dynamic structures – which respond to the people and cars that physically pass over them as well as to the light and the changes in weather. They are conduits of the energy of nature and humankind – musical sound sculptures waiting to be made.

His first bridge piece, *Oscillating Steel Grids Along the Brooklyn Bridge* (1983), was purely a sound piece. The oscillating sound generated by the steel roadway spanning was transmitted live at the World Trade Centre’s first Twin Tower. Speakers were embedded in the architecture so it seemed as if the building itself was making the sound. Up at the top, in the Windows on the World restaurant, there was a live stereo feed. He was taking our hearing as far as we could see, and it was an experiment in the physics of sound, a subject that has preoccupied him since he began making work.

Shadow Soundings is no less of an acoustic experiment, but on a far bigger scale. Fontana uses microphones and accelerometers in the same positions on the 25 de Abril Bridge, but the sounds they pick up appear to be heard at different times and different places. Sound travels at different speeds in the air, which the microphones pick up, and in the steel the accelerometers are attached to. He then mixes them up live with a compositional tool – the Matrix mixing console – to choreograph and extend movements of sound, so that it is deliberately layered even further away from reality, including the visual images. He is radically breaking down the relationship between sound and image, sight and sound, and taking us to another dimension of perception entirely.

The physics of sound has always been part of Bill Fontana. Unsurprisingly, he originally wanted to be a scientist and, from his earliest days as a composer working with John Cage, his absorption with the science as well as philosophy of sound is evident. It is these understandings that for example inspired him to make *Silent Echoes* (2009) – an installation of five monumental Buddhist bells in Kyoto, completely still and not ringing. Vibration sensors were attached to the bells and acoustic microphones were placed inside of their resonant cavities, so that the bells appear to be ringing when in fact they are responding to

the environment around them. The accompanying video shows the great bells still and unmoving, whilst they are sounding and resonating – thus moving in sound. This echoes one of the learnings of physics: that even in the void which appears still and empty, it is in reality full of energy and movement.

But what is very striking, is how Bill Fontana is now increasingly turning to experimenting with the moving image, creating layers and moving to abstraction. It's a little-known fact, that before he met John Cage, Fontana hung out with a group at Cleveland's Art Institute and for the summer of 1967, at least, he was a painter. He is evidently galvanised by his increasing exploration of the possibilities of film and increasing preoccupation with the visual in his career which spans over 45 years:

In the visual world, I still have a learning curve. There's an excitement I have about that. Sound is more transparently objective because I leave a lot to the imagination of the audience and with it I take them to the edge of vision. Whereas if I use a moving image which I have filmed, it is very personal and subjective. I am inserting my view onto the audience, and so people see what I have selected to see. It's intensely autobiographical and as personal as I have ever got.

For this artist, making any work is a way of being. It enables him to be fully present and connected to a moment and a place. He says, "It's my meditation. It is part of my daily life." There has rarely been a moment in his 37-year career when he has stopped making work because it is as natural to him as breathing.

When trapped in a hotel room in New York in a snow storm last year, Fontana's instant response was to record in sound and vision the snow piling up on his window sill and be amazed at how it sounded like flames. In the same year, when his studio in San Francisco was in danger of being flooded and thus destroying his archive and equipment, he stood there for hours with buckets at the ready, whilst also recording the sounds and sights of it happening. "Making those recordings took away the stress of the event. It was an opportunity to make new work." And that's precisely the adventurous spirit with which he still seeks to explore the new sensations of the now, and that takes him – and us – to edge of our senses.

¹Term used by the composer Richard Wagner in an essay in 1849 to describe his aesthetic of a master work, which unites the arts. A *Gesamtkunstwerk* (German: [gəˈzamtˌkʊnstvɛɪk], translated as "total work of art", "ideal work of art", "universal artwork", "synthesis of the arts", "comprehensive artwork", "all-embracing art form" or "total artwork") is a work of art that makes use of all or many art forms or strives to do so.