

Breathing (air) into plastic

CELINA MONTE JAN. 11, 2008

The crowd was not large in the Autzen Gallery Monday evening, but it was interesting all the same. The artist, Dan Senn, answered questions patiently from the handful of people pressed into the shadows against the window, all of who seemed to be covering as if his installation might hurt them.

"What are you trying to convey?" one visitor with a perky white beard asked, a question which Senn declared was a very good one. By way of an answer, the artist explained his true invention, the technology behind the piece, which appears to breathe with sound. In the end, it came out that Senn and the bearded man had both played the French horn as teenagers.

"Air Lift, Lilt with Traffic" is an exercise in conceptual music and a display of sound's physical attributes.

Visually, the piece has few references. Made up of simple upright tubes, plain black bags and a flood of black wires on the floor, the installation is intended to give no sense of metaphor or narrative, though Senn recalled someone comparing the bags—which inflate as inaudibly low frequency sound waves pass into them—to the covered-up street signs sometimes seen along roads under construction, much like the streets where new MAX rails are being installed adjacent to the Portland State campus.

"I accept the meaning," Senn said about his audiences' various metaphorical attempts at understanding his work, explaining, "in art installation these days people inject a metaphor into the piece. This is something I almost never do."

Trained as both a musician and a sculptor, Senn received his doctorate in music composition from the University of Illinois and spent over 10 years of his life as a university music professor. He has taken up installation art as a sort of a third career, although, according to him, his work has always been that of an interdisciplinary artist.



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"Work like this really brings my different sides together," said Senn, who considers the sound composition and the technological process he invented to portray his work more important than any visual sense of the display.

In "Air Lift," each column is a polyvinyl chloride pipe with a woofer installed in the bottom. Senn created the composition by recording common sounds such as late-night traffic and his own breathing. He then mixed them according to an algorithm on his Macintosh computer. The composition is played over audible and inaudible frequencies from a stack of discmen set at random in the back room. When low frequency, inaudible sounds are played in the PVC pipes, the bags inflate and a vibration within the pipe is audible. When audible sounds such as the breathing or traffic are played, the bags deflate, creating the sense that the installation as a whole is breathing.

Senn used the technology he invented for this installation in a related piece, "Huffa Puffa," which he installed in a former locker room for the workers at Hornicky Skanzen Mayrau, a museum in the Czech Republic that used to be an industrial mine. There, the PVC columns are suspended from the vast industrial ceiling, and the inflating bags are white and interspersed with miners' boots, old clothes and dirty hardhats, though Senn insists that the Czech version is as purely devoid of metaphorical association as its less decorative American counterpart.

"Air Lift, Lilt with Traffic" is up in the Autzen Gallery, on the second floor of Neuberger Hall, until Feb. 7. Gallery hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Also this week:

PiP Gallery in the Everett Station Lofts has an interesting series of paintings up this week, "Dreaming of Men," by Shanon Playford. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday.

"StereoJets: Travels in the Third Dimension," a stereoscopic series of large-scale prints by Simon Bell, is open at the 3D Art Center, along with a double-feature video series. Hours are Thursday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. The Center is located at N.W. 19th and Lovejoy.

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