



Ed Osborn/MATRIX 193

Vanishing Point

March 18 – May 13, 2001

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

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*Sound, like fire, is simply an artifact of the transfer of one form of energy into another—expended in an instant and then gone.*¹

—Ed Osborn

Often defined by that which it is not—for example, music—sound art uses sounds for their own essential qualities, from the recognizable (telephones ringing and fans whirring) to the unknown (abstractly configured tones and chords) to the barely discernable (low-decibel noises). Some contemporary sound artists, such as Kristin Oppenheim and Bill Fontana, present only sound (her own voice and a mix of live and recorded sound, respectively), while others, such as Stephen Vitiello, Alan Rath, Rebecca Horn, and Christian Marclay, link the sounds to tangible objects. Helsinki-born, Oakland-based artist Ed Osborn fits into the latter group.

Trained as a traditional composer, with degrees in composition and experimental music, Osborn made the crossover from performance to installations in 1990 as his interests began to outstrip the possibilities of conventional composition. Today he creates mechano-acoustic sculptures that, while low-tech, are moving and provocative. Critic Mitchell Akiyama places Osborn in the tradition of innovative avant-gardists such as Marcel Duchamp and John Cage.² Indeed, his artworks contain visual elements similar in spirit to those used in Duchamp's Dadaist sculptures: Osborn often creates his installations out of such mundane items as fishing rods, model trains, music boxes, rubber tubing, and electric fans.

As critic Sandy Thompson has noted, asking how and why Osborn's works work is like imagining that to know how paint is made engenders an understanding of painting.³ The technical aspects of Osborn's creations include random patterns, transduced movements, shadow audio images, sounding ghosts, inaudible artifacts, sonic depictions, silent taxonomies, ultrasound sensings, echoes, and interference patterns. The content of his works, however, like those of many artists working in the visual and the aural, draws upon the "collective cultural memory," a storehouse of thousands of images and sounds that one encounters daily.⁴ Thus, one does not need to possess a complex understanding of the mechanics of Osborn's sculptures in order to appreciate them.

The essence of Osborn's work is the transformation of one form of energy into another—for example, motion into sound. In *Swarm* (1998), the motions of a group of electric fans suspended from the ceiling are detected by ultrasound sensors positioned below, and transformed into a rumbling sound. The fans switch on and off in intricate patterns, oscillating solo and in clusters, allegorically echoing the way people navigate not only art exhibitions but culture and the everyday: experienced collectively, but processed alone.



In *Night-Sea Music* (1998), Osborn presents a wall of rubber tubes that undulate like seaweed, "dancing" to the movement and sound of the small music boxes to which they are attached. The tune of the accompaniment is a slow rendition of the *Merry Widow* operetta. The result is slightly surreal in being unexpectedly lyrical and poetic. The connecting wires writhe and twist in what is a spirited parody of the mostly futile upstream struggle of spermatozoa in search of their target. (The work is a riff on John Barth's short story of a similar name, "Night-Sea Journey.") Osborn creates an implied tension between natural forces and humans' attempts to control their own destinies.

Osborn's work frequently explores social phenomena. *Parabolica* (1996) suggests the sociological tendency in which traits of a large population fall into a certain average range. The sculpture features a scale model train engine running on tracks suspended three feet in the air. The train sports a speaker that picks up and then emits sounds from the track into the gallery space. The train track thus acts as a conduit for the soundtrack, which features narratives about personal aspiration. In contrast to these stories of hope and determination indicative of free will, the switches and paths, while apparently random, are programmed to describe the statistical bell curve for which the work is named: the train takes the routes through the center more often than those on the inner and outer part of the loop.

Fencesitters (1995) is perhaps the work that is most similar to *Vanishing Point*, Osborn's site-specific MATRIX installation. In *Fencesitters*, contact microphones and audio speakers were placed on the inside of large frosted windows at the front of the Victoria Room gallery. The microphones picked up sounds both within and outside the gallery, and these sounds were amplified through the speakers. The microphones produced a specialized and oblique signal; the acoustic image they provided mirrored the translucence and opacity of the windows.

Vanishing Point (2001) differs from the majority of Osborn's recent installations in that, like *Fencesitters*, it is a sound installation without a conspicuous sculptural component. The audio content is comprised of a series of chords and pitch relationships derived from the measurements of the museum's windows. In fact, *Vanishing Point* is installed directly on the window facade of the Berkeley Art Museum's Galleries A and B. The windows become speakers through the affixing of a small speaker driver to the base of each window. As a result, the glass vibrations

Recoil, 1999, mixed media, electronics, sound; dimensions variable. Artspace, Sydney, Australia—installation view. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.



are magnified and sound is transmitted. People can hear the work both in the galleries and outdoors in the museum's sculpture garden.

Through *Vanishing Point's* placement on the skin of the institution, a space simultaneously within the museum and outside it, Osborn addresses the role of the museum in relation to its larger community. The work is physically and conceptually reliant on the site and structure of the Berkeley Art Museum building. Though it is an imposing concrete structure that exudes a sense of permanence, ironically, due to seismic safety issues, the building's time is itself limited. In fact, during the installation of Osborn's piece, work will begin in the garden for a temporary retrofit of the BAM. The original form of the building will be permanently altered, its integrity in a sense vanishing.

Vanishing Point employs as a point of creative departure a Robert Irwin acrylic plastic disc painting in the Berkeley Art Museum's collection, *Untitled* (1969), currently on view in Gallery 6. The physical form of *Untitled* is a curved disc that is gently arced toward the middle where it is bisected by a horizontal line. Osborn concentrates on several vanishing aspects of *Untitled*, including its provenance as well as its place in the evolution of Irwin's career. When looking through collection records at the museum, Osborn noticed that the painting is in fact a replacement, an exact recreation of the original that was damaged while in storage and then destroyed. Thus, while the "new" work is not in any way denigrated, in theory the "original" painting has vanished. As the disc series was the last of Irwin's works to focus on the tangible object, this means of creation also vanished for Irwin.

Around the same time that he made *Untitled*, Irwin fabricated a series of curved glass pieces that never left his studio—the tension in the glass would have caused any disruption to destroy them. Osborn echoes Irwin's fascination with curved glass by using an elongated S-shape to articulate the movement of tones as they glide from one pitch to another in *Vanishing Point*.⁵ His gesture is a metaphorical attempt to use sound to inscribe curves into the museum's glass façade. The sounds in *Vanishing Point* are made up of simple sine tones, the most basic element of sound.⁶ These tones were selected, according to the artist, precisely because they are hard to localize: the point of listening will continually shift and vanish regardless of how hard one tries to focus on the emanation of the sounds. Additionally, the pitches fade out before reaching the notes that will resolve

Night-Sea Music, 1998, mixed media, electronics, sound; dimensions variable. Galerie DARE-DARE, Montréal, Québec, Canada—installation view.



their chords, so that the harmonic parameters of the chords are never heard. This elusiveness is a brilliant metaphor for the creative process, which is in itself a vanishing point. The effort to see (hear), know, and make is a straining to grasp that which exists on the periphery. Osborn's work, with its gradually shifting, unlocatable, and ultimately vanishing tones emanating from a space which is in between, neither inside nor outside, is a commentary on the nature of creativity itself: seductive, elusive, and inspiring.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

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¹ David Hunt, "Pause and Reflect: Sound Art from the Bay Area," *Merge*, Fall 1998, no. 2, p. 40.

² Mitchell Akiyama, "The art of noise," *The Link*, January 20, 1998, p. 7.

³ Sandy Thompson, "Ed Osborn at the Farfield Center Gallery," *Artweek*, July/August 1998, p. 26.

⁴ Charles Ashley Stainback, S.O.S. Scenes of Sounds (Skidmore, New York: The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, 2000), n/p.

⁵ The path of the curve is calculated using a simple cosine function, which causes the curve's rate of change to decrease as it nears the edge of its range.

⁶ There is a long history of using sine tones in electronic music that includes the work of Jim Tenney and Alvin Lucier, two composers and electronic music pioneers who have influenced Osborn.

High Fidelity, 2000, mixed media, electronics, sound; dimensions variable. Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco—installation view.



Ed Osborn was born in 1964 in Helsinki, Finland. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut in 1987. He then attended Mills College in Oakland, California, and earned a Master of Fine Arts in 1992. Osborn lives and works in Oakland.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2001
singuhr-hörgalerie, Berlin, Germany
Klangturm, St. Pölten, Austria

1999
Artspace, Sydney, Australia
Thompson Art Gallery, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA

1998
Galerie DARE-DARE, Montréal, Quebec, Canada

1997
Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA

1996
Museum of Applied Arts, Helsinki, Finland
Kästrich, Mainz, Germany
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
LACE, Los Angeles, CA

1995
San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA

Selected Public Projects

2001
"SoundGarden Project," San Francisco, CA

1999
"Cascade," Otira, New Zealand

1998
"Walkway," North Adams, MA

Selected Group Exhibitions

2001
"Resonance International Sound Art Festival," Seoul Metropolitan Museum, Seoul, Korea
"Zeppelin Sound Art Festival," Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Spain

Swarm, 1998, mixed media, sound; dimensions variable. Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia—installation view. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.



2000
"Bay Area Connections," Virgin Atlantic Terminal, SFO, San Francisco, CA
"send + receive festival," Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
"Tectonic," Physics Room, Christchurch, New Zealand
"Aural Sex," Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA
"Inventionen 2000," Berlin, Germany
"Sounds and Files," Künstlerhaus, Vienna, Austria
"Net Work," New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA

1999
"En Red 0 Soundscapes," Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Spain
"Situaciones," Universidad de Castilla La Mancha, Cuenca, Spain
"Inaugural Exhibition," Tryon Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC
"Sound Box 2," Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland
"SoundCulture 99," Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
"Musique en Scène: Collage Jukebox," Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, France

1998
"Brisbane Festival," Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia
"EarMarks," Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA
"Resonance FM," Meltdown Festival, South Bank Centre, London, U.K.
"Sound Box," Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland

1996
"Sonambiente Festival," Berlin, Germany
"Techne," San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA

1995
ISEA 95, Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts, Montréal, Québec, Canada

Selected Bibliography

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___, "Aural Sex," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, September 6, 2000, p. 84.

Hunt, David. "Pause and Reflect: Sound Art from the Bay Area," *Merge*, Fall 1998, no. 2, pp. 40-42.

___, *Interiors*, exhibition catalogue, Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1998.

Kahn, Douglas. "Squirming and Recoiling," catalogue essay, Artspace, Sydney, Australia, 1999.

Lemarche, Bernard. "Symphonie Ludique," *Le Devoir*, January 31, 1998, p. D9.

Marquez, Susan. "Interiors," *World Sculpture News*, Winter 1999, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 60-61.

Parabolica, 1996, mixed media, sound; dimensions variable. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco—installation view. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.



Mattessich, Stefan. "Dromologies: Ecstasies of Speed," *Art Papers*, November/December 1998, vol. 22, no. 6, p. 41.

Osborn, Ed. "Electricity Arcs Both Ways From Heaven," catalogue essay, Artspace, Sydney, Australia, 1999.

___, "Creaking Grounds: Plate Tectonics and SoundCulture 96," *Essays In Sound*, December 1996, no. 3, pp. 45-53.

Roche, Harry. "Big Jesus Trash Can," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, February 8, 1995, p. 88.

Schumacher, Donna. "Interiors," *Flash Art*, January/February 1999, p. 57.

Tanaka, Yumika. *SWITCH*, Spring/Summer 1996, vol. 2, no. 1, <http://switch.sjsu.edu>.

Thompson, Sandy. *Artweek*, July/August 1998, pp. 25-26.

Young, Gayle. *MusicWorks*, Spring 1995, no. 61, pp. 62-64.

Work in MATRIX

Ed Osborn
Vanishing Point, 2001
Electronics, sound; dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco

Please note:

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will give a curator's walkthrough of this exhibition, along with Ricky Swallow/MATRIX 191 *For those who came in late*, on Thursday, May 3, at 12:15 p.m.

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Above: *Blindfield*, 1994, mixed media, sound; dimensions variable. Victoria Room, San Francisco—installation view. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

Cover: *Fencesitters*, 1995, mixed media, sound; dimensions variable. Victoria Room, San Francisco—installation view. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.