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A Space for
Looking is
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Listening

Jacqueline Kiyomi
Gordon

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Scientific Supercake (1994) is the first album by godheadSilo, a punk noise duo with no guitars, only bass and drums. I bought their CD in the spring of 1994 largely on account of rumors I had heard through friends about how punishingly loud the bass on the album was. In fact, the liner notes cautioned the listener that the last track “Battle of the Planets”¹ would break your stereo if played too loud. Though I’m sure this was all explained in a science class at some point in my youth, I still remember listening to this album—slowly inching the volume louder on my stereo, fearing the speakers would explode—as being a defining moment in my understanding of sound as a physical force. At the time I played in a punk noise band with friends from high school, which was heavily influenced by this idea of sound being able to break shit. Though I grew away from the those destructive urges, I think I spent the better part of the next late teens and early twenties making music that considered sound as an object.

A good visual demonstration of sound’s physical properties (that doesn’t involving shredding your speakers) is a Chladni Plate. Named after German Physicist and musician Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni, these instruments transmitted

tones onto a plate that was covered with a fine layer of sand. The wavelength of the sound would create patterns in the sand depending on the tone being reproduced.² The higher pitch a sound, the shorter its wavelength, the lower a tone, the longer its wave. On a chladni plate, these wavelengths appear in a relatively compact space, as sound travelling through a solid object has shorter wavelengths. But in open air, a low frequency can be quite large. For reference, a 75 hz tone in air of average temperature would produce a wave about the same width of the gallery here, 15 feet. The gallery’s length of 36 feet could contain a single wavelength of a 30hz tone.³

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon makes sculptures that engage with this notion of sound having a physical presence. Using sculptural and architectural forms, coupled with specialized speakers and various oscillating tones, Gordon’s work is often rooted in an exploration of feedback systems. In several early works, Gordon constructed environments built around a feedback loop between acoustics and architecture or place. *Our Best Machines are Made of Sunshine* (2009) is a four channel sound installation that used two microphones on the gallery’s exterior to capture live sound, process it through a series of filters, delays and other effects, then send it to 24 speakers spread across four walls of the gallery. In *SA-3* (2011), Gordon used live sound from inside the gallery and fed it into a hanging sculpture of directional speakers. In making this

work, Gordon was interested in creating a “mirror of sorts where you control what the sound is but how you chose to place yourself in line with the directionality of the speakers decides how you experience that sound in space.”⁴

In this relationship between the viewer as both a listener and maker of sound in *SA-3*, Gordon opens up another angle into the notion of feedback—a relationship between bodies and sound—which is further explored in her recent work *Always a Floor* (2014). Part of a series of research Gordon embarked on, this work used moveable walls built out of different materials that either reflected or absorbed sound and were further activated by choreographers to develop relationships between movement and sound. In one experiment, Gordon asked a choreographer to wear binaural microphones to record what they heard while moving in and around the wall structures. In these experiments, Gordon was interested in how different languages perceive sound, how an artist trained in movement might be influenced by the fields of sound Gordon’s sculptures created.

For her work at Western Front, Gordon is building upon two recent sculptures *Linda* (2015) and *Tammy III* (2015), which were made during a residency at Mills College. Here, Gordon uses armatures constructed of 80/20 extruded aluminum, a modular framing system often used for building engineering prototypes. These are adorned with materials—vinyl curtain material, hand formed ceramic tiles,

a section of carpet, and a hand woven blanket—which variously reflect, absorb and diffuse a sound composition of simple oscillator tones at different frequencies. The sound is beamed directly at the sculptures using a hyper-directional speaker that focuses sound waves into a narrow beam. Pointed at the ceramic tiles, this laser-like beam of sound reflects off the hard surface of the tile and from there disperses around the room in different directions.

Walking into this environment, one can quite literally feel the shape of sound. Similar to the patterns you would see on a Chladni plate, Gordon’s sound compositions emanate outward as the sound reflects off the tiles. As a viewer, you become active in this role as your position in the gallery determines what you hear, and thus, how you experience these pieces. Movement is central, both that of the sound waves and their trajectories around the room as well as the movement of the viewer’s body as an agent that activates the work.

The types of speakers employed by Gordon in this work are derived from the same technology that is used in military sound instruments such as the LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Device). These sonic weapons focus intense beams of sound over long distances and can be used for a range of applications from communications to less-than-lethal crowd control. In these works, Gordon turns the technology around: rather than deploying this apparatus as an instrument of control, where one’s hearing is used against them,

it accentuates one's listening. In these sculptures, sound is used to guide the body rather than contain it. They invite a heightened awareness of one's body as it relates to the space, architecture and objects around it. Here, listening is an act that takes place alongside looking.

1. For your listening pleasure: <https://godheadsilo.bandcamp.com/track/battle-of-the-planets>

2. You can see some examples of one of these instruments here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRFysSAxWxI>

3. If you would like to hear what that sounds like, go to the website <http://onlinetonegenerator.com/> and you can punch in 75hz and then 30hz. You'd need to do it with good headphones or a full range stereo, as the speakers in a normal laptop don't usually reproduce sound much lower than 125hz.

4. Moss, Ceci. "Artist Profile: Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon." rhizome.org. May 30, 2012. Web. Accessed January 19, 2016. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2012/may/30/artist-profile-jacqueline-kiyomi-gordon/>

Artist Biography

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon works in sound, installation, sculpture and performance. Her work is devised around audio and spatial feedback systems that manipulate the visitor's awareness of sound and space. She received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute (2004) and an MFA from Stanford University (2011) where her research focused on the history of communications technology and the physiological and psychophysical effects of music and sound on the body. Gordon has had solo shows at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (2014, San Francisco), Pro Arts Gallery (2013, Oakland) and Queens Nails (2009, San Francisco). Gordon has received a Joan Mitchell Foundation MFA Award, a Center for Cultural Innovation Grant (2011, 2014) and a San Francisco Arts Commission Cultural Equity Grant (2009). She has participated in artist residencies at Skowhegan School of Drawing and Painting (2011), The Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (2014), Djerassi (2013) and Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (2008). Since 2006, Gordon has been a member of the female music and performance collective, 0th, whose performances include venues such as The Berkeley Art Museum (2011), The San Francisco Electronic Music Festival (2011), Southern Exposure (2010) and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (2014).

Gallery List of Works

1. *Tammy IV*

Ceramic, fabric, extruded aluminum, HSS
directional speakers, software, 2016

2. *Barbara*

Ceramic, fabric, extruded aluminum, HSS
directional speakers, software, 2016

