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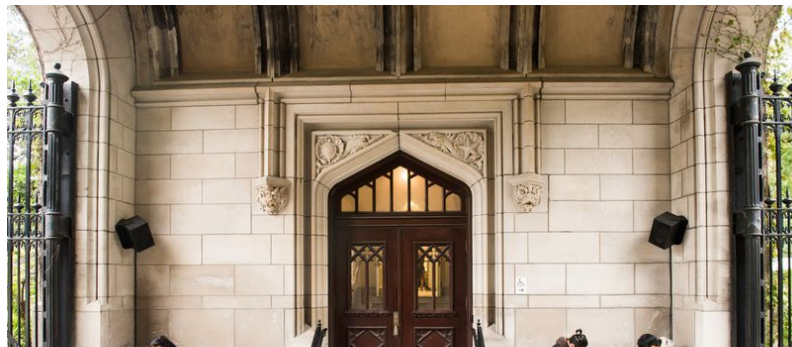
'Chicago Sound' pairs University of Chicago campus with artistic sound for a feast for the ears

By LORI WAXMAN

CHICAGO TRIBUNE | OCT 25, 2019 | 4:07 PM



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Sound Installation at Cobb Gate at the University of Chicago. (Jean Lachat / HANDOUT)

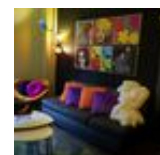
Rare is the art exhibit that asks more of the ears than the eyes. I sometimes fantasize about wearing ear plugs at the museum, the better to look without being distracted by other people’s conversation. “The Chicago Sound Show,” a sprawling and ambitious display projected out of buildings and bushes across the historic University of Chicago campus in Hyde Park, requires another kind of focus entirely. In an effort to hear more, I seriously considered tying on a blindfold, but ultimately thought better of it.

Nine local artists, not all of whom work exclusively in sound, created new work for the exhibition, which was co-organized by Laura Steward, the university’s curator of public art, and Sam Pluta, who directs the school’s Computer Music Studio and whose work is also included in the show. The artists chose settings as unlike as a contemplative cloister garden and a heavily-trafficked gateway. Katherine Young placed her “Resonance, and the Inhibition of” by the Botany Pond, a

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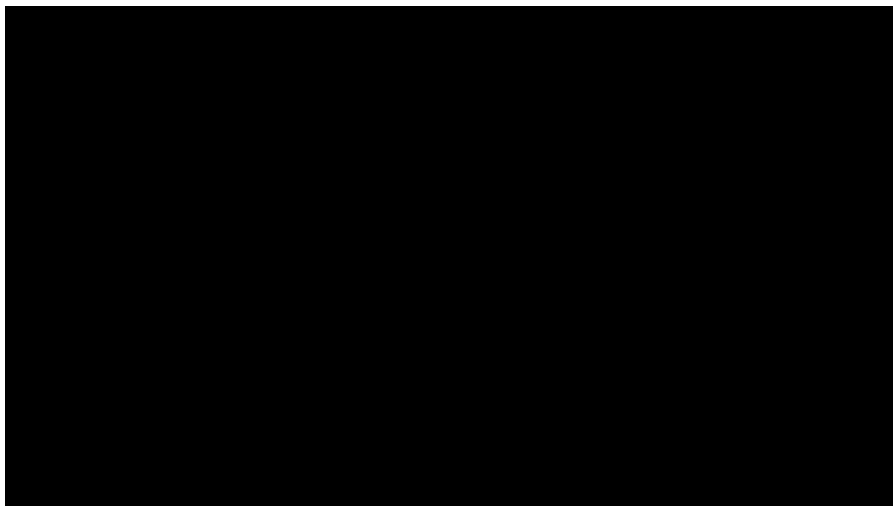
The Field Museum is offering free admission to Chicago Public Schools students today because of the Chicago teachers strike (and tomorrow’s free too)



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serene pool surrounded by pine trees, occupied by two families of Mallard ducks the day I was there. It was a splendid fall day, the kind that makes wandering and stopping extra pleasant, and a good thing too: outdoor art, whatever the medium, is extremely susceptible to weather conditions. Even the most joyful sculpture can be depressed by a downpour. Sound art is even more sensitive than most, since the extra noises generated by a storm can cancel out its more delicate registers. Save "The Chicago Sound Show" for a nice afternoon.

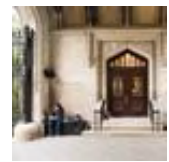
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To those not especially familiar with sound art, the irony of this exhibition may be its deep responsiveness to site. Actually, that easy misapprehension is why it turned out to be a

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good thing that I skipped the blindfold and succumbed only to the occasional eye closing. Olivia Block's "Indiana Karst," all trickles and drip-drops, must be experienced in the dark canyon of the walkway between Pick Hall and the Walker Museum in order to connect the watery sounds of limestone caverns and the buildings constructed from materials mined there. Stephan Moore's "Six Accompaniments for Solo Voice" can only be heard on the grassy quad outside the Searle Chemistry Laboratory, a place I imagine is normally bereft of people due to the incessant drone of the edifice's massive ventilation and filtration system. That's the "Voice" of the title, to which Moore adds six different musical compositions, each of which can be heard through a pair of speakers attached to the ends of the wooden benches that ring the lab. Walter Kitundu's "Maximum of the Eyes," hands-down my favorite piece in the show, sends the sounds of Chicago — kids calling for mom, horns honking, airplanes rumbling, plus lapping Lake Michigan — into the center of a circular birch grove. The copse has always been a lovely resting spot, but now it's a distinctly urban oasis, in which the city itself can be contemplated.

Many kinds of sound art exist, and you might

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be tempted to assume that an exhibition as grandiloquently titled as “The Chicago Sound Show” is attempting to survey the field, at least as it exists locally. It’s not, though such an endeavor would certainly be worthwhile. The city’s scene is unrivalled, with roots in the School of the Art Institute’s sound department, the first of its kind, and the Experimental Sound Studio, plus long-running series like Florasonic at the Lincoln Park Conservatory. (As in the cultural landscape of Chicago generally, much is intertwined: many of the artists in the show are affiliated with SAIC, including Lou Mallozzi, also a founder of ESS, and Kitundu, whose “Caren” just opened at LPC.)

The majority of the art included here is what used to be called environmental sound art, though that term has fallen out of favor as “environmental” has come to mean nature and our impact on it, rather than simply a person’s surroundings. Regardless, the artworks are still typically made with field recordings and evince a keen sense of the world’s sonic nature. These installations are exceptionally good at attuning us to the little sounds of everyday life: wind whistling, cars vrooming, doors shutting. Such sensitization is a

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worthwhile endeavor, and it takes a capacious aesthetic, as well as a sense of the surreal, to pull off most successfully. The visitor has to be induced to slow down long enough to notice, and it helps to have a context sufficiently different from those noises that they stand out as unusual, even if they're normally familiar enough to disregard. The downside, at least in "The Chicago Sound Show," is redundancy. There's a lot of water dripping and bird twittering here, and some of it is not dissimilar enough to matter.

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Notable for an art exhibition that goes beyond the visual are two projects actively engaged with issues of accessibility. Both David Wallace Haskins' "Breath" and Andy Slater's "Unseen, Re-heard" feature recordings of campus sounds — those listed above, but also organs wheezing, bells pealing, people chattering — in covered passageways that rarely offer a chance for pause. But here they do: Haskins uses large infrasonic speakers, on which visitors are invited to sit, and through which anyone, hearing or deaf, can experience the soundscape of the campus. In fact, his projections are powerful enough to be felt

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through the air, while walking. Slater's composition distinguishes itself for the tap, tap, tapping detectible amid other elements; it's the knocking of the metal tip of the artist's echolocation cane as he makes his way, blind. So closely was I listening, trying to discern the individual tones of Slater's exploration, that I nearly fell down from shock when some students let a nearby door slam shut.

So take off those earbuds, and keep them out. Feel and hear what you're missing.

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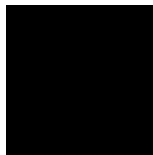
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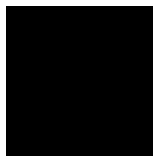
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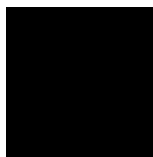
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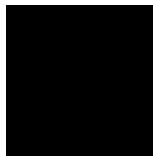
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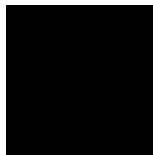
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the Smart Museum of Art, 5550 S.
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