

New Music: Sounds You Can Walk Through

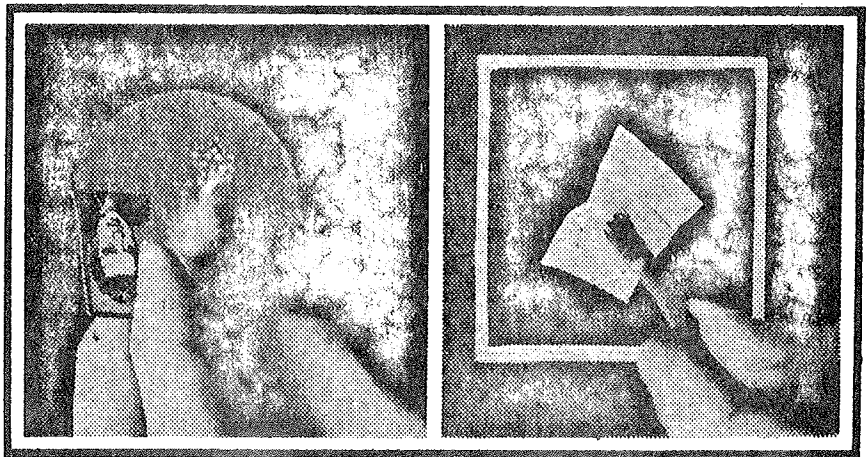
ARTISTS SPACE, a gallery on the second floor of 105 Hudson Street in Lower Manhattan, is currently offering what purports to be the first extensive exhibition of "audio art" in New York City's history. The show runs until Feb. 25, and Artists Space is open 11 A.M. to 6 P.M., Tuesdays through Saturdays.

What is the difference between "audio art" and "music"? Not much, really. Both are created and then re-created, live or on tape. The present show offers recorded work in a gallery setting—some installations, some open-reel tapes that are played in sequence in a gallery space, LP's and 45's that can be requested and played on a phonograph and cassettes that can be listened to through earphones. There are also several live performances scheduled in conjunction with the show, by artists already exhibited in it: John Zorn will do a performance tonight at 8; Scott Johnson will appear next Friday and Saturday at 8 P.M., and Rhys Chatham will present his "Ear Ringing" on Feb. 22 and 23, again at 8 P.M.

The exhibition represents a valuable showcase for a rapidly proliferating tendency among experimental artists. On the one hand, there is a vast amount of recorded new music by composers working outside the boundaries of what has traditionally been considered music—electronic sounds, of course, but also pieces using natural sounds, narration and various conceptual schemes. On the other, artists whose primary reputations have been won outside the realm of sound are turning to audio work as part of a

desire to express themselves in a variety of mediums. This is not a new trend; earlier 20th-century artists like Kurt Schwitters and Jean Dubuffet worked in sound, too, and are part of a traveling exhibition of artists' records that is touring the country just now. Unfortunately, that show isn't coming to New York, and the current exhibition concentrates on current artists.

The Artist Space show offers sound works by artists best known for their visual work (Carl André, Keith Sonnier), by performance and conceptual artists (Vito Acconci, Terry Fox), by dances (Meredith Monk), novelists (Constance de Jong) and composers (Jim Burton, Charlemagne Palestine). All together more than 80 artists are represented, with an unusually strong contingent from Los Angeles.



The New York Times/Fred R. Conrad
Moments from John Zorn's "San Francisco," an audio-work show to be presented tomorrow evening at the Artists Space on Hudson Street

The quality of the work is variable, but much of it seems genuinely fascinating, assuming the listener's predilection toward this sort of avant-gardism in the first place. But a complete over-view (or overlisten) of all the pieces on display would take more than a day of steady attention, and that is just the first of the problems of this exhibition.

Unlike the visual arts, which can be happily displayed together, music exists in time and in space. A given piece generally has a fixed length (except for some "infinite" tape loops), and can generally be heard only in isolation. Thus a visit to the current exhibition demands selectivity, and the general listener—given this show's almost complete lack of documentation—is going to have no idea what to select.

Music exists in space insofar as it demands its own space in which to be heard. The Artists Space people have attempted to isolate one listening area from another, but they aren't always successful. Works being played in the next room intrude, as do miscellaneous office, street and theater noises. Even earphones for cassettes fail to provide complete insulation.

And, finally, there is a problem of focus. Some of the pieces here are simply recordings of work originally meant to be performed live. Others were designed for radio broadcast, still others for cassettes or records. Some are by composers with a fairly sophisticated musical or technical training;

others are by visual artists who are more or less meaningfully playing around. All of these approaches are valid, and perhaps the grab-bag, we'll-take-anything-we-can-get-that-emits-a-noise aspect of the Artists Space show makes its own statement, as an indication of the burgeoning field.

Ultimately, though, the purpose of a sound exhibition on the gallery model may be self-defeating, given the nature of the medium. But the present show is still valuable, if only to call attention to an art form best enjoyed in concerts or privately at home.

The principal recording on display, for instance, is a two-disk set called "Airwaves." This is on sale in Lower Manhattan art-book stores, and includes generally fascinating pieces by 13 artists. This listener went out and bought the set after visiting 105 Hudson Street and late that night sat down with earphones to hear what he'd bought.

As it happened, there was a cat sitting on his shoulder, purring next to the left earphone. And right there, at the end of side one, was a nine-minute excerpt from a piece by Terry Fox called "The Labyrinth Scored for the Purrs of 11 Different Cats." It consists of a sensuous aural tapestry of stereophonically shifting, pulsating, overlapping purrs, and it justified the concept of audio art all by itself. The live cat liked it, too.

JOHN ROCKWELL