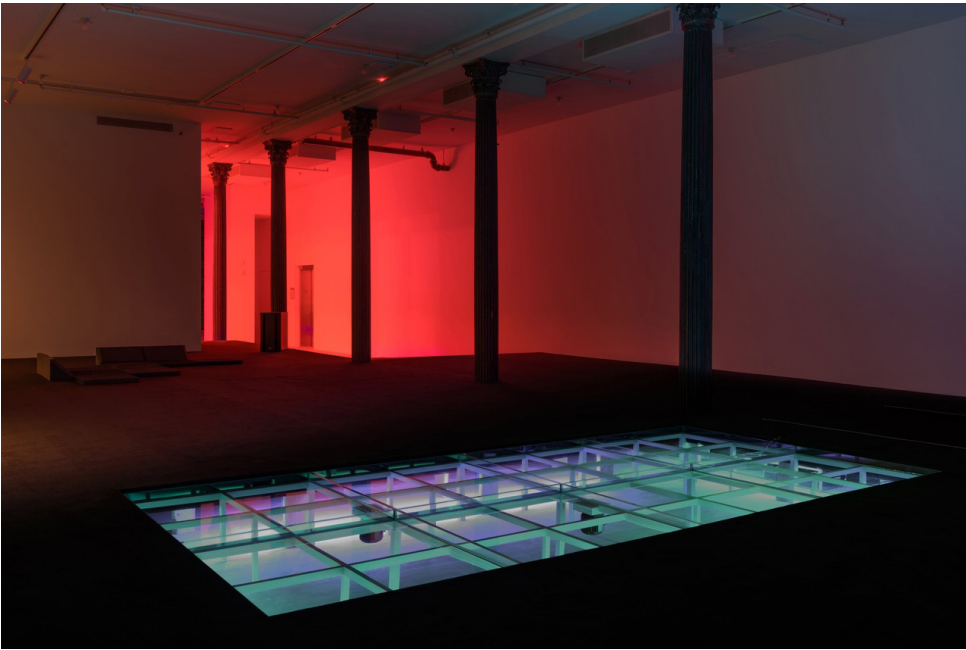


## TEXTE ZUR KUNST

### "THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING SOMEWHERE"

Rachel Haidu on Constantina Zavitsanos at Artists Space, New York



"Constantina Zavitsanos: fwiw," Artists Space, New York, 2024

The art watcher, just as the review reader, is always already indebted, owing their experience to the work of others as well as to their own senses. Constantina Zavitsanos gets in on the ground floor of such dependencies in her recent show, capturing both light and sonic waves through different technologies and thereby editing them for their audience's perception. Being receptive of the various aids available throughout "fwiw," Rachel Haidu follows the 1966 song referenced in the show's title – Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" – to map out what exactly was happening at Artists Space.

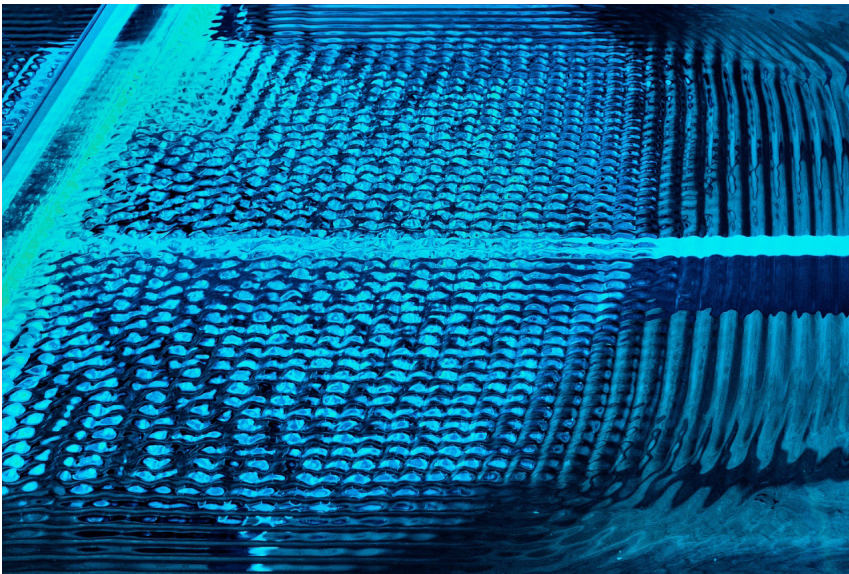
I missed one crucial element of "fwiw," Constantina Zavitsanos's second solo exhibition at Artists Space, twice. This seemed like an ordinary frustration until I realized that the missed work – tin cans zip-tied to the building's facade and rooftop, serving as pinhole cameras bringing White Street and Cortlandt Alley into the galleries – itself encapsulated a first level of the show's concerns: Where is the work; which spatial parameters belong to it? Then, as I tried from a distance to remember the sounds of Zavitsanos's playlists and whether the colored lights inside Artists Space overlapped or not – as I tried, in other words, to re-place faded recollections into my present consciousness – I inched, before I understood what was happening, toward a second question, one that Zavitsanos has addressed previously: How do we hold two states at once? Might these two questions start to answer another: the question of how we occupy space at all.



Constantina Zavitsanos: "∞," Artists Space, New York, 2024

You entered “fwiw” by confronting two sound-light situations, distributed over a series of works on either side of the gallery’s threshold space that holds its elevators, restrooms, and public-facing desk. Heading up stairs or a ramp, you heard a low soundtrack emanating from the left side of the space, and from the right, a dim, sometimes silenced, in-and-out throb. Lights, colored and only occasionally bright, cut up pitch-dark spaces on either side, marking the sites of different works. The brightest light by far was emitted by *Wishing Well (Korpi)* (2023–24), a large rectangular cavity filled with liquid, lit from below. Water imported from the artist’s grandmother’s hometown, Korpi (Greece), was being (sometimes) moved by a combination of a “sine wave generator, speakers, and transducers,” as the checklist explained. Visible waves, both translating and imaging aural waves, became “extra” visible through the grid built over them. As the water would suddenly stutter, creating a map of waves under the grid above its surface, your sight was aided by the grid and the light, while the retinal means of operation – the translation of light waves to vision – was materialized, demonstrated, made visible to itself. Your dependency was made clear to you, at the outset, even as you might have wondered why you were looking so carefully at a pool of imported water.

My (requisite?) incomprehension sent me again and again to the checklist. That piece of paper (which I also lost repeatedly) provided another key to, or making-visible of, the works. The checklist also, of course, is a work, even if it’s not marked on the checklist or available (as far as I know) for sale. Image description captions, Zavitsanos has said, “provide access, and [let me] do what I do with any other material as a sculptor, which is to use it as a material, maybe even let it use me, too.” [1] This reciprocity was nowhere more evident to me than in the arrangement of acoustic foam wedges and squares forming a kind of lounging area between *Wishing Well* and the gallery’s entry. To lie down was to feel the vibrations of one of Zavitsanos’s playlists coming in and out of audibility, and to let your eyes adjust to the darkness. To become bodily akin to a transducer, that is, a device that converts one form of energy or signal to another. The foam conducted sound as thrum to your body, and as you became aware of that pulsing and the darkness your eyes might now be mastering, it was almost too late. Your body had done its work, not only conducting its adjustments to you – you’ve sensed the adjustment, it’s happened – but through you. It was exactly as the work’s title indicated: *There’s Something Happening Here* (2024). That something was both “there,” in the work, and taking place through a body that would eventually move out of the work’s space. By interfering with the waves, you realized, you were already doing your job.



Constantina Zavitsanos, “Wishing Well (Korpi)” (detail), 2023–24

And indeed, across the gallery’s threshold, it sounded as if someone was humming the melody accompanying the phrase “there’s something happening here,” made famous by the 1966 Buffalo Springfield song “For What It’s Worth,” initialized for the exhibition’s title. Rearrangements of the song appeared across two adjoined floor-to-ceiling HD video screens, but only as trippy segments of the alphabet lighting up and disappearing at different speeds, right side up, upside down, diagonally, in different colors. Entitled *Ms. Pac-Man* (2024), with letters running across and past the edges of both screens like the titular video game’s heroine, this work wasn’t treating its audiences to Buffalo Springfield’s song – not really. Occasionally you read what might have been under-breath utterances from a captioned performance (“can do”), or such captions’ surprisingly exact descriptions (“slow ripped reverb reverses”) – and slowly you realize that the amalgam of lines, captions, and alphabetical excerpts come from the list of performers and remixes that make up this playlist, also enumerated on the checklist (from the Voices of East Harlem choir to Nina Simone to Public Enemy). In the end, cut up and collaged like any remix, the mix of remixes seemed to bear at most only an uncanny relation to the song, like the faraway-sounding melody that accompanied, or maybe correlated, to the visual. [2] Did they share an algorithm, a feedback loop echoing *Wishing Well*’s sonic-to-visual mapping? In other words, was the visual experience on offer also translating the sonic, but according to another apparatus, not the human sensorium? Would you consider such an algorithm another aid, like the super-precious checklist? As you asked Buffalo Springfield’s basic, repeated question – “What’s that sound?” – you sensed the degree to which you daily live its techno-politico-historical answer: “Something’s going down.” Just as one corner of the show might demonstrate the relation between sound and image (“waves”) and cause, or source, another reopens it. Similarly, the question of “what’s going down” might suggest, in the fall of 2024 in New York City as well as any time in the last who-knows-how-long, a truly ominous framework. What gets called a “dog whistle” in the media is, on the physical plane, merely a frequency that lives at the (ultra)sonic end



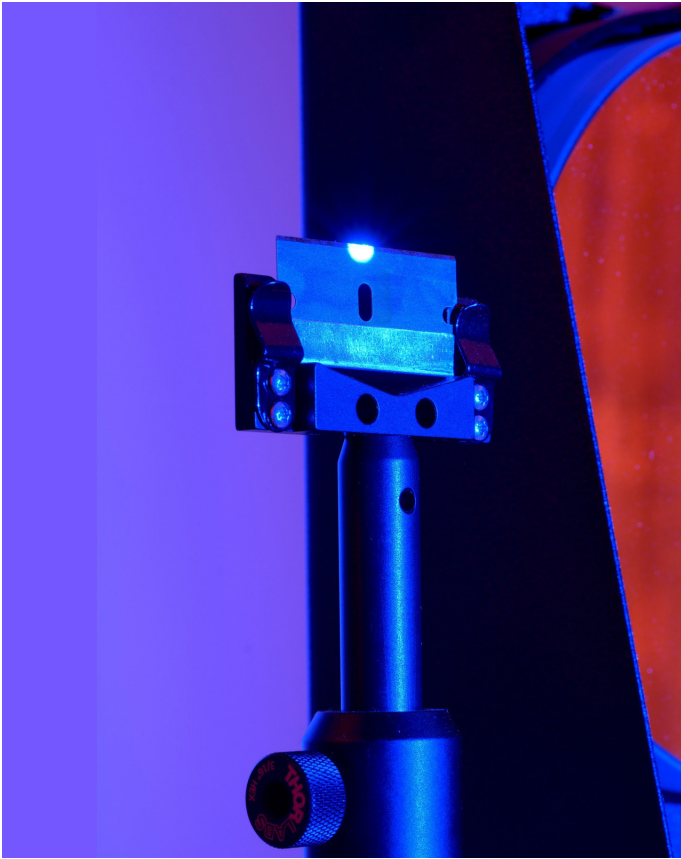
of the spectrum. But what lies between the ultra- and infrasonic ends of the spectrum are not merely normative standards for hearing – let alone hearing for a certain demographic. What Zavitsanos has engineered gets us to tune to our own frequencies, which, as we soon understand, are not merely generic, and maybe not even ours. They are fully dependent, contingent, in debt. As the appearance of the collaborative work *LEAVE - A - PENNY / TAKE - A - PENNY* (2024) indeed suggests. Positioned close to *Wishing Well*, in case you might want to actually throw a penny into that imported well, it reminds us that capital is both a metaphor for and reality of the dependencies being engaged in by “fwiw.” To be dependent in order to see (what is all around you, or right in front of you) is both a form of debt that points to disability and one that points to forms of disability making up our lifeworld, or life\*work\*, the labor we have to “give” just in order to get by.



“Constantina Zavitsanos: fwiw,” Artists Space, New York, 2024

Off to the side of *Ms. Pac-Man* sat an interferometer atop two steel tables (*Ace of Spaces*, 2024), a somewhat different version of an instrument that Zavitsanos has previously produced for Artists Space. [3] Zavitsanos’s interferometer – their version of an imaging device first developed in 1625 then popularized in the 19th century – echoes a camera obscura across the gallery. Both bounce light around, though one captures a moving image (what’s happening outside the “dark chamber”) and the other designed to separate particles according to their characteristics – whether they transmit as looser (therefore red) waves, or tighter (thus blue) coils – “interferes” with its subject. Once used to measure the concavity of a mirror and any of its defects, Zavitsanos’s theatrically-lit interferometer looks like part of a Cronenberg-esque body horror movie set. And indeed, it does provide a kind of set for seeing, again, what and how we see. Sitting near a wall, its dangerously sharp knife edge is reflected twice on that wall, once, as if in a mirror, and a second time, in closeup. That arrangement around a “beam-splitter” whose basic function is to “superimpose beams of light in order to generate an interference pattern” allows you to watch what looks like the sulfurous, wispy movement of air against a wall tinted red by light. [4]

Again, you are watching the making-visible of waves, again, in a manner designed to be perceived as such. But this time, the interferometer cues us that that which serves on one level as an object of observation, that unholy-looking interferometer, is also a component factor in observing. Interferometers themselves model observer participation; as Karen Barad describes, rather than simply showing us particles, making their paths clear to us, the interference effects for which the interferometer is named change the nature of what the device shows. [5] What we are looking at is no longer what can be measured purely, as if it was occurring in nature; it is, for Barad, “ontologically indeterminate,” asking after “the nature of nature.” [6]



Constantina Zavitsanos, "Ace of Spades" (detail), 2024

Watching the interference of an apparatus might seem like a rehearsal of what the first wave of institutional critique brought to art: an awareness of what makes art – institutionally, and therefore experientially – possible. But lying on the acoustic foam pillows, my awareness of how we – or I in particular – interfere with art's institutional settings gained new frequencies. As much as Barad's "ontological indeterminacy" compels, Zavitsanos seems to be embedding the question of how to think one's collective or individuated self inside a larger structure of dependency and debt, one that they have articulated elsewhere. "We are surplus, we are common, we are extra," Zavitsanos has said, continuing: "We are a site of accumulation that is marked as disposable. But rather than figuring us as extra, I'm more interested in the disfiguring that disabled life offers to consensus-based reality". [7] To describe disability in this way is to describe not a static entity or even a state of being but, as they've said, the "ground" of life itself. That ground is something that the range of works across "fwiw" explores. Waves, on view in *Wishing Well* and audible everywhere, can be measured and even sorted according to the specific qualities that a given device is made to measure (like color). But the particles forming those waves cannot; they exist only as such, in one place at one time. Demanding that we review what we think we understand about sorting and separating, and "what" exactly we are sorting and separating, is the nature of a challenge to "critique," one that arose as soon as institutional critique itself raised questions about "what's going down."

Sorting and capturing are basic institutional tools. Is it a surprise that Zavitsanos mounted this intense exploration of how they work to create the grounds of our perception in 2024? Liberal-democratic notions of difference, like the regimes built upon them, seem finally to be in their death throes. Sorting and capturing are doing their work, allowing states and other phalocrats to map and re-map, give papers to some and withhold them from others. Meanwhile, more than ever, the rest of us are living in two places, like a disobedient particle; we are in a new kind of debt, along with the old ones. Public Enemy's 1998 remix of Buffalo Springfield's song, part of Zavitsanos's playlist and *Ms. Pac-Man's* script, goes well past that band's sympathetic liberalism. It cuts closer to present-day arrangements: "thought of reparations got 'em playin' with the population ... folks don't even own themselves / payin' mental rent to corporate presidents." [8] Don't we know it.

#### Notes

[1] Constantina Zavitsanos, "'Giving It Away': Constantina Zavitsanos on Disability, Debt, Dependency," interview by Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, *Art Papers* 15 (Winter 2018/2019).

[2] The melodies to this work, like that on the other side of the threshold, in fact reflect playlists of a variety of field recordings (*Wishing Well*) and samples and songs (*Wishing Well* and *Ms. Pac-Man*) from Buffalo Springfield, Public Enemy, and Nina Simone, among others, to Zavitsanos's frequent collaborators Park McArthur and Oscar Tillman.

[3] The first, a Mach-Zehnder interferometer, was in the group show "Coop Fund, Amalle Dublon & Constantina Zavitsanos, Devin Kenny, John Neff," in February/March 2018. The title "Ace of Spades" is another musical reference, this time to Motörhead's

1980 song that starts "If you like to gamble..."

[4] See "What Is an Interferometer?," LIGO Laboratory, Caltech.

[5] Barad writes that the "specific nature of the material arrangement of the apparatus is responsible for the specifics of the enactment of the cut." Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 264.

[6] "The further we explore, the more questions seem to arise concerning the nature of measurement and the nature of nature." Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 263.

[7] Constantina Zavitsanos, "Giving It Away."

[8] "He Got Game," by D.R. Period (Daryl Pittman), Hank Shocklee, Keith Shocklee, Stephen Stills, Chuck D, and LuQuantum Leap, was released in 1998 as part of the soundtrack to Spike Lee's film of the same name.