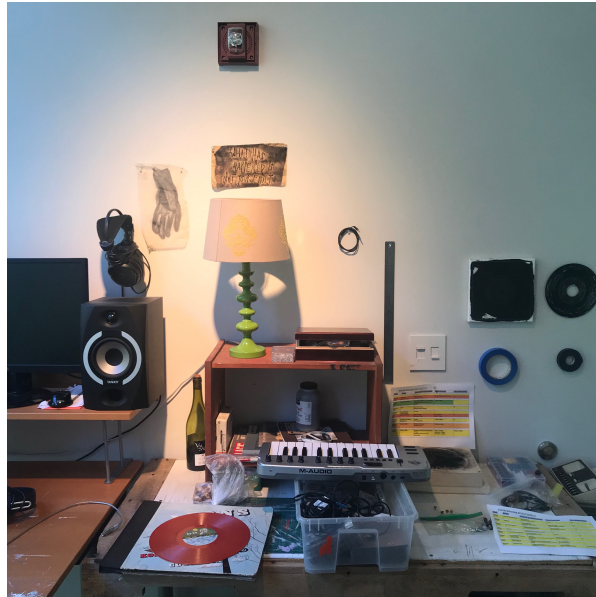


VisArts Studio Fellowship: An Interview with Alex Braden



Inside Alex Braden's studio at VisArts

Late at night, the 2nd floor of VisArts emanates with the reverberations of rotary telephones, televisions, and subwoofers from Alex Braden's mixed mod studio space. Alex Braden, the current VisArts Studio Fellow, is a sound artist and musician. He received a B.F.A. in Sound Art at George Mason University in 2012. During his fellowship, Alex is continuing to stretch the parameters of how sound can be experienced in the contemporary art realm. Braden's investigations include interactive installations that activate the senses and minds of viewer/listeners through the assemblage of sound and objects. He uses this medium to experience physical spaces, articulate social justice, explore the historical significance of daily life and gender roles, and to tap into streams of consciousness. As the Studio Artist Fellow at VisArts, Alex is working to create an immersive soundscape at VisArts from January 12, 2018, to February 11, 2018.

What is the difference between a sound artist and a musician?

A sound artist is less limited by the structure of music. Music has a certain set of elements: meter, melody, harmony, arrangement, etc. A sound artist can utilize those tools, but **he or she** is not obligated to. Sound is a very broad medium. Essentially, it's just vibrating molecules of air that interact with your ears. So you can do whatever you want as a sound artist. As a musician, you have to follow a few rules at a time—that's my opinion, anyway. Music is much more easily packaged—it has elements that are recognizable. Because I am both, I switch between them pretty easily, and sometimes the distinction fades. Somebody once told me that the difference between music and noise is that music is intentional, while noise isn't. However, I don't think that's necessarily the case; I think that sound art is totally subjective.

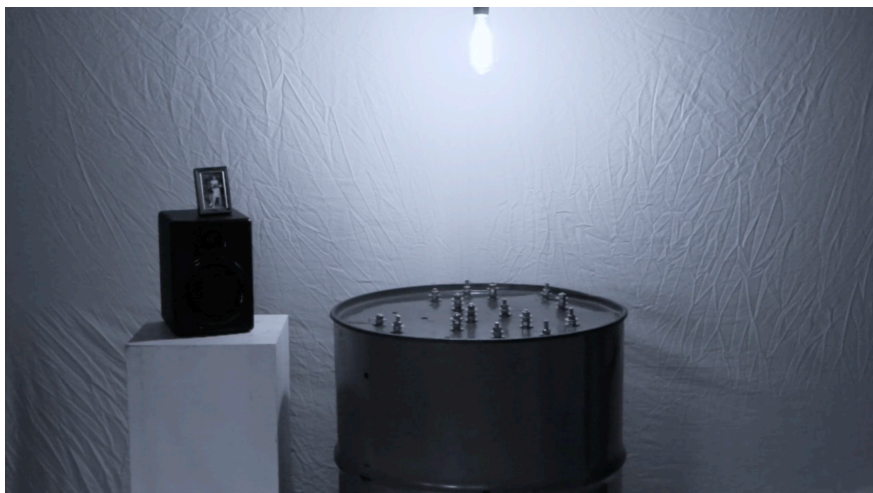
How do the objects that you use to generate sound fit within your concept? Do you choose them to enhance the message of your pieces?

Well, it really depends on the piece. What I like about working with sound is that it allows me to work across a variety of mediums. I have seen these sound installations in essentially an empty gallery—just white walls. You would think that there is nothing going on, yet the purpose of the installation is to try to eliminate any other sensory distraction, so you can focus on what is going on with your ears. The closest I have been to just experiencing sound was through an installation maybe five or six years ago at Civilian Art Project's old location in Chinatown. The room was so dark—you couldn't even see your hand in front of your face. I sat on something comfy and listened to this sound loop that went all day long. It was really enjoyable, but at the same time, that beanbag chair was a part of the piece, as well as the darkness. So, to try to answer your question, I really prioritize the object that is presenting the sound. You can't do a sound piece that does not involve some sort of assemblage. The sound itself is more than likely recorded with an array of objects, reminding you of something. But presentation provides context and experience. In my work, and specifically what I am going to do with my time as the VisArts Fellow, is to think hard about the way the sound is presented, the object, and the value of that object, as it relates to the sound itself.

I just want to make sure I'm getting everything, because you're speaking kind of softly 😊

I do that (smiling).

That's okay. So to expound on that, a piece that I was particularly interested in, *Nickel Ride*, is a piece inspired by Freddie Gray. Were the physical elements that created the sound a part of the message and the metaphor? Or were you focused on solely the physical sounds?



Installation view of Nickel Ride, 2016

<https://vimeo.com/204256003>

That piece has a lot of layers. I wanted to make a piece that made its own sound, and I wanted that sound to be physically activated by another sound. By putting the subwoofer inside the barrel, those frequencies were moving the barrel itself. Adding the hardware was a sonic choice. I was creating something that was very hard to endure: something that was very rickety. I wanted there to be as much physical evidence of something inside the barrel as possible within that aesthetic.

The barrel also reminded me of the material of a moving truck, or a paddy wagon. Freddie Gray had just been killed, and I was kind of working through that, I was thinking about what it might have sounded like from the perspective of the driver of the van, where Freddie Gray died. You got this body, that's chained up by hands and feet, essentially rolling around and hitting the sides of the van so violently that his neck breaks and he dies on sight, right? It seemed impossible to me, even over the roar of the engine, that the driver, and whoever else was in the van, couldn't hear that. Knowing what's going on and hearing that sound, it seemed impossible to me that that wasn't their intent.

Thinking about that, I really needed a base-heavy sound source in the subwoofer to create that discourse. I had been listening to Kendrick Lamar's record, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, for quite some time, and I was really impressed with his ability to enter the mainstream with some very aggressive truths. So in the barrel, I played the album on loop. That was also great too because the patterns of the pulses would change, so it became this very kinetic natural thing. I chose the other songs, that were played outside of the barrel, by Peggy Lee. One of the songs that I chose was 'Nickel Ride,' which is an old term that they used to describe the way Freddie Gray was killed. The song is also known as 'Rough Ride' which is meant to sarcastically mean a cheap ride, in which you might die. Peggy Lee's version of 'Nickel Ride' is translated into this beautiful summer moment, in which she meets a guy at a carnival and he buys her a ride on a Ferris wheel. Another song that is played over the vibrations of Kendrick Lamar is Peggy Lee's cover of a song originally called 'Weed Smoker's Dream,' renamed 'Why Won't You Do Right?' The implication for me was that in the era that it was written, when talking about somebody that smokes weed and the underlying racial implications, it seemed pretty obvious that Peggy Lee was appropriating that song. While she may not have had horrible intentions, the message contrasted to what was inside of the barrel. For me, it provided another level of tension.

When did you start to use your sound art as a channel for activism?

I can't claim activism. I honestly don't think that I am literate enough to be confident in saying something directly, I don't think I'm totally there yet. But I do try to use my work to investigate these things, and I try to learn. I try to do so as humbly as possible, because I am not 100% confident in my knowledge. That said, it is hard to create something for no reason. I do sometimes create things just to create something beautiful because there is value in that, but sometimes it's hard for me to be creating something that's beautiful when there is so much going on outside of my studio that need conversation and attention. Sometimes I feel guilty about that, and I struggle to find the appropriate balance in creating work for work's sake and trying to use my medium to accomplish something. When I first started getting into sound,

especially with music, I used it mainly to exorcise my own demons and to confront parts of my past and things that I struggle confronting in other ways. What I can do musically and with sound is more emotive, and honest. I do a lot of work inspired by my childhood and my upbringing. When I am writing music and lyrics, it comes out. I write a lot of songs for siblings, and for my family. But again, lamenting my own personal issues when I have had, by all accounts, a pretty decent life, often feels pointless. There are so many other bigger things happening that could use that air space.

Do you want people to be listening to your work or hearing it?

Both... It depends. I think that the difference between listening and hearing is pretty subjective. I had a piece where listeners stood on a subwoofer and listened to the piece around them, in this surround-sound situation, and initially, as far as the physicality of the sound, I wanted someone's feet to be really activated and their body to be vibrating with the sound itself, so that they were kind of immersed in it. Using that spherical surround sound set up I wanted them to be interacting with the piece visually. And they did. What was cool was that nobody who stood on this platform and with eight speakers around them actually *stood still*—it was almost instinctually. Your body would physically interact with the sound waves by absorbing the sound waves directly, inspiring movement. But the piece itself was a combination of musical and non-musical elements.

How do you see your work fitting into the history of sound art, or a contemporary historical context?

I try to be aware of what has happened before, mainly because I don't want to reproduce anything. There has been some really good sound work. In a contemporary setting, I am constantly channeling Shannon Carnath. She's amazing. Anytime I come up with something that I think is my own, I pretty much go to her website and check if she hasn't done it yet. Sound art as a documented art form, in a fine art gallery institution, is relatively young.

What are you working on at VisArts?

I am oscillating between a bunch of different ideas and projects, as well as thinking a good amount about the show in January. Overall, I am trying to condense some ideas into smaller forms by focusing on the objects which will omit sound. Currently, I am thinking about creative ways to modify the technology of rotary phones and TVs to present sound. A big part of being here is using the space to try to make some smaller works, but I also have come up with some ideas for installation-level works. I am also mixing, editing, and finalizing some sound compositions that I have been working on in the past year. I get halfway through something and then move onto the next thing, so I'm trying really hard to finish. Hopefully, I will have a cache of compositions that I can potentially install into one of these objects or present as a digital file. I also have plans to create a cylindrical piano, that will be played from the inside. I want it kind

of floating in a room, and I want it to be operated by a very small object, like a record player, or possibly interact with a Twitter feed, and would it rotate every time a certain word occurs.

How can you reach your hand inside of a tube to play it?

You don't: you put objects inside of it that strike when it rotates.

Oh okay, so kind of like a music box?

Kind of, the strings of the piano would be exposed, covering the outside.

Have you ever built instruments before?

I have, but I don't want to go there. There are some really amazing sound artists like Emily Francisco who build instruments and do it really well, but I don't see myself going down that road. I don't want to be an instrument-building sound artist because I am not going to do it well. I want to create a sound piece that makes its own sound but wouldn't be playable like an instrument. I want it to be self-sustaining, something that you would sit down and experience, not something that you would walk up to and play.

When did you transition from being a musician to a sound artist?

I was a sophomore in college. I started out as a jazz guitar major, but after taking an elective, I went over to the art school. I met some really cool professors, including Thomas Stanley, who at the time was teaching sound there. He introduced me to the idea of sound beyond music. It was under his guidance that I was able to get my B.F.A. in sound art. We put together an independent study program and created the major.

To see more of Alex's work, visit <http://alexanderbraden.com/>

About the VisArts Studio Fellowship: The VisArts Studio Fellowship provides a unique opportunity for a dynamic individual artist or collaborative artist team to create a new body of work, evolve an existing body of work, or develop a project in a stimulating, supportive environment over a **six month** period. Studio space is provided free of charge. Artists receive a \$500.00 per month stipend. The Studio Fellowship offers the gift of time and space to two artists and/or collaborative artist teams each year to experiment and realize new work. The VisArts Studio Fellows will present their work in solo exhibitions at the end of their respective fellowships.

-Noa West, VisArts Summer Intern, 2017