Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork by Byron Westbrook

Sound art as performance, choreography, and object.

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Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork’s work occupies a singular space at a nexus of visual arts and sound composition. With a multifaceted sphere of influences that includes textiles, club music, archaeoacoustics, and choreography, she has one of the most rigorous and unique practices in what is often termed sound art. Her work manifests as a generous space for audience exploration, where sculpture, sound, and interactive installation environments live and breathe in a symbiotic collaboration with viewer and architecture. Kiyomi Gork’s first East Coast institutional solo exhibition, Poems of Electronic Air (https://carpenter.center/program/jacqueline-kiyomi-gork-poems-of-electronic-air), at Harvard University’s Carpenter Center presents an expansive survey of her ideas and work. In the conversation below, I speak with her about concepts explored in the show, including participation, feedback systems, surveillance, choreography, and sonic forms as expressive metaphor.

—Byron Westbrook

Byron Westbrook
Something that I admire about your work is that it has the ability to be equally object-based and spatially immersive. There are things to imagine being contained by while exploring being contained, and one can pick or choose what to engage with. This concept of the container is a consistent thread throughout, and I’m interested to know more about your relationship to that idea.

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork
I remember being so frustrated with some of the first formal sound works I experienced in the early 2000s. It wasn’t the content of the sound; it was the context: white walls, black speakers, lots of dudes. In order to listen, I need two things: the desire to listen and to feel comfortable spending time in a place. I guess you could think of the container as a secure space for me. There’s something about being comfortable with the unknown that I find so important. I feel like I can only access that when feeling safe, not in an escapist way but a present kind of way, which is the only way for me to listen. It’s how I make sense of the experiential contradictions I feel all the time and a way to allow myself to drift between spaces as my body and attention desire.

BW
I once had an experience in an installation of yours where another viewer and I struggled to carefully navigate around each other within a narrow, silent structure, while a subtle buzzing noise played from a speaker. The work highlighted our movements and our awareness of our shared presence in a way that felt meaningful. It also implied a specific route for us to follow. I’m curious if you have thoughts on the work operating as a score for the audience?

JKG
Absolutely. I mean to me it’s a choreography, and a choreography can be a kind of score. I don’t really make scores ahead of time; I set intentions. I interpret my own version of Lawrence and Anna Halprin’s RSVP cycles when I need to. After I make the thing, I can see the score or structure and document it for future variations and installations. I used to create scores ahead of time, but it felt limiting to the possibilities where a piece could go once the physical space is active. There’s so
much unpredictability with acoustics and live sound systems; that’s the fun but also stressful part. Often I think of setting the software of an installation as a kind of performance. It’s in those moments that the installation becomes my instrument.


**BW**

Galleries can be challenging for sound works given that they are generally resonant spaces and not always ideal for conversation or amplified sound. I find it compelling that you’ve chosen to work in a way that is sonically subtractive by using materials that effectively remove from the space sound and the resonance of the physical presence of gallery visitors. What led you to work with these materials?

**JKG**

It all happened very organically. When I started working with sound twenty years ago, it was the immersive aspect of it that I found most compelling, the ability for the experience of the sound to guide my body. Visual-art spaces were what I had access to as an art student, so I had to modify the
space to achieve that through sound processing, speaker placement, and acoustic interventions. As a mostly visual art student, if I was to put something in the space, I needed that something to be a part of the whole thing. Over the last ten years it has become more conceptual with maintaining the necessary functional aspect. I keep thinking: What is being absorbed? What is the labor of that absorption? Who or what is controlling it? And how does that affect our experience? As bodies we are creators and absorbers of noise, sound and music, voice.

**BW**

I like how that relates to both the clothing and the inflatable sculptures. In addition to having a surface that reduces resonance in the space, the clothing feels like a proposed container for viewers’ bodies. The inflatables contain air, which is crucial to conducting sound, so they are bodies that gather and hold the key material to make sound. Both kinetic and potential acts of control are demonstrated at play.

**JKG**

Working with sound, I’m obsessed with how air moves and how sound waves interact cognitively and physically. It’s not as invisible as we think. The inflatables also create sound. The blower noise and kinetic movement of air inside of them are key components of the sound composition.
BW
Thinking more about addressing sound in galleries, I’m also curious about how you’ve incorporated feedback systems that harvest sound from the activity of the viewers within your installations. It’s really interesting to think about in terms of the history of sampling, as well as how it offers a sort of sonic mirror for the viewer to engage with.

JKG
I think of acoustics as a given equation I have to accept. It’s not so much sampling as about transposing, all in real time. There is a history of transposing soundscapes, including R. Murray Schafer’s idea of “schizophonia,” Maryanne Amacher’s City-Links, and many others. It’s also a way to create space that acknowledges the audience and that we are all active participants in public space. In grad school I studied archaeoacoustics. And I kept wondering, What if instead of looking at how acoustics impacted behavior in the past, how could the study be applied to the present and include microphones and sound systems as an extension architecture, thinking of all spaces as places of performance?

BW
I like the idea of the work being a semi-utopian space for study and inquiry, almost like a biosphere. I also wonder about your thoughts around the surveillance aspect of gathering sound from the audience? How did this methodology come about?

JKG
For me it’s all about a utopian-dystopian boundary, being trapped by escapism or something like that. I started working with live microphones and surveillance pretty early on. The second sculpture I made, in 2006, was a small geodesic dome that took sound from five microphones located in and around a warehouse, live-work gallery called LoBot in West Oakland. At the time I was living in a different warehouse and was pretty depressed. This sculpture was a way to be sonically present while physically isolated. Simultaneously, I was working at Free Radio Berkeley and playing around with pirate radio transmitters broadcasting ambient sound from my kitchen or bicycle. In my band, 0th, we used surveillance software to perform with as a way of turning technology onto itself, a way to experiment and play.

In 2009, I made Our Best Machines Are Made of Sunshine at Queens Nails Projects as a way to modify architecture and expand sensory perception. Using microphones, I tried to make the front wall of the gallery storefront disappear, to have the outside penetrate in, as a way to collapse or fold architecture. I was really into Sara Oppenheimer’s work and thinking how sound could function like that. Now it’s turned into an interest in self-surveillance. How does behavior and perception of space change when we become aware of the noise we make? There is also a massive history and current practice of using sound surveillance for control. Disrupting the hierarchy of the watched and the watcher is something important to me.
BW

In regard to the participatory elements that you incorporate, there’s potential for the viewer to unwittingly appear as a performer in the work. I’m wondering if you have thoughts on how those scenarios might fall into a category of audience labor versus agency?

JKG

That’s absolutely a goal. I want the audience to work. It’s passive work, though. I’m not asking them to push a button or download an app, just simply be present and listen. But I do realize that’s a lot to ask sometimes. I’m under the thought process that the architectures of institutions and galleries are spaces of performance. Voluntary or not.

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— Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork

BW
Another thing that comes up is an idea of proficiency and that there is something gained over time from the viewer learning the language of the work and becoming proficient in ways to “play” it, sort of like an instrument. I’m also thinking about La Monte Young’s relationship to duration and how he wants the viewer to calibrate to his environments over time. Do you see the work as having transformative potential?

JKG
Yes, I’ve always wanted my environments to make people more sensitive or aware of their own movement, their own choices. It’s one hundred percent an instrument. Maybe someone can learn about acoustics, but there’s not an agenda for that. And I sometimes purposely confuse the space by adding in moments that contradict the acoustics. I also consciously make my work pretty quick to experience because I like for the audience to be able to get an overview of the work within the first five minutes; then they can explore from there. I don’t like to be demanding on time.

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork: Poems of Electronic Air (https://carpenter.center/program/jacqueline-kiyomi-gork-poems-of-electronic-air) is on view at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, until April 7.

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Byron Westbrook is an artist and composer whose work has been presented at MoMA PS1 in New York City, ICA London, MOCA Los Angeles, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. He currently lives in Los Angeles where he hosts the monthly radio program Chromatic Fields on dublab. Westbrook’s work Translucents will be released by Shelter Press in 2024.

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