

word count: 1907

A Zone of Magnified Power: The Transformative Potential of Site-Specific Public Art Installations

by David Means

In the introduction to his book *The Transformative Vision: Reflections on the Nature and History of Human Expression*, art historian Jose Argüelles reveals that, “The problem of art, I slowly discovered, was inextricably involved with the problem of history, and the problem of history with the unfathomed depths of [one’s] own nature.¹ Initially trained as a painter, Argüelles grew weary of the constant need for newness. After leaving school he began to experience the world of the mid-1960s as a “strange and chaotic place that bore little resemblance to what I had known inside the university.... I slowly began to consolidate my thoughts and feelings about history...[and wrote] a brief paper...[announcing] the central themes of *The Transformative Vision*: history as a mythic cycle, transcendence of reason, and the visionary role of the artist.”² Argüelles’s concerns were shared by Robert Smithson, Michael Heitzer, and other visual artists who rejected the historical role of the museum in favor of large-scale earthworks in remote locations. More recently, some visual artists have replaced visual form with sound as the primary element of their work, and traditionally trained composers are rejecting the traditionally loaded setting of the concert hall in favor of a more direct form of reception found in sound art.

What began for Argüelles as a problem of history has resonated for many sound artists today as a challenge to transform the relationship between artist and audience through a variety of new strategies, including the creation of site-specific public artworks in remote spaces and natural environments. In Australia, Ros Bandt has used original, historical, and non-Western instruments to explore the resonance of a large, hollow, concrete cylinder five stories underground in the Collins Place car park in Melbourne.³ In the Netherlands, sound artists Mario Van Horrik and Petra Dubach transformed the tower of the Eindhoven train station into a vertical tramway for a “sonic cart” that gathers small sounds from

the building and the surrounding environment and amplifies them while traversing the exterior of the building. In New York City, artists Bill and Mary Buchen have created elegant sound playgrounds and parks where young people explore the nature of acoustics in creative environments.⁴ And in Minnesota, artist Leif Brush uses outdoor space as the context for his installations, which electronically monitor and acoustically orchestrate sounds of tree growth, wind, snow, sleet, rain, and other natural phenomena.⁵ In each of these projects, sound is the principal material and method for transforming the process of making and experiencing public art.

This article discusses some critical and aesthetic implications of a specific public art project by Dan Senn, a Tacoma-based composer and intermedia artist. Analysis of his project *The Catacombs of Yucatan Sound and Video Installation* reveals how the discovery, invention, and manipulation of sounds related to a site's cultural history and natural environment can transform the relationship between artist and audience and reestablish important aesthetic and cultural links to a broader public discourse on the nature of art and creativity.

The Catacombs of Yucatan

The Catacombs of Yucatan is the name of a limestone cave that was commercialized as a dance hall in 1934 in the hills separating Houston and Spring Grove, Minnesota. Until it succumbed to the hard times of the Great Depression, it attracted thousands of tourists. In 1995, Senn, who had spent many of his childhood summers near the cave, returned to undertake a major public art project. The residents of Yucatan (population 20) were skeptical of the project at first, but were won over by an editorial in the local newspaper. Fifteen hundred people showed up for the opening weekend. They came across fields and on the backs of tractors and represented every generation. Local residents and former employees of the dance hall mixed with experimental arts advocates from the Twin Cities. The whole occasion was a celebration. It was also a subversion. Senn did not present his project as art to the community. He focused instead on local nostalgia and historical interest in the cave. In this way he seduced an audience who would not normally have sought art in a gallery or museum setting

to interact with his experimental work and enjoy themselves in the process.

The structure of The Catacombs of Yucatan Sound and Video Installation and the materials Senn chose to use were directly inspired by the physical environment of the cave:

The first half of the cave descends 50 yards into the hillside to an intersection where two narrow rooms veer to the left and right. From here, a second and wider pathway descends sharply off to the right for another 50 yards, leading through two large chambers. The front half is characterized by a narrow path, high pointed ceilings and sound-absorbent surfaces. The second half features a wider path leading through the larger rooms, with reverberant surfaces...These features dictated the structure of the installation, in which discrete, sight-oriented materials with a sound component were located in the first half, and heterogeneous, sound-oriented materials with a sight component were placed in the second half. The midpoint served as a transition between halves.⁶

In Senn's installation spectators encountered a variety of time-based and space-defined viewing and listening experiences. Led by docents from a parking area to the site of the old dance hall foundations, visitors viewed a video made by Senn of local musicians performing appropriate dance music from the 1930s. Traveling further down a path to the cave entrance, they viewed, upon entering, five monochrome video monitors featuring former cave and dance hall workers recalling their memories of the place. Senn relied on the powerful images of these former workers and local residents to provide a cultural authenticity that matched the natural authenticity and environmental authority of the cave.

A constant balance between sound and visual elements informed Senn's concern for egalitarian access and aesthetic awareness. The overall sound environment included Senn's sound sculptures (self-activated constructions of metal objects and wire that created irregular tapping and tinkling sounds, articulating the natural acoustics of the cave) mixed with the voices from the videotaped interviews. The sculptures themselves exhibited a delicate notion of balance,

since the beaters (made from chopsticks suspended by monofilament) moved because of minute impulses from subharmonic electronic feedback loops: a chaotic pendulum mechanism. The physical principle is as intriguing as the sounds that were created. As viewers moved through the cave, they encountered shifts from the spoken sounds on the monitors to the acoustic and electronic sounds of the instruments, to the natural reverberation of the cave itself.

Balance was also a concern in lighting the cave space. As Senn explains, “Floor-positioned lights were used in the front half [of the cave] to push light upward toward video monitors placed on shelves, and gallery-like spots were placed in high positions to illuminate the sculptural instruments in the second half.”⁷

As they responded to the physical characteristics and ambient conditions of the site, Senn’s spectators took on a journey not unlike the hero in Joseph Campbell’s seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell’s notion of a “call to adventure” informs the journey of exploring Senn’s cave installation. One is reminded of Campbell’s hero “[going] forward until he comes to the ‘threshold guardian’ at the entrance to the zone of magnified power.”⁸ Senn’s heroes—whether local farmers informed of the event by word-of-mouth, or Twin Cities arts enthusiasts traveling to the site for the day—cross the catacomb’s threshold and enter into a labyrinth of visual and sound experiences. It is in the cave’s underworld of possibilities that the most powerful transformative leap is taken by Senn’s spectators. With care and consideration, Senn helps them experience a particularized past full of powerful meaning in the local individual and collective memories.

A Critical and Cultural Perspective

Stephen Wilson has written elaborately on the relationship of critical and cultural theory to art that uses emerging technologies. In his paper “Light and Dark Visions,” he surveys several themes from critical theory and cultural studies and suggests that some of the critical and cultural confusion that exists in the field of art and technology derives from the many different stances that artists have taken in the past regarding aesthetic issues. One stance, however, that serves to clarify

this confusion is when “[the artist] seeks to enter into the heart of the inventive process to help elaborate the culture transforming possibilities of the new technologies.”⁹

In its capacity to reproduce art endlessly, technology has also changed the ways in which art is viewed. In “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin notes that technology has decreased the importance of presence and “aura” in works of art.¹⁰ With the creation of *The Catacombs of Yucatan Sound and Video Installation*, Dan Senn restores the importance of presence and aura by transforming the role of technology beyond traditional venues of reception. In Senn’s work, technology is incorporated into a natural environment and emerges as an agent for negotiating a much broader meaning for the experience of the viewer-listener—one associated with an experience that is neither transportable nor reproducible.

Senn’s interest in the viewer-listener as a dynamic element in his work dates back to his active recruitment of concert audiences for new music while at the University of Illinois. There he delighted in distributing fliers to labor unions and retirement homes, believing that broad-based exposure to complex art would bring about a “human society [that] is irretrievably and positively shifted by what is true.”¹¹

The qualities Senn seeks in producing what he calls “ephemeral public art” are grounded in a nonelitist yet sophisticated sense of playfulness:

- The location of the event [is] unusual and curiously attractive.
- The proposed use of the location [performance or installation] [is] heretofore untried.
- Non-arts people volunteer their help, sometimes in large number.
- The event [is] free to the public and funded in advance.
- The art or performance [is] messageless and non-metaphoric.¹²

Senn believes “there is no correct audience for what is often misunderstood to be elitist art, experimental art, for non-metaphoric art is protean and expressive in ways which uniquely attach to any observer.... Yet, art which smartly plays the ‘fool’ can have a powerful impact on society for the simple

reason that its playfulness and unintended meaning allows for unrestricted and manifold interpretation.”¹³

With *The Catacombs of Yucatan Sound and Video Installation*, Dan Senn has awakened a renewed spirit of thought and adventure through a unique public art endeavor. His accomplishment is an inventive elaboration of new technologies and their cultural possibilities as art practice.

Postscript

The Catacombs of Yucatan Sound and Video Installation was shown in October 1995 as part of a McKnight Visiting Artist Fellowship administered by the American Composers Forum. A documentary video entitled *The Catacombs of Yucatan Sound and Video Installation* (ntsc vhs-hifi) is available for thirty dollars from Newsense Intermedium, 4218 North Cheyenne, Tacoma, WA 98407. *Catacombs Memories*, a subsequent gallery installation of video and sound materials from Senn’s project, was exhibited at the Leopold Hoesch Museum in Düren, Germany, where it received First Prize (\$10,000) in the biennial exhibition, *Paper 7: Electric Paper*. It will soon travel to Arizona State University in Tempe. Dan Senn’s projects and writings are on his Web site: www.newsense-intermedium.com.

Notes:

1. Jose Argüelles, *The Transformative Vision: Reflections on the Nature and History of Human Expression* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1975), 1.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
3. See Ros Bandt’s Web site: www.knm.com.au/bol or <http://farben.latrobe.edu.au/mikropol/gallery.html>.
4. See Sonic Architecture’s Web site: www.users.interport.net/~sonarc/playgrounds-parks.html#ps244.
5. See Leif Brush’s Web site: www.d.umn.edu/~lbrush/lbarchivesa.html.
6. Dan Senn, “*Catacombs of Yucatan Sound and Video Installation*,” *American Composers Forum Newsletter*, 23, no. 1 (1996).
7. *Ibid.*

8. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 77.
9. Stephen Wilson, "Light and Dark Visions: The Relationship of Cultural Theory to Art That Uses Emerging Technologies," *SIGGRAPH 92 Visual Proceedings: Art Show Catalog* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 1992).
10. Walter Benjamin, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1966).
11. Dan Senn, "Pendulum-based instruments, percussive video, sound art, and the permanence of ephemeral public art," *Organised Sound* 2, no.3: 160.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.