

INSTALLATION ART RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT:

You will give a presentation on an installation artist for this class. Look at the work of at least 10 artists on the list of Installation Artists (those highlighted). Choose one or two artists to focus on, especially exploring the process, materials, meaning of **one project**. Prepare a professional slide presentation. **Use these research questions as a guide**. Make a printed handout for the class. Have good images scanned or from web (if they are good enough). 10-15 min (Practice your delivery!)

ARTIST: BILL FONTANA

TITLE(S): HARMONIC BRIDGE; SONIC SHADOWS; WHITE SOUND – AN URBAN SEASCAPE; ACOUSTICAL VISIONS OF THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE; SONIC MAPPING; DESERT SOUNDINGS

1. How does the artist use the SPACE in a way that is different from an art “object”?

What is different about Fontana's work from other, more traditional art forms is that there is no tangible object to observe; rather, the object exists within the listener's mind. This means that each person may, and probably does, have a different idea of what his work “looks” like—the work is tailored to the individual. In this way, his work is more like music than an art object—in its abstraction, it means something different to each person.

Fontana uses the space in which his work is presented in different ways. Sometimes his pieces are site-specific, sometimes they are not. Some of his pieces have a visual component, and some do not. The space that really matters, however, exists not in the world but in the mind of the listener/viewer.

2. How is time used/needed to experience the work?

When experienced for the first time, it takes the listener a few minutes to understand what they are listening to. If this is achieved, it then takes a significant chunk of time more to fully appreciate the sound and to construct their own “sculpture” in their mind. Much of Fontana's work also deals with the passing of time in general, especially its cyclical nature: his pieces produce very specific sounds, but rarely do they change very much over their duration. This, in turn, distorts the listener's perception of the passing of time—how long has the sound existed in this way? How long have they been perceiving it?

3. What is the experience/role of the artist in making this work?

I think that Fontana would describe himself as a sort of magician: making tangible, at least abstractly, what cannot be perceived ordinarily (namely, acute sonic vibrations and accelerations). As an artist, his role is to draw attention to the hidden yet seemingly infinite world of unheard “music” that exists in the world.

4. What is the experience/role of the visitor/participant in this work? What type of audience would respond well to this piece?

The experience of the listener is initial confusion, hopefully followed by an “oh, wow!” moment, when they can wrap their head around what they are hearing. Something I really like about Fontana’s work is its accessibility—it means something to everyone. I think that an audience that is aware of its surroundings in everyday life would respond positively to the surprise of his work.

5. Is this piece compelling initially (visually, aurally, conceptually) if so, what makes it draw you in? What about it is original/ seductive/strange/etc?

There is a hurdle of subtlety to Fontana’s work that must be overcome in order to understand and appreciate it fully—it is possible to miss his work, as there is often no visual component. However, once the listener is able to focus on the sound that they hear, there is a definite element of “what is that?” that encourages them to dig deeper.

In my mind, Fontana’s work is wholly original—the idea of creating a work of art that isn’t really there by revealing a hidden sonic world is as strange as it is unique. It is a more subtractive process than making music or sculpting. The medium I find to be most similar is stone carving—both involve the process of drawing out something that is hidden in the natural world (though in stone carving, there is more creative freedom—the pietà doesn’t exist on its own and is simply invisible to humans, but rather a certain level of creativity was required to create it). However, Fontana’s pieces truly exist in the mind—not physically. I find this tremendously exciting.

6. Is there a certain amount of **conceptual depth** or complexity that allows a **sustaining** interest on the part of the viewer?

Yes, absolutely. Fontana’s work is highly conceptual, which initially demands a certain level of discipline from the listener. However, if this effort is exerted, the reward is highly sustaining.

7. Are there elements of **surprise** in which something new is revealed over time? Where something develops that you didn’t expect? This can occur by imaginative ways of handling the material or revealing a twist in the idea after it is well established, etc.

All of Fontana's pieces have an element of surprise—"that sounds like that?" By revealing what is ordinarily unheard, he surprises the listener with a new sonic landscape.

8. How is the work **resolved** in the way that makes sense for the project? The various themes and metaphors should pull together into a unified whole that makes sense.

While the concept behind and way in which Fontana's work is experienced may be abstract, it is by no means unobvious what he is trying to achieve—to reveal an unseen, unheard, and thus unknown world. Once the listener makes sense of what they are hearing and, sometimes, seeing, each piece speaks for itself.

9. What type of **commitment** does the artist show to the work? Skill Development, attention to detail, unified approach, etc.

Fontana's commitment is evident in his work—the sounds he captures are so focused and so specific that any ambient noise will compromise their effect, thus demanding an almost obsessive attention to detail. Furthermore, his pieces that are site-specific require painstaking calibration and tinkering in order to achieve their potential. Fontana takes this aspect of his work seriously, and dedicates the time and effort necessary.

Fontana's work, while remaining true to the medium of sound sculptures for over 40 years, has changed significantly. His current work is much more focused and fully-developed. Recently, his work with video has added another layer to his art, with which he continues to experiment.