

SITUATION EXCHANGES

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Ursula Nistrup and Duncan MacDonald

Anna Leonowens Gallery
Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University
Halifax, Canada

June 12–23, 2012

Curated by Trine Friis Sørensen

Situation Exchanges

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FOREWORD

Trine Friis Sørensen, curator

For anyone interested in conceptual art, Halifax in Nova Scotia holds an almost mythological status. From the late-sixties on, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) has been a hub for artistic activity especially for artists involved in conceptual art.

The Anna Leonowens Gallery, which opened in 1968 on Coburg Road and later moved to its current location on Granville Street, has hosted many exhibitions by conceptual artists over the years. These artists would often teach and engage with NSCAD students in different ways, and while the gallery today primarily shows NSCAD student work, it commemorates these past collaborations by welcoming several outside projects every year. This was the case when Bruce Barber curated the exhibition *Conceptual Art: The NSCAD Connection. 1967-1973* (1994) that reviewed conceptual art emerging from the Halifax scene.

In June 2012, the Anna Leonowens Gallery hosted the exhibition *Situation Exchanges*, a two-person exhibition with artists Ursula Nistrup and Duncan MacDonald. While *Situation Exchanges* is indebted to the history of conceptual art, it also—through the work of Nistrup and MacDonald—reflects how sensibilities are passed on, and how ideas transform over time and distance.

For some years, Danish artist Ursula Nistrup has been interested in the politics of places and situations she does not have immediate access to, be it buildings, art works, or even resonances.

Engaged with a notion of context-specificity, her works often explore imagined or projected sensibilities in relation to existing structures. Nistrup completed part of her MFA at California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles – another key institution within conceptual art. She had never been to Halifax before the exhibition.

Canadian artist Duncan MacDonald completed his MFA at NSCAD. Consequently, he is both familiar with the city of Halifax and, as an artist, evidently informed by the school's strategies and sensibilities. The strong presence of conceptual art has also urged MacDonald to take these thoughts in a different direction, however, to formulate a singular position for himself as an artist – not in opposition to the aesthetics of conceptual art but rather in an attempt to sound out his own understanding of conceptual aesthetics.

For this publication, Bruce Barber and Robert Bean, both professors at NSCAD, have contributed new essays that explore the sensibilities of the exhibition and the work of these artists.

I would like to thank Bruce Barber and Robert Bean for their contributions to this publication and for their invaluable support and hospitality in connection with the exhibition. Also a very warm thank you to Director Eleanor King and Exhibitions Coordinator Melanie Colosimo at The Anna Leonowens Gallery as well as the NSCAD community.

SITUATION EXCHANGES: Ursula Nistrup and Duncan MacDonald

Bruce Barber, artist and professor, NSCAD University

As part of NSCAD's 125th Anniversary, artists Ursula Nistrup and Duncan MacDonald present a two person exhibition that engages with notions of context specificity and the conceptual legacy of the school. Located in a former piano factory and showroom, the Anna Leonowens Gallery resonates within the history of conceptual art. The space invites attentiveness to both the logic and mechanics behind the making and showing of instruments, as well as the sounds they produce. (Exhibition Media Release)

If Francesco Conz¹ the late Italian art collector of prepared and decorated pianos were alive today he might be tempted to purchase the documentation and burned remains of Canadian artist Duncan MacDonald's *Piano Burn*. This iconic video of a piano alight in a field remains 'burned into' the viewer's consciousness for hours, days, even weeks after viewing, and would have found good company with the prepared pianos of Fluxus artists George Macuinus, George Brecht, John Cage and others in the Conz collection. Exhibited together with two piano based works in this exhibition by Danish artist Ursula Nistrup this destruction of a piano by MacDonald is representative of intrinsically conceptual and phenomenological approaches to art process, production

1 Francesco Conz of Verona, Italy had a collection of 40 pianos, most painted and prepared in various ways, many from Lettrist and Fluxus artists who used them in art projects and performances.
http://colophon.com/umbrella/conz_interview.html

and spectatorship. In such work, the Kantian noumenal (*das ding an sich*) is eclipsed by the phenomenal experience of being in the world and, with this, the complexity of multiform objects, architectural structures, social relations and exchanges between individuals and groups.

MacDonald and Nistrup's individual art practices share several important characteristics such as site specificity, truth to material, and self-reflexivity with the minimal and conceptual artists of the 1960's and 1970's. Their work also acknowledges the work of several contemporary artists whose work evidences a privileging of specific social contexts, particularly the everyday sites wherein the work is configured and subsequently read by viewers and/or participants who may also participate in its construction. This links their practice to neo-conceptualists and so-called 'relational' artists of the present such as Francis Alÿs and Liam Gillick. MacDonald's *Piano Burn* for example is exhibited in a former piano showroom and warehouse,² from a historically situated and cultural context into a landscape.... and to return as reproduction, ironically affirming the dynamic history of piano compositions from the medieval period, to the romantic and modern era, and one could say, from Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, to Jerry Lee Lewis' *Great Balls of Fire*. According to MacDonald this work "is one of several attempts at researching the value attached, historically and currently, to the presence of pianos in daily life." "Historically," he writes, "pianofortes can be tightly linked to the extension and colonization of Empires, namely of France and Italy. The natural resources (ivory, semi-precious stones, exotic woods, etc.) associated with the construction of early pianofortes, clavichords and harpsichords map out enculturation on a geo-economic scale that was later made audible in the courts of royalty in Europe." "However", he asks, "in the 21st century, what are the roles and functions of pianos? Are they a sort of residual icon of yesteryear connoting culture? Are pianos the trophy of the bourgeoisie (having gained their importance and place through the advent of the Concert Hall – the greater good for the greater number)? I am trying to draw such questions from my audience."³

2 There is some debate about the widespread belief that Anna Leonowens Gallery formerly housed a piano factory and showroom. Archival photographs in an index of advertisers from 1871 Halifax reveal the presence of Haggarty's Musical Warehouse, 98 Granville Street, specializing in English Piano Fortes and Peiler, Sichel & Co., pianoforte and organ purveyors at 127 Granville Street several doors further south of the present location of Anna Leonowens Gallery. However, given the Granville Street number changes over two centuries, it is entirely possible that one of the pianoforte purveyors migrated north along the street.

3 Email interview Nistrup and MacDonald, 2013



Fig. 1 MacDonald, *Piano Burn* (2012)

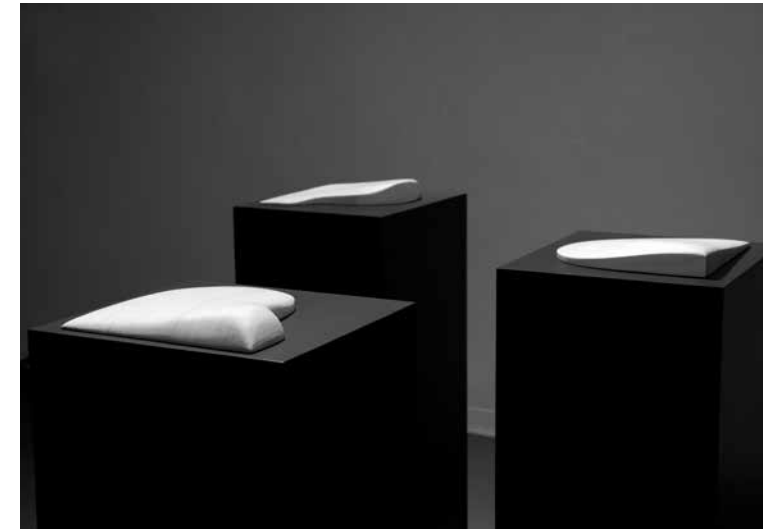


Fig. 2 Nistrup, *Three Non-Standard Resonances* (2012)

Both Nistrup and MacDonald are graduates from schools (CalArts and NSCAD respectively) that have strong links with conceptual art of the 1970's hence their interest in the historical and theoretical foundations of this critical period of late modernist art.⁴ This is apparent in the several piano themed works in the exhibition that are site-specific and conceptually driven propositions. Duncan's previously mentioned *Piano Burn* and Ursula Nistrup's *Three Non-Standard Resonances* (2012), especially produced for this exhibition, consist of three models of sound boards made of spruce woods from the German Alps that were also used in the making of Stradivarius violins. Each carefully handcrafted board was shaped for a graduated thickness and acoustic property thus analogically modifying the resonance of each piano. This work reads as an homage to Marcel Duchamp's iconic *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913), a meditation on the arbitrariness of measure.⁵ A century later Nistrup inverts the standard to a negative "non-standard" to affirm ironically the importance of variation within/without the norm. The three pieces were displayed on a very minimal looking grey plinth that further enhanced the irony of this work in the hallowed spaces of NSCAD historically identified as a minimalist and conceptual art school.

4 This is also the interest of the author who curated an historical exhibition *Conceptual Art: The NSCAD Connection 1967-1973* (ALG Catalogue)

5 Duchamp described this work thus: "This experiment was made in 1913 to imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance, through my chance. At the same time, the unit of length, one meter, was changed from a straight line to a curved line without actually losing its identity [as] the meter, and yet casting a metaphysical doubt on the concept of a straight edge as being the shortest route from one point to another." (Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., *Marcel Duchamp*, exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia Museum of Art 1973, p. 273-4)

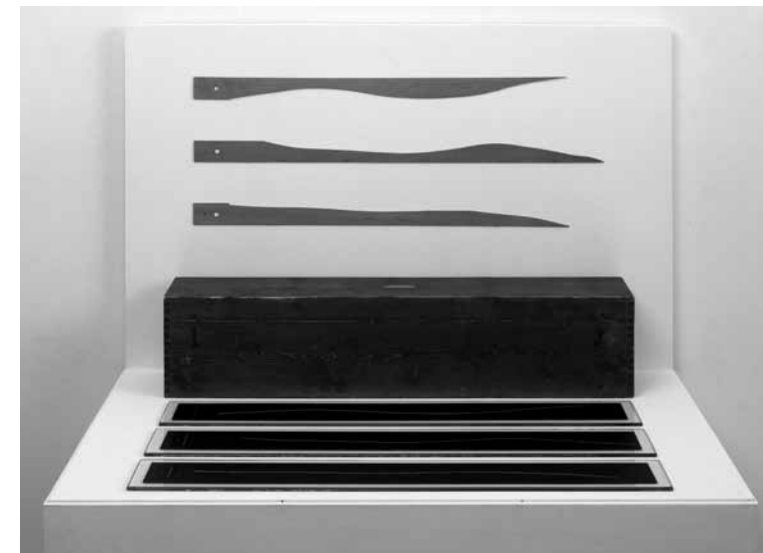


Fig. 3 Duchamp, *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913) © Tate, London 2013

An accompanying work, Nistrup's intriguing split screen video *Audible Tuning* (2007), shows two grand pianos being separately tuned to concert pitch, one for the note A equaling 440 Hz, and the other pitched to 436 Hz. As Nistrup writes in her explanation: "This second value is generated from the average of the different values that historically have been used for piano tuning"⁶ – and one could add, provides the value-laden ground for this cultural critique. This work documents a performance installation produced at the Music School of the California Institute of the Arts in 2006. The recording of the two pianos being tuned overlap in time and space simultaneously providing an audio montage of differing sound assonance and dissonance and an ensemble of differentiated audio cues. The standard and non-standard pitches convey a historical register of various piano tunings valued at different times in history, thus providing an allegory of musical taste.

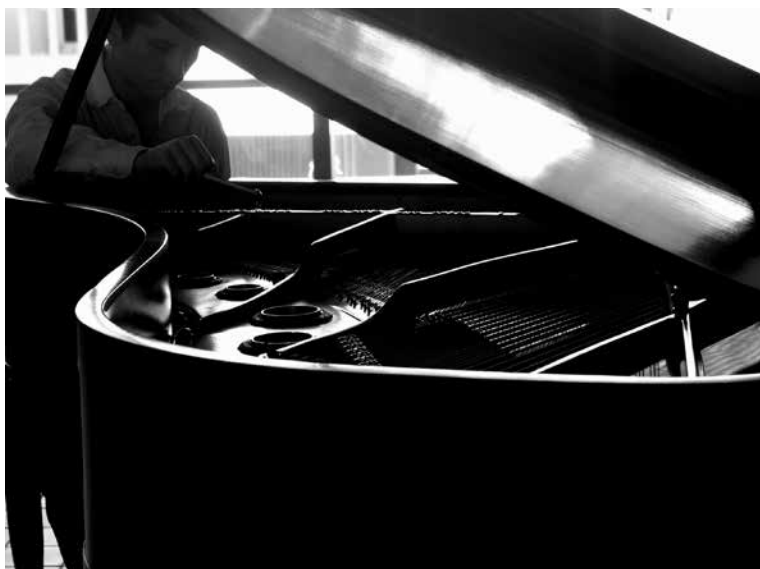


Fig. 4 Nistrup, *Audible Tuning* (2007)

⁶ Ursula Nistrup, *Audible Tuning*, exhibition statement, 2007

This trilogy of vibrations includes another subversive homage to the chance processes of Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* that result in the renouncing of this historical connection between Stradivarius and Duchamp.

MacDonald's piano works similarly challenge our understanding of the conventional musicality of instruments while reinforcing the importance of the encounter and aural privileging (after Russolo and Cage) of everyday sound. For example his *Invisible Piano* (2003) was produced while he was studying in the graduate program at NSCAD University, first as a performance and subsequently as a vinyl recording. The work involved the playing of several piano compositions written by the artist and designed for performance in a concert setting. When performed before an audience during the first half of the performance the lights were turned on and the second half the lights extinguished, thus diverting the authority – hegemony of the visual to the subordinated aural sensitivities of the ear. The corollary to this extinction of light and visual acuity during the performance takes place with the condition of the dubbed vinyl that degrades over time thus resembling the performance itself once darkness produces difficulty for the pianist in both the reading of the composition and playing of the piano keys. The audience's listening and enjoyment of the scores interpretation is also compromised by this darkness. MacDonald's work is in the company of Canigiullo's *Luce!* (Lights!) performance (1919) an early example of a Futurist *sintesi* (synthetic theatre) that places the audience in darkness until persistent calls of "lights ... lights! ... lights!" from audience members succeed in producing a cacophony and the lights are turned on to end the performance. These works affirm the phenomenological audio/visual experience for both the performer and audience.



Fig. 5 MacDonald, *Invisible Piano* (2003)

The subordination of the material to the concept is evident in many works by Nistrup and MacDonald. For example, MacDonald's succinct description of an earlier piano piece *Birch Music for Player Piano* (2000), is "an interactive sound work that involves the transcription of patterns from a piece of birch bark onto a player piano roll." The artist continues to explain that "the outcome is a chance-operation where the piano "plays" the tree."⁷ And Nistrup's *Seeking Brahms with Strings* (Paris, July 2009 – ongoing) consists of the artist appealing to the public through various forms of media to play/perform/reproduce an enigmatic piece by Johannes Brahms in various public spaces. In this work pianist Trami Nguyen performs three voices of the Brahms's opus individually which are then recorded and played back together through three mono-aural speakers from three separate walls in the exhibition space, thus reinforcing the phenomenal experience of audio tectonics in the architecture.

Paris is also a productive city for MacDonald who drew a series of sketches while researching the history of the pianoforte and its connections to the European colonization of Africa. This research resulted in a work titled *L'Afrique* (2005).

As both artists are aware, pianofortes figure prominently in the history of music, visual art, literature, and even in political economy. For example in Karl Marx's *Grundrisse*, the piano is



Fig. 6 Nistrup, *Seeking Brahms with Strings*, Riga (2012)



Fig. 7 MacDonald, *Birch Music for Player Piano* (2000)



Fig. 8 MacDonald, drawing from *L'Afrique* (2005)

⁷ Duncan MacDonald, NSCAD MFA Graduate Thesis, 2000

used to discuss the labour theory of value. What values, Marx questions rhetorically, do we assign to the production of the piano? Whose labour values do we privilege ... that of the piano's designer, the hewer of the wood, the maker of the iron frame, the producer of the strings and felt-hammers, or the procurer of the elephant's tusks? Marx carefully negotiates which values to assign the owner of the means of production, the distributor of the staple materials – wood, iron, copper, felt, ivory – and attempts to distinguish between the work values of the designer and builder(s) of the piano and the composer/author of the piano scores as compared to the pianist/interpreter of these scores. But how does one assign value here? Whose labour should we privilege? And what of the piano burner (desecrator) of the piano, or the piano deconstructor herself? Some staples theorists, Harold Innis, the Canadian social historian for example, would privilege the originary materials and their owners and, by extension, the Empire designers and builders, the technocrats and dynasts. And of course Capitalism, the so-called 'free enterprise' system has the answer to all of these questions of value: it is simply – perhaps irrevocably – what the market will bear! Value therefore becomes relative, provisional, and perhaps quixotic. It can be assigned and reassigned ad infinitum.

For Marx this realization presented something of a conundrum that led him to distinguish between productive labour and reproductive – hence non-productive (in the strictly economic sense) – labour. Accordingly his passage in the *Grundrisse* reads:

Is it not crazy Mr. Senior, that the piano maker is a *productive* worker, although the piano would be absurd without the piano player? But this is exactly the case. The piano maker reproduces *capital*; the pianist only exchanges his (sic) labour for revenue. But doesn't the pianist produce music and satisfy our musical ear; does he not even to an extent produce the latter? He does indeed: his labour produces something; but that doesn't make it *productive labour* in the economic sense; no more than the labour of a madman who produces delusions is productive. *Labour becomes productive only by producing its opposite.*⁸

8 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse Foundations of a Critique of Political Economy* (Rough Draft) trans. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1973, p. 305

MacDonald and Nistrup's piano based works take these politico-philosophical reflections to another extraordinary register by insisting that their works may exist allegorically in their absence – invisibility – through the agency of fire, and the interstices of mathematical reasoning and sonic equivalences provided by the piano tuning process, here further abstracted for our critical apperception and physical enjoyment.

This level of complexity attends the work of both artists. Nistrup and MacDonald's sonic projects are visual analogues of audio signals – a form of audio imaging – through various conceptually based site-specific projects. MacDonald's *Chromaphone* transforms the soundscape of visitors encountering the gallery space into colour changes projected by a movement sensitive light projector. In a sense this synesthetic work echoes the earliest examples of synesthesia, such as the innovative audio imaging experiments of the 17th century Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher (1602 – 1680) among whose extraordinary inventions included a magnetic clock, an organ for playing colours providing a codex of colour-to-sound signals, and even a Katzenklavier (Cat Piano) that, by playing the piano hammers to the cats tails, would elicit different pitches in sound.

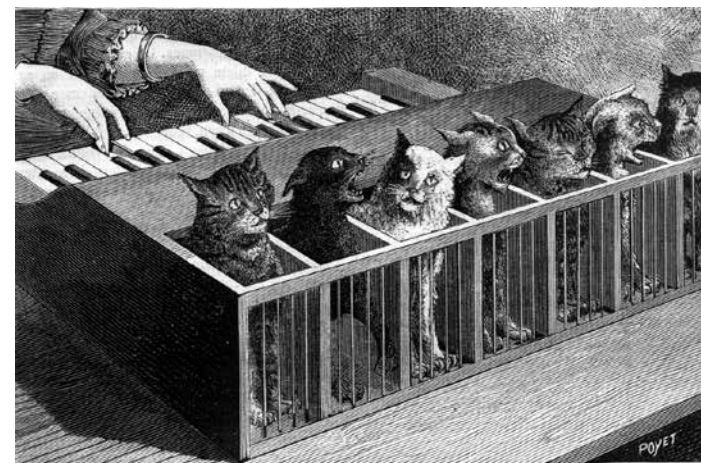


Fig. 9 Kircher, Katzenklavier from *La Nature* (1883)

Nistrup's art practice is marked by site-specific audio projects traversing several continents, including one proposed in 2010 as a response to the museum as an abstract entity – the Museo de Arte, Sacramento, Mexico by artist Mario Garcia Torres. The work is based on the Canadian pianist and composer Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North* (1967) in which Gould composes and conducts an aleatory piece derived from spoken sentences in an interview, the words analogically representing various orchestral instruments in the composition. In her proposal for this work Nistrup determined that four visitors to the museum (one interested or invested in architecture, one in urban planning, one in story telling, one in film) would whistle their responses to entering the space of the museum at an appointed time and place. The artist's directive stated that the whistling performance was to be recorded for subsequent depositing in the museum and, together with the artists' written proposal that true to conceptual propositions, constitutes the work as such.

In several works Nistrup and MacDonald pay discreet homage to key works from the contemporary canon. Such is the case with Nistrup's *40 years of displaced Asphalt Rundown* that critically acknowledges the famous entropic *Asphalt Rundown* work of Robert Smithson. The physicist P.W. Bridgeman notes: "Like energy entropy is in the first instance a measure of something that happens when one state is transformed into another." Interpreting Bridgeman's statement in a famous essay, Robert Smithson wrote:

We are unable to experience time and likewise change of which time is a function via a reception of energy transformation to and/or loss from one substance to another. Time can be looked at abstractly; that is we can set up arbitrary units by which to make measurements of it, but *our experiences of it depend on our perception of energy change* (emphasis added).⁹

The American sculptor Robert Morris and the novelist Thomas Pynchon, whose activities as a writer in many ways parallel Smithson and Morris as artists, also shared Smithson's inter-

est in entropy. In his novels and short stories, one actually titled *Entropy*, Pynchon represents a world in the throes of entropy, his protagonists either submitting to it willingly or resisting at every opportunity. In the most general terms entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, is concerned with the fate of energy – of objects, individuals, societies and the world, and as such would be of interest to artists like Pynchon and Morris and arguably more recently, by artists of the 21st century. In their own way, these artists are attempting to discern or establish the patterns that their culture is assuming.

Consisting of ten photographs, the following text accompanies Nistrup's work:

In 1969 Robert Smithson completed the first version of his work Asphalt Rundown in the south of Rome. In 2011 I visited the city and found an archive with material that had accompanied this event. I found a slightly out-of-focus map indicating the place where the event had taken place. With the map I set out to find the site and how the passing of 40 years had contributed to the work's entropic processes.

Although the work acknowledges the iconic work of another artist negotiating the zeitgeist, Nistrup infuses it with her own sensibility, a type of subtle affirmation in the Duchampian sense of a 'rendezvous with a readymade' which then is 'made over' to impose its new context and generated meanings on the viewer, who knowingly participate in the acknowledgement of contemporary art history, theory and its subversion into a new art practice, and both acknowledges and disavows the edicts of the past.

For both artists, sound provides a powerful entry into the public sphere and an affirmation of *vie quotidien*. For MacDonald music can be made from an assisted passage through a revolving door,¹⁰ and for Nistrup listening can be compared to "getting lost" as she writes: "When listening, similarities can be found that suggests "getting lost" is not just a product of a visual experience, rather a furthering of a spatial experience which can have extensive aural qualities."¹¹

¹⁰ *Musicbox Revolving Door*, by Janis Demkiw, Cory Lund and Duncan MacDonald, Toronto, April–May, Metro Hall

¹¹ Ursula Nistrup, *I Thought I Heard Something* (2010)

⁹ Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments" *Art Forum*, June 1966



Fig. 10 MacDonald, *MusicBox Revolving Door* (2004)

Chance encounters are valued for their audio signs and opportunities for (dis-) simulation. A detour can be a prelude to an audio phonic arrival and a passage to a musical composition through aleatory means. This use of chance compositions has a long and venerable history stretching back to Futurist Luigi Russolo one of the giants of modernity who along with Marcel Duchamp is celebrating the centenary this year of his “Manifesto of Noises” published in 1913. In this same year Marcel Duchamp’s “happy idea” to upend a bicycle on a kitchen stool and watch it turn, inaugurated the readymade.

MacDonald’s *White Picket Sound Fence*, (2008) a site-specific audio art installation with performative elements was exhibited at a public library and art gallery in Grimsby, Ontario. The artist researched eight years of meteorological data from the Niagara region, a key fruit and wine producing area. Visitors to the library gallery were encouraged use sticks to “play” the white picket fence, providing some powerful memories of childhood actions, not to mention perhaps television programs and films. The artist subsequently observed, “When several people play the piece simultaneously, the work sounds a bit like rainfall.”¹²



Fig. 11 Nistrup, *Whistling While Walking through Charamarende Castle* (2009)



Fig. 12 MacDonald, *White Picket Sound Fence* (2008)

¹² Duncan MacDonald, *White Picket Fence*, statement, www.duncanmacdonald.ca, 2008

Translation also figures prominently as a theme in the work of both artists. For example in *Aluminum Drop* (2010) MacDonald undertook an audio recording of his dropping of an aluminum rod and after this was accomplished, imported this into an audio computer program that translated the sound into a sonic waveform and was subsequently rendered by a CNC lathe into an aluminum sculpture, the very material with which it began. For the artist, this recalled the self-reflexive conceptual strategies Robert Morris utilized in his *Box With the Sound of its Own Making* (1961).



Fig. 13 MacDonald, *Aluminum Drop* (2010)

Nistrup's elegant *Images Read as Sound* (2003) parallels the conceptual translation and self-reflexive strategies of MacDonald, Morris, and, in her case perhaps, the work of Michael Asher, an influential teacher at the California Institute for the Arts where she studied. In this work she employed looped 35 mm slide film, a small direct current motor, a sound to light unit, an amplifier unit and two speakers. The various densities of light in the 35mm images provide varying acoustical properties that *in situ* corresponded to changing sounds emerging from adjacent rooms.



Fig. 14 Nistrup, *Images Read as Sound* (2003)

In 2009, Nistrup proposed an as yet unrealized work. Titled *Towards a Different Understanding of Acoustics*, her text aimed to “investigate and shape an extra scientific understanding of acoustics” away from the programmatic discourse of physics “into spheres of activity such as music, architecture and human behaviour itself in order that perceivers may experience acoustics in a non-scientific way.”¹³ The artist understands this in philosophical terms as a counter to the western hegemony of the visual that, through her work as a whole, reinforces the thesis proposed by Martin Jay in his book *Downcast Eyes*.¹⁴

In response to several questions regarding their interest in linguistically driven propositions both artists offered candid responses that link their concerns to those of conceptual art. MacDonald for example suggests:

The de-materialization of the art object and Conceptualism have paved the way for artists to really open up Sound as a form. I have come to realize that my work is very process-heavy, not particularly conceptual in the true sense of the term. The ways in which I attempt to make meaning with art is largely a story about the making of things – videos, sounds, drawings, installations, etc. For me, a concept is the starting place for an idea, something that has to be worked on for at least a couple years until it comes into fruition as a finished artwork.¹⁵

Nistrup echoes MacDonald with her detailed response to the question of conceptual origins. “Each time I make a work I somehow develop the concept and then the medium that will reflect the idea best is used. Sound became for me a tool through which I could work with the point where something has a physical presence and simultaneously does not exist.” Both artists explore absences that initiate a presence and vice versa; a visible/invisible that we know from Michel Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic*¹⁶ is an appropriate state of absolute awareness that may be socially framed. As in his discussion of the origin of medical invention such as the stethoscope, often a discrete yet finite event will provide a stimulus for another event that provides a catalyst for innovation and perhaps change. Such was the situation with

the invention of this quintessential medical device. As Foucault argues, with changing social attitudes a male physician placing his ear on a woman’s breast to detect a heart murmur was considered inappropriate, the only means to maintain propriety for the prognosis was to extend the listening apparatus to maintain a measured distance from the body.

Many examples of Ursula Nistrup’s work explore liminal spaces and autochthonous situations: absence/presence, the visible/invisible and something being formed from its originating space/place. *Drafts* (2007) consisted of the artist identifying a fissure at the base of a wall in a room from which a constant draft emanated, then setting up a simple ‘empirical’ device, a hanging pastel that in accordance with the differing amplitude of the draft, made autonomous marks on sheets of paper, twelve in all. This work is similar to an earlier work *Audible Drawing* (2003) that also used air passing over a receptive recording device: in this case an audio speaker with a paper mask coated with colour pigments that would, according to changing pressure and amplitude provided by the amplifier, make marks.



Fig. 15 Nistrup, *Audible Drawing* (2003)

¹³ Ursula Nistrup, *Towards a different understanding of acoustics*, www.nistrup.com/towards.html, 2009

¹⁴ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press, 1994

¹⁵ Email interview with Nistrup and MacDonald, 2013

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, London: Tavistock Publications 1973

The work of Duncan MacDonald and Ursula Nistrup traverses many theoretical historical and critical junctures with respect to site-specific audio installations and situational exchanges, and in this essay I have only begun to scratch the surface of their exchanges between NSCAD and CalArts, the U.S., Canada and Denmark, Copenhagen, Brock and Halifax. The author is particularly happy that this exhibition was partially inspired by NSCAD's history and its important role in the formation of the conceptual art movement through the decade 1970 to 1980. Nistrup and MacDonald's work acknowledges the signal importance of this formative period within late modernism and reinforces the best of this critical thinking into the present.

LISTENING, READING, LISTENING

Robert Bean, artist and professor, NSCAD University

There is always something to listen to.¹

Samuel Beckett

The artwork of Duncan MacDonald and Ursula Nistrup considers histories of sonority, listening and Conceptual art in ways that evoke intersensorial experiences and readings. Following in the footsteps of others is inevitable and both artists have taken care and pleasure in their enactment of quotation. John Cage made numerous works that cited and celebrated the authors, musicians and artists that had a significant influence on his practice and thought. Engaging chance operations and conceptual frameworks, his creative process dispelled assumptions regarding innate artistic genius for intuitive gestures and an irreversible and insightful experimentation with music, sound and listening. His vocation is acknowledged and celebrated in the contemporary works that comprise the exhibition *Situation Exchanges*.

When I encountered *Situation Exchanges* installed at the Anna Leonowens Gallery in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I was captivated by the synaesthetic relationships that were established between listening, looking, touching and reading. The exhibition offered a complex assemblage of events where the flow of meaning and experience would coincide.

In one respect, containing sounds within a gallery contravenes the odorous nature of sound, what Steven Connor has referred to as "expansiveness and leakiness".² This observation was well understood by Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter when they developed their analysis of *acoustic space* in 1955. For McLuhan and Carpenter, acoustic space has origins in

¹ Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, trans. Janey Tucker (Leiden: Academic Press Leiden, 1995), 155

² Steven Connor, "Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art" in *Sound*, ed. Caleb Kelly (London and Cambridge MA: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2011), 129

oral traditions, privileges non-linear perception and is analogous to the ubiquitous sensorial effects of electronic culture: “Auditory space has no point of favored focus. It’s a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment”.³

Making sound visible

Martin Jay uses the neologism *ocularcentrism* to describe the dominance of vision over other sensorial perceptions in the historical production of knowledge in Western culture.⁴ Prosthetic optical technologies such as telescopes, microscopes and the camera have contributed to the discursive formation of disciplinary regimes associated with surveillance culture and the “Society of the Spectacle” theorized by Guy Debord.⁵ The ongoing preoccupation with the discourse and critique of vision in Western culture has diminished other sensorial explorations and observations. Understanding that vision, touch and auralities engage inclusive and complex intersensorial experiences that art unfolds provide better options for experiential interpretation. For Connor, sound art within the gallery enacts the encounter of acoustic space as well as an alternative to the linear reductions of ocularcentrism:

“Sound art is the gallery turned inside out, exposed to its outside, the walls made permeable, objects becoming events. Sound art is the most potent agency of that attempt to dissolve or surpass the object which has been so much in evidence among artists since Dadaism in the 1920s. And yet, the gallery or museum seems to provide a kind of necessary framing or matrix, a habitat or milieu in which art can fulfill its strange contemporary vocation to be not quite there.”⁶

Attentive listening and reading is what the work of Duncan MacDonald and Ursula Nistrup require of their audience. I hear myself listening to what listening sounds like, what listening looks like and what listening feels like. This form of listening

induces a practice of reading, an encounter with other sensorial experiences, objects and networks of relationships that configure a complex matrix of potential experience that will surpass recent ‘art world’ trends in relational aesthetics. When is relational and the social art practice actually embedded in everyday life? What is the device that validates this conjecture? Can the habitus of everyday life subsist in a globalizing art system? This understanding of context accords with Pamela Lee’s description of “the work of art’s world,” a distinction that moves beyond the historical framework of the ‘art world’. By shifting the rhetorical and historical context it is possible to distinguish where art resides in a globalizing and hegemonic culture. “For to speak of ‘the work of art’s world’ is to retain a sense of the activity performed by the object as utterly continuous with the world it at once inhabits and creates ...”⁷

I am sitting by an open window and I hear the voice of a woman reprimanding her dog. Neither the woman or the dog are visible:

*we do not go on the road!
you must learn to listen!*

The absurdity of a human telling a dog that they must *learn to listen* is obvious. Dogs are always listening and the physiological abilities of their ears are far superior to human hearing. In this context the difference between listening and hearing is enmeshed in a network of situated histories that infers domestication, inter-species play and learned behavior. The relationship between the dog and human is curiously reciprocal. As Donna Haraway notes, “... how *do* dogs and people learn to pay attention to each other in a way that changes who and what they become together?”⁸ Both the human and the dog are participating in a mutual process of learning recognizable behaviors. The dog has an innate ability to read human behavior, a form of attentive listening that the human and the animal share with one another. This may be a clue to how we ask questions about our own experience with auralities.

³ McLuhan, Marshall, and Edmund Carpenter. “Acoustic Space” in *Explorations in Communications: An Anthology* ed. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 65-70

⁴ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3

⁵ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red Press, 1977)

⁶ Connor, 137

⁷ Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 8

⁸ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 208

“Perhaps we never *listen* to anything but the non-coded, what is not yet framed in a system of signifying references, and we never *hear* [entend] anything but the already coded, which we decode.”⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy questions the difference between listening and hearing as a function of attention and signification. This observation references concerns that both Roland Barthes and John Cage comprehended. For Barthes, the notion of an *obtuse meaning* emerges in his analysis of film stills from Sergei M. Eisenstein’s film *Ivan the Terrible*. The obtuse meaning is discontinuous with narrative and metalanguage. It is a signifier that resists signification and has the attributes of disguise: “. . . the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, . . .”¹⁰ John Cage understood listening and composing as experiential and sensorial phenomena. Many of his compositions relinquish the hierarchies of artistic control. Through the use of chance operations in composition as well as offering strategic decisions to the performers of a composition, Cage ensured that these compositions would test received ideas about art, aurality and listening. His composition *Fontana Mix* (1958) is potentially interminable. Every realization of this score will be unique and different, a heterogeneous composition that is analogous to the acoustic space that sound inhabits in human perception. The work sanctions the obtuse meaning.

In the work *40 Years of Displaced Asphalt Rundown* by Ursula Nistrup the journey and gesture of quotation is particularly complex. Following in the path of Robert Smithson, Nistrup travels to the initial location of Smithson’s *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), south of Rome. Her archaeological and archival pilgrimage attempts to locate, observe and document the “entropic processes” that the artwork has endured since the pour was completed. Smithson considered his *flows* and *pours* as “entropic made visible”¹¹ and was primarily interested in their collapse “after the truck pulls away”¹².

Smithson may never have fully anticipated how his *flows* would result in subsequent flows of interest during a period of

artistic entropy that he helped to critically initiate. In this case I am referring to Nistrup’s doubled quotation of Robert Smithson and Tacita Dean, a gesture of reading that implies the accumulated stratification of time and history that both Smithson and Dean engage in their practice. In *Trying to find the Spiral Jetty*, 1999, Tacita Dean also pursues a mythical pilgrimage to one of Smithson’s entropic earthworks. Using the detailed instructions written by Smithson to locate the Jetty at Rozel Point Utah, the resulting artifact is Dean’s audio art documenting her failed attempt to find the *Spiral Jetty*; an artifact of collapsed intention. Dean acknowledges Smithson as “. . . an important figure in my working life, not because I depend on him in any way, but because his work allows me a conceptual space where I can often reside. Artists don’t talk about this very much, because it is extremely difficult to describe. It’s like an incredible excitement and attraction across time: a personal repartee with another’s thinking and energy communicated through their work.”¹³ This observation by Tacita Dean addresses the form of listening and perception associated with the non-coded experience that Jean-Luc Nancy and Barthes refer to above. Although the pilgrimage failed in locating the *Spiral Jetty*, it allowed for a subsequent creation based in listening and reading.

Situation Exchanges provides a discerning opportunity for listening and sound to be visible, a banquet of intersensorial experience that navigates architecture, landscape, things and sounds. A sea shell perched on the tone arm of a turntable absurdly plays the surface noise from a vinyl recording titled “Silence”, the haptic beauty of time embedded in the grain of wood signifies the acoustic properties of natural materials, tuning and detuning pianos explore aural possibilities that exist beyond convention and the translation of sound waves from recordings of childhood utterances into wooden dowels replicates the most fundamental song that a parent listens to. *Situation Exchanges* is an opportunity for an encounter with the obtuse meanings and disguise that art presents, an opportunity for listening, reading and listening again.

9 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* translated by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 36

10 Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning” in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 55

11 Robert Smithson, “Entropy Made Visible: Interview with Alison Sky (on site #4, 1973)” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, edited by Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 189–196

12 Quoted in Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 195

13 Tacita Dean, “Selected Writings 1992–2011” in *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey* (Gottingen: Steidl Publishers, 2011), 30

EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION



Ursula Nistrup
Installation shot
Photo: Erin Graham



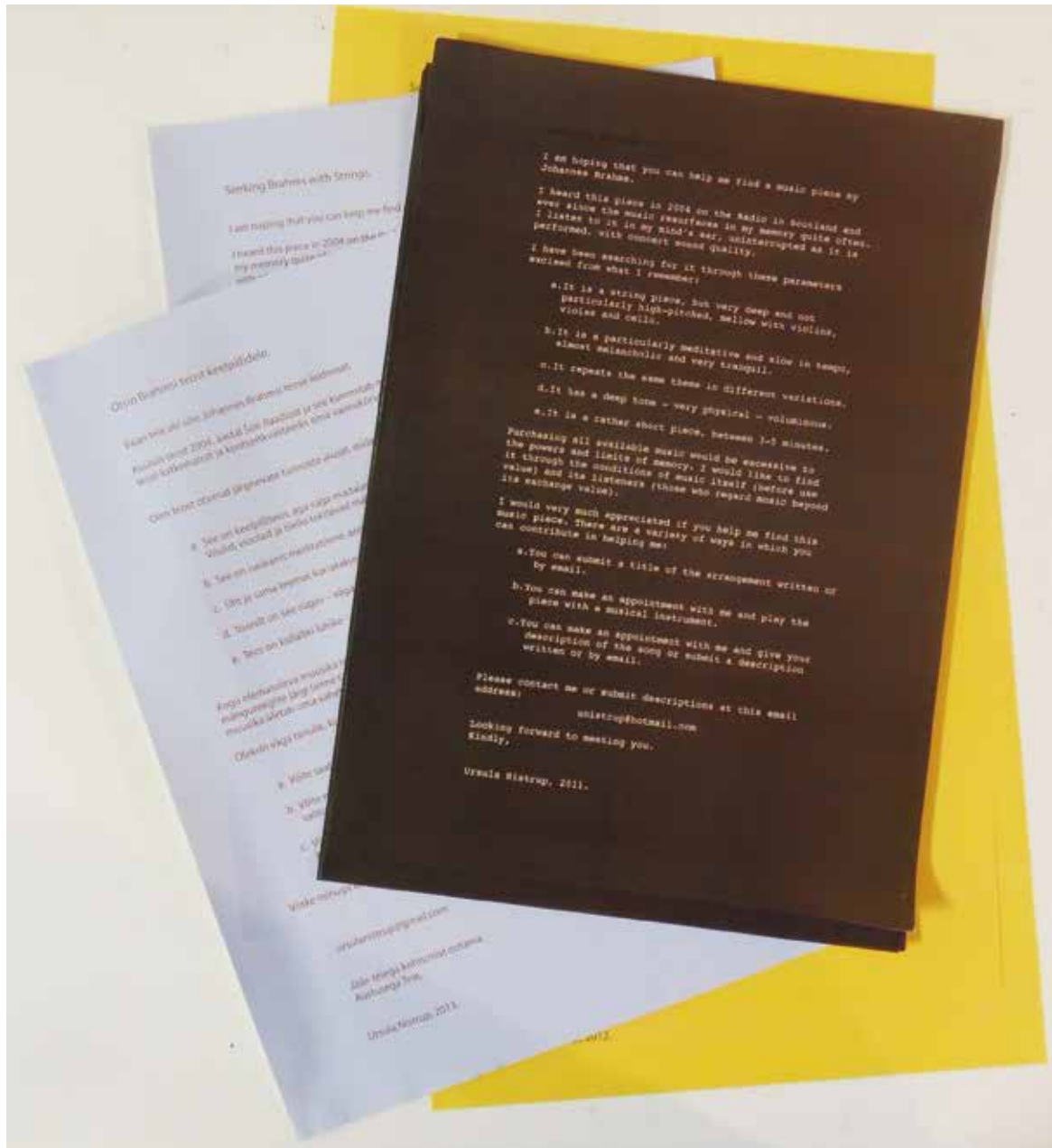
Ursula Nistrup
Three Non-standardized Resonances
3 x Austrian spruce wood, bees wax finish
30 x 30 cm
2012
Photo: Erin Graham

These pieces of wood are models for the soundboards placed in grand pianos. They are made out of slow-growing spruce wood found around the tree line of the Austrian Alps, the same kind used to make the back of the Stradivarius violins (from a different portion of the tree).

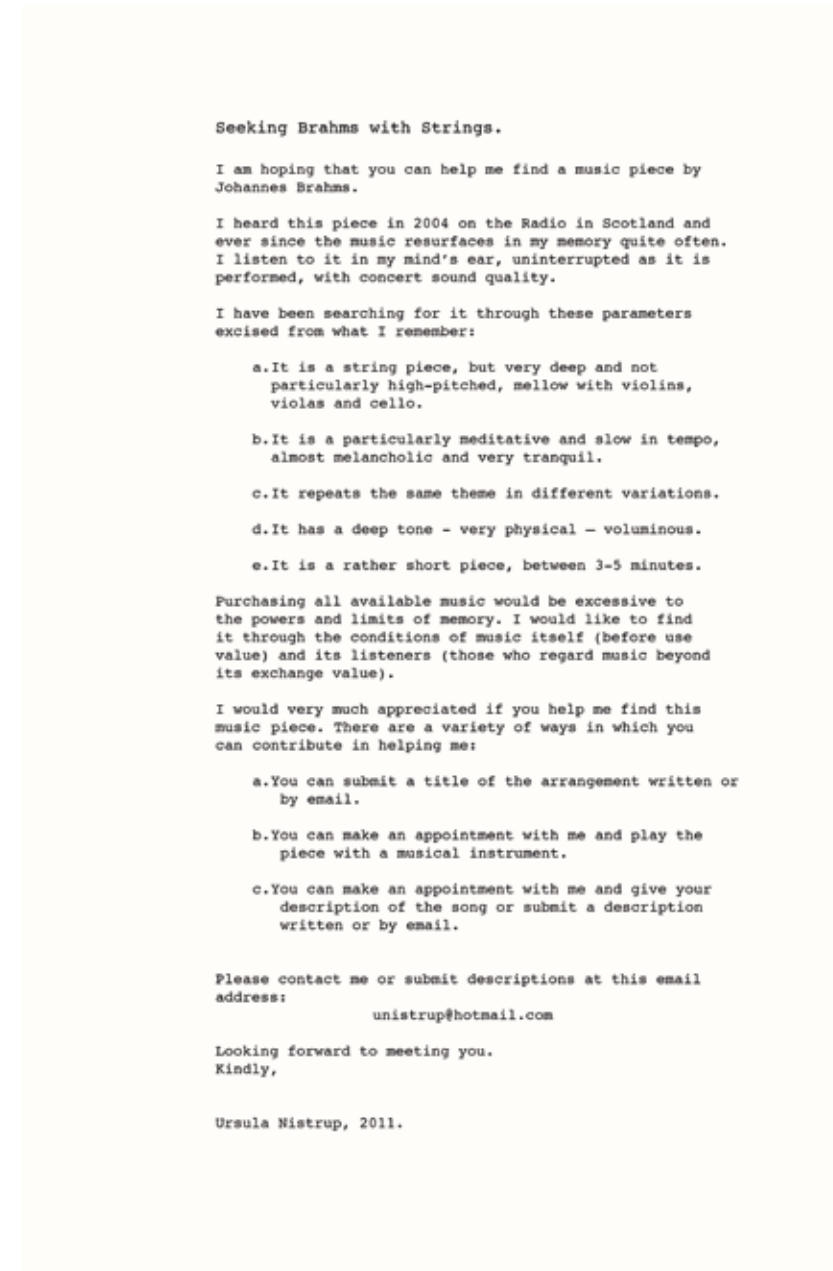
Each board is shaped with graduated thicknesses. These elevations alter the acoustic properties inside each piano, which in turn modify the space surrounding the strings, and thus the resonance of each piano.



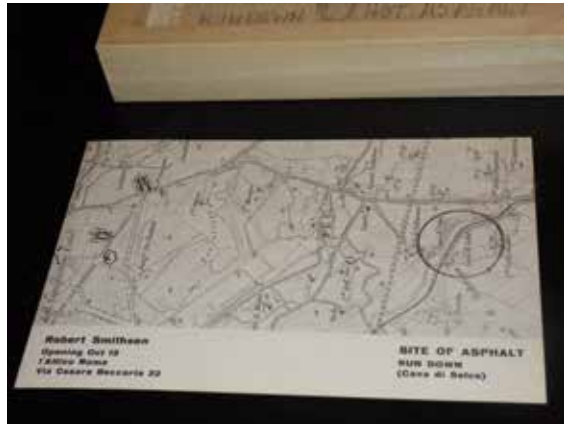
Ursula Nistrup
Audible Tuning
Split-screen video with stereo sound
44 min.
2007



Ursula Nistrup
Seeking Brahms with Strings
 Paris, Den Haag, Toronto, Riga, Tallinn
 60 x 45 cm, various prints
 2009 – ongoing



Ursula Nistrup
Seeking Brahms with Strings
 60 x 45 cm, riso print
 Halifax, 2012



Ursula Nistrup
40 Years of Displaced Asphalt Rundown
 27 x 33 cm, 10 C-type prints
 2011

One print contains the following text:

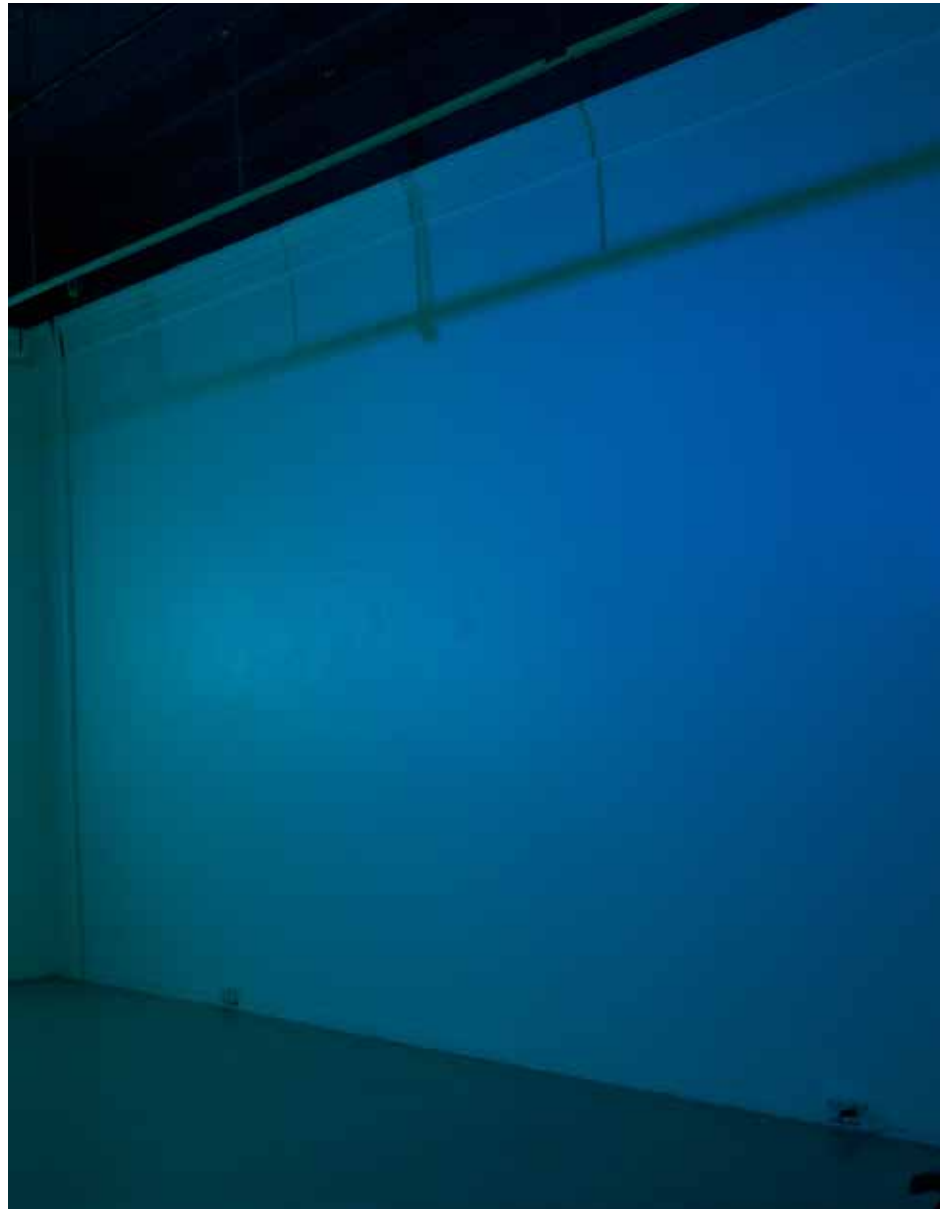
In 1969 Robert Smithson completed the first version of his work Asphalt Rundown in the south of Rome. In 2011 I visited the city and found an archive with material that had accompanied this event. I found a slightly out-of-focus map indicating the place where the event had taken place. With the map I set out to find the site and how the passing of 40 years had contributed to the work's entropic processes.



Duncan MacDonald
Installation shot
Photo: Erin Graham



Duncan MacDonald
Silent Ocean
Modified record player, seashell, silent record
2011
Photo: Erin Graham



Duncan MacDonald

Chromaphone

Chromaphone is a sound-sensitive artwork that translates the live decibel-level of the gallery space into colour. The colour is projected onto a gallery wall and subtly diffused with a frosted lens that has been added to the projector.

Video projector, iTouch, software

2012

Photo: Erin Graham



Duncan MacDonald
Piano Burn
HD video, single channel with stereo sound
52 min.
2012



Duncan MacDonald
Love Taps From Lily
Silver maple, dimensions vary
2010
Photo: Trine Friis Sørensen