

Nashville Scene

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT » ART

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The sounds of balloons, spray cans, crickets and violins filled the air at *SoundCrawl 2.0*

Art for Ears

by LAURA HUTSON

Speaking to a sound artist about his work is a bit like speaking to a Zen Buddhist about life. Sound art is neither sound nor art, yet it is both. It is silence and listening. It is elusive and all-encompassing. It is uncivilized and articulate. Sound art is difficult to describe — yet it is that difficulty that makes it so compelling.

More cerebral than sentimental, and often relying on nuance that can be foreign to the untrained ear, sound art has always been firmly rooted in the underground. As early as 1902, French minimalist composer Erik Satie was performing "furniture music" in Parisian art galleries, asking that he be ignored by his audience as he played what would later be known as background music. His decision to perform in an art gallery is an early example of using context to contradict tradition, and it spawned a long line of sound artists who waver between visual art and music. That approach lives on with the recent performance of Aaron Doenges and Kyle Baker, composers and co-founders of SoundCrawl:Nashville, which presented *SoundCrawl 2.0* at Oct. 2's First Saturday Art Crawl.

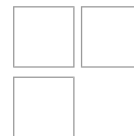
Doenges and Baker met as graduate students at Belmont, where they frequently discussed bringing sound art compositions to the Nashville community. They hosted their first event a year ago, at the October 2009 Art Crawl. The Downtown Arcade, with its open architecture and thriving gallery scene, was an obvious choice, and the Art Crawl was the perfect event, says Doenges. "Galleries generally seem to be open to new and sometimes challenging things," he says, "so it seemed like the best possibility for a potential audience. There is a built-in audience of people who will be at the Crawl."

The music at *SoundCrawl 2.0* was more like a soundtrack than the center of attention. The work explored the potential for sounds to bring about states of mind: In Doenges' "Pop: The Bubble Wrap," a balloon expanding and contrasting recalled childhood playfulness, while other works featured ambient electronic sounds that were grounding, reminding you of the innocuous way technology can surround and comfort you. Most of the tracks in the collection were what Doenges and Baker refer to as "electro-acoustic music": atmospheric, minimalist soundscapes that flutter between organic and technical, not quite melodic, but not aggressively difficult either. Baker calls this "the final stage of modern art music's fascination with noise." Daniel Eaton's "Volant Fizzle" put chanting over repetitive sounds of spray cans being shaken, and Greg Bartholomew's "No George No" used traditional orchestral sounds like upright bass, violins and pianos over crickets chirping and water flowing, with the occasional interruption by a voice repeating the song's title like a melodramatic mantra.

The sophistication of the work was matched by the professionalism of its delivery. The installation included a main stage in the mezzanine of the Arcade, positioned so that everyone passed by as they climbed the stairs to view the galleries on the second floor. The architecture of the Arcade must have been an exciting discovery for Baker and Doenges — its open balcony overlooks the stage, and as attendees skipped from one gallery to the next, they re-entered the auditory space of the *SoundCrawl 2.0* amplifiers. Inside several participating galleries, including Twist and Studio #61, listening booths provided gallerygoers with earphones. This way, visitors were able to listen to one piece, while speakers played another piece directly into the gallery. Maps were available, and each listening station was equipped with a track listing and artist bio.

One onlooker told Doenges that he felt like he was walking into *Star Wars*. Such observations show how culturally relevant sound art has become, and Doenges sees an even brighter future ahead. He notes a couple of current trends: interactive electronic music (where sounds are manipulated through physiological means, such as brainwaves or body movement) and a more underground deconstructivist style that includes the increasingly popular practice of circuit-bending. As Doenges explains it, circuit-bending is "where someone opens some sort of electronic that makes sound — usually toys like Speak &

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SoundCrawl 2.0
Through October at The
Rymer Gallery

Spells, Furbys, etc. — in order to cross the circuits and make them make sounds they weren't intended to make. One side is building robots, and the other side is destroying them."

Doenges and Baker are trained in music composition, not fine arts, and yet their ability to cross over and influence an entire community of supporters depends on their ability to approach the art world as a friend. Like robots interacting with aliens, SoundCrawl:Nashville is not trying to blend in, but to communicate.

For those who missed the October Art Crawl, an installation from SoundCrawl 2.0 remains on display at The Rymer Gallery through the end of October.

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