

Vibrant Mattering

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Abstract

Vibrant Mattering explores the artistic practice of Gail Priest and Thomas Burless working as the Institute for Non-Empirical Results. Their collaborative ventures develop contexts to test the capacities of cause and effect via the interactions of sounds and materials. Based on historical research, they then use intuitive experimentation to explore how things work (or not). This presentation focuses on their latest project, the exhibition *Five Self-Vibrating Regions of Intensities* which explores sound as energy and vibration.

Keywords

Sound, installation, kinetic art, vibration, phenomenological materialism.

Introduction

All living beings are oscillators. We vibrate. Amoeba or human, we pulse, move rhythmically, change rhythmically; we keep time. Le Guin [1]

This paper is presented on behalf of myself and Thomas Burless. Together we are the Institute for Non-Empirical results and, over the last five years, we have been creating kinetic objects and assemblages that expressively demonstrate the transmission of sonic energy through materials resulting in visual manifestations known as cymatics.

At the Institute for Non-Empirical Results, we develop contexts to test the creative capacities of cause and effect via the interactions of sounds and materials. In our projects we manifest the materiality of sound through visualized vibration inspired by research into old and sometimes forgotten materials and processes. However, rather than pursuing accurate recreations, our processes are conducted with a sense of instinctive play, creating novel objects and environments that meld the acoustic, the mechanical and the digital. In this way we rematerialize digital processes by remembering the mechanical and technical histories that underpin them. In our practice-based research we aim to conjure a late-19th and early-20th century naivety and curiosity that we then pair with 21st century digital mediation. Past, present and future processes collide and are subsequently displayed as both elemental demonstrations and curious objects.

Establishing the Institute

Thomas and I began working together on projects where I was wanting to create more ambitious infrastructures and gallery inhabitations. Through these interactions we realized that we had an interesting combination of mechanical and digital expertise that could manifest ideas and experiments that we both found intriguing. Consequently, we then commenced to work as co-creators on the first of our vibration projects, *A continuous self-vibrating region of intensities, (ACSVROI)* that was a performance installation presented at Liveworks 2019 at Performance Space. As we live in separate cities, the development process involved coming together for short periods of experimentation, and proof of concept prototypes, gradually finding the form for the final versions. We documented our processes and research on a blog: <https://vibratingworkshopnotes.blogspot.com>.

For this artist talk I will be focusing on our most recent project that emerged from that previous one. *ACSVROI* was co-commissioned by The Substation in Melbourne, however after all the interruptions of the pandemic, by the time we came to remount the work, we decided to completely redevelop the ideas into a multiroom exhibition. This was presented at The Substation in April 2023 as *Five Self-Vibrating Regions of Intensities*. The change to installation format came about because we felt that the time pressures of performance were not always conducive to getting the best results from the instruments. Within an installation context we could fine-tune the objects and explore the non-human aspects of matter as energy.

Five Self-Vibrating Regions of Intensities

...materiality that is as much force as entity,
as much energy as matter,
as much intensity as extension.
Bennett [2]

This project is an exploration of the transmission of sonic energy through materials and sound's visual manifestations as wave-driven geometric patterns (cymatics). The project takes inspiration from the writings of Jane Bennett and her ideas around energy and vibration as matter. INER's



Figure 1. Tridophone, Gail Priest & Thomas Burless © Damian Raggatt & the Artists

explorations that materialize sound as wave, vibration and energy draw attention to energetic oscillation as a shared phenomenon of the human and non-human, organic and inorganic. The installations play within a space of material agencies that ask the viewer to reconsider themselves not as the pinnacle of natural evolution but as a particular kind of vibrant matter existing within a network of vibrational materials. Below are brief explorations of each installation.

Tridophone

Tridophone is a kinetic sound and light sculpture that allows the vibrations and geometries of sound waves to be manifested in grains and powders. It is based on the Eidophone developed by [Margaret Watts Hughes \(1885\)](#), that comprised a singing tube connected to an amplifying cone over which was stretched a membrane. Certain sung frequencies generate patterns in fine dusts distributed on the surface. In this re-imagined device, there are three such cones, fitted with speakers. The singing tube also houses a speaker. A four-channel soundscape activates each instrument in a synopated cymatic dance. Captivating close-up footage of the patterns are shown on an accompanying video that is projected on a wall in relation to the object. The sound from the

video footage drives the installation so there is a direct integration of sound and images.

Pond Life

...an animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power...what Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage.

Bennett [3]

Nestled amongst neglected urban plant life, ponds of water vibrate with the pulsing oscillations of a multichannel composition. Combining the machinic and botanic, Pond Life explores how vibratory energy is elemental to organic and inorganic matter alike. The ponds have a distinctly industrial quality and amongst the weeds are scattered elements of urban detritus. In this we were exploring not only the heard and seen sonic energies but the kind of affective energies that connect objects as discussed by Bennett:

Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within.

Bennett [4]



Figure 3. Pond Life, Gail Priest & Thomas Burless © the artists

Membrane

Membrane is a two-channel video work that demonstrates an analogue audiovisual process in which vocal vibrations are manifested as mesmeric swirling patterns on the spectral surface of a soap bubble. It is inspired by experiments by Sedley Taylor using a device he called a Phoneidoscope (circa 1878). The videos document the results of an improvised vocal performance by myself with the bubble moving through a range of colors and patterns until its eventual demise. In the installation, the macro image of the soap bubble is projected downwards onto a raised circular plinth, offering the shimmering patterns in high definition.

Calling Wire

Moving into slightly different territory, and created from scratch for the exhibition format, Calling Wire is a three-channel audio work that explores the analogue transmission system of the tin can telephone. Three audio streams engage with different aspects of telecommunication and its role in culture and society. One stream comprises interviews undertaken with people of different generations, conducted by telephone, in which the person reflects on the different telephonic technologies they have engaged with over their lifetime. The prerecorded sounds are transmitted through vibrating wires and received through listening horns made of

different materials, Bakelite, aluminum and dope-treated paper which in turn offer different sonic vibratory properties.

Vibrant Matters

A spatialized essay made from heat-treated mild steel letters pinned to the gallery wall weaves the conceptual and material strands of the works together. It uses theoretical citations and original poetic fragments, some of which I've included as quotes in here. Presented in the hallway of the Substation the fragments work as introductions to each room but also are textual, textural and material as the letters darkly shimmered in response to movement in the hallway.

Conclusion: Exhibition as Assemblage and Ecosystem

While each of the works can exist independently there is a very strong resonance and conversation that takes between them conceptually, materially and sonically. The soundscapes are designed and timed so that they work as a kind of collective soundscape, with natural waves and cycles occurring between them. And as mentioned the materialized text works to form conceptual flight lines between them. Collectively the intention is to fill the gallery with nodes and antinodes of vibration and contemplation.

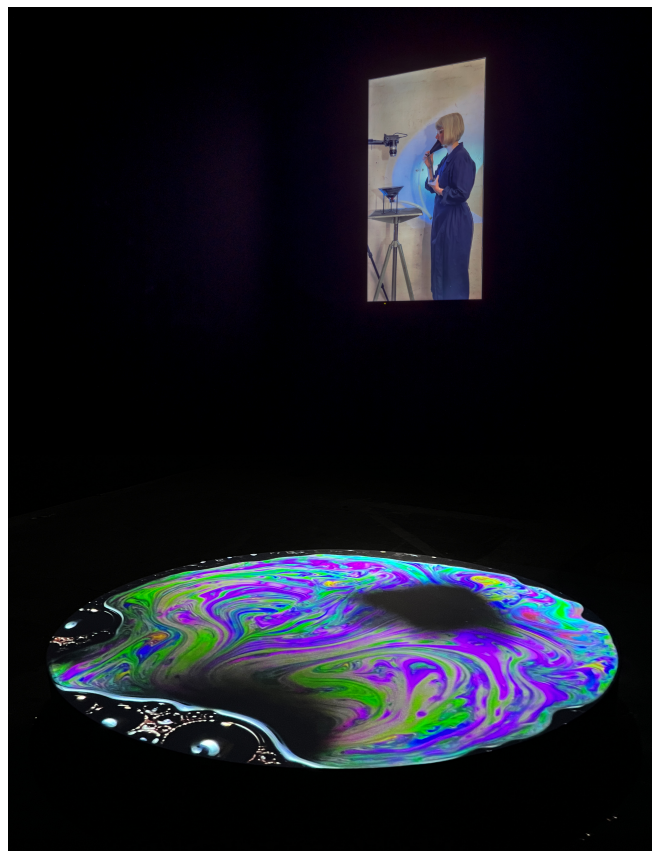


Figure 2. Membrane, Gail Priest & Thomas Burless © Damian Raggatt and the artists.

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- [1] Ursula Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader and the Imagination*. (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 195.
- [2] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 2010), 20.
- [3] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23.
- [4] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23-24.

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Author Biography

Dr Gail Priest has a multidisciplinary practice that focuses on the aural realm. Working across installation, composition, recording and performance she is interested in creating works that dwell in a liminal zone between figuration and abstraction. She has performed live electro-acoustic compositions and exhibited sound-based installations nationally and internationally including in Japan, Hong Kong, Germany, France, Norway and the Netherlands. She also curates events and exhibitions and writes fictively and factually about sound and media art.

Thomas Burless is an industrial artisan whose practice is centered on the design and manufacture of limited run, bespoke products. His deeply considered approach to design and an ever-present curiosity about new, old and sometimes forgotten materials and processes, gives his work a unique character. Tom is also a photographer and an archivist of industrial paraphernalia and detritus.