Drum Listens to Heart
Part III: Review

By Renata Blanco Gorbea
*Drum Listens to Heart* is a three-part exhibition at the Wattis Institute, bringing together the work of multiple artists. The exhibition focuses on the different interpretations and approaches artists give the concept of percussion. Part III of the exhibition took place from January 17 to March 4, 2023. Part III, in comparison to the previous parts, felt more focused on percussion as a social act, rather than percussion as something within ourselves, or around us. Multiple artists present their own vision of how sound changes meaning depending on social contexts; for example, how applause conveys different emotions depending on the setting, the pause between the movement, and the expression of the person performing it.

As in Part I, the gallery space was divided into multiple sections, each one presenting a different vision of percussion as a social act. There were multiple references to sound as a catalyst for change, as well as to the spiritual properties associated with percussion and drumming. As we first enter the gallery we are faced with the installation *Basketball Installation*, 1995, by David Hammons, which presents the marks of a bouncing basketball covered in charcoal and dirt, a basketball hoop attached to a tree trunk placed on the gallery floor, and a basketball inside a ceramic pot placed in close proximity to the hoop. Hammons used dirt from Harlem (a historically Black neighborhood in New York) in order to create the marks in the gallery, making the viewer reflect on the role of African American athletes, specifically in basketball, and how through this sport that Black community has been able to take space in society. The marks visible on the gallery walls make us reminisce on how finding a voice and taking space in society has been a struggle for many groups of people throughout history.

As we move further into the exhibition we encounter the works of Consuelo Tupper-Hernández and Raven Chacon. Tupper-Hernández approaches this concept of percussion or sound as a social element through one of the most common percussive acts, applause. Tupper-Hernández created an “applause dictionary” which showcases multiple spreads with printed text mounted on the gallery walls. They describe different types of applause, such as the “applause of required repetition” and the “applause of simultaneously consensual and genuine response,” revealing how the simple action of applause can convey different emotions depending on the pause between each movement, the context in which the applause is being performed, and the motive behind the applause. For example, the “applause of required repetition” is described as “usually responsive to a series of brief and repetitive events that occur in a limited period of time, all of which demand (either implicitly or explicitly) an
applause at their end.” Tupper-Hernández’s *Applause Dictionary*, 2020-2022, draws attention to the social context that gives sound meaning. This section of the exhibition also presents the work of Raven Chacon. The piece *American Ledger #1* proposes a new way of recording history. The work functions as a flag with a score that narrates the history of the United States and is meant to be performed as a sound piece. Chacon’s work considers how the way in which we communicate can change collective thought. By presenting American history through a score that is meant to be performed, the artist rethinks the way in which we interact with history; the score serves as a reminder that history is something that affects the present and that we should reflect on.

Next in the exhibition, we are presented with the works *Disease Thrower #4*, 2021, and *Tripa Chuca*, 2023, by artist Guadalupe Maravilla. The pieces are meant as a way for viewers to reflect on alternative methods of curing illness, but the drums, with all their different bits and pieces, reminded me more that sound can bring people together as well as serve as a type of comfort (in a sense this might be a way of healing). The different elements that make up the piece represent how a community is built by different individuals that share similar values and beliefs, and how they all come together. Maravilla’s works are made out of found materials that he took while retracing his journey from Central America to the United States as a migrant, such as baskets and conch shells. The materials used in the artworks also speak to this sense of healing and acceptance, coming to terms with identity, and in general making people reflect on where they come from and how that brings us together or drifts us apart.

The final section of the exhibition departs slightly from the constant of sound as a social act. The works of Haegue Yang come into conversation with each other in order to create an environment that speaks to the spiritual value of sound and how many different cultures have used bells and percussion in spiritual practices. Even though this section of the exhibition might not seem to match with the rest by changing its focus to the spiritual value of sound, there is still a relation to community and society represented through sound, even if it is not in plain sight. Bells and sound as part of rituals and spirituality are also a way of bringing people together and building community by sharing values, traditions, and beliefs.

The third iteration of *Drum Listens to Heart* feels like a conversation about different ways in which percussion is interpreted, used, or ever-present in society, and how we understand it. The first two
sections of the exhibition really set this argument forward, but as we move through the exhibition, it seems like the conversation shifts toward the connection between sound and spirituality. It would be nice to see this concept introduced earlier in the exhibition and enter into conversation with more of the pieces presented. It was very interesting to see the different ways in which artists represent sound as a social act, from sound as a political statement, to the nuances and definitions of different types of applause. Overall, the exhibition made me reflect on how sound is all around us and can be interpreted differently depending on the context surrounding it, which was a satisfactory way of closing the three-part exhibition.
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