

INNER EAR VISION: SOUND AS MEDIUM

CURATED BY MARIA ELENA BUSZEK, RAVEN CHACON, AND ROBERT AIKI AUBREY LOWE

Inner Ear Vision: Sound as Medium assembles works by contemporary multidisciplinary artists who push the boundaries of sound beyond the aural and explore it as an expansive artistic medium. The title of the exhibition references the multi-sensory nature of the ear, which affects not only our sense of sound, but also those of vision, space, and even cognition. With these elements in mind, the work in *Inner Ear Vision* asks that audiences recognize the tactile, visual, visceral, spatial, and generative potential of sound in myriad ways.

In her book *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, artist and writer Salomé Voegelín argues that, while in traditions of visual art “visuality is the desire for the whole: to achieve the convenience of comprehension and knowledge through the distance and stability of the object,” sound necessarily “pursues a different engagement.” To Voegelín, “listening is not a receptive mode but a method of exploration.”

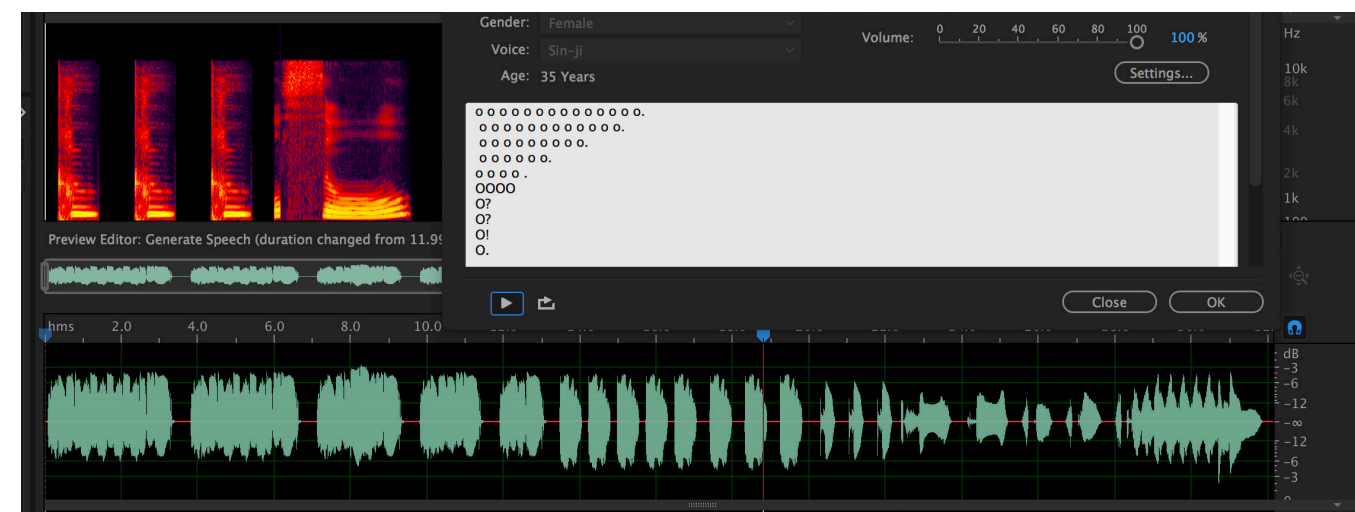
But, what of work that exists in-between?

Inner Ear Vision proposes that this conversation around the notion of “stable” versus the “exploratory,” or the tangible versus the ephemeral need not be a conversation at all—indeed, the artists in this exhibition reject such binaries.

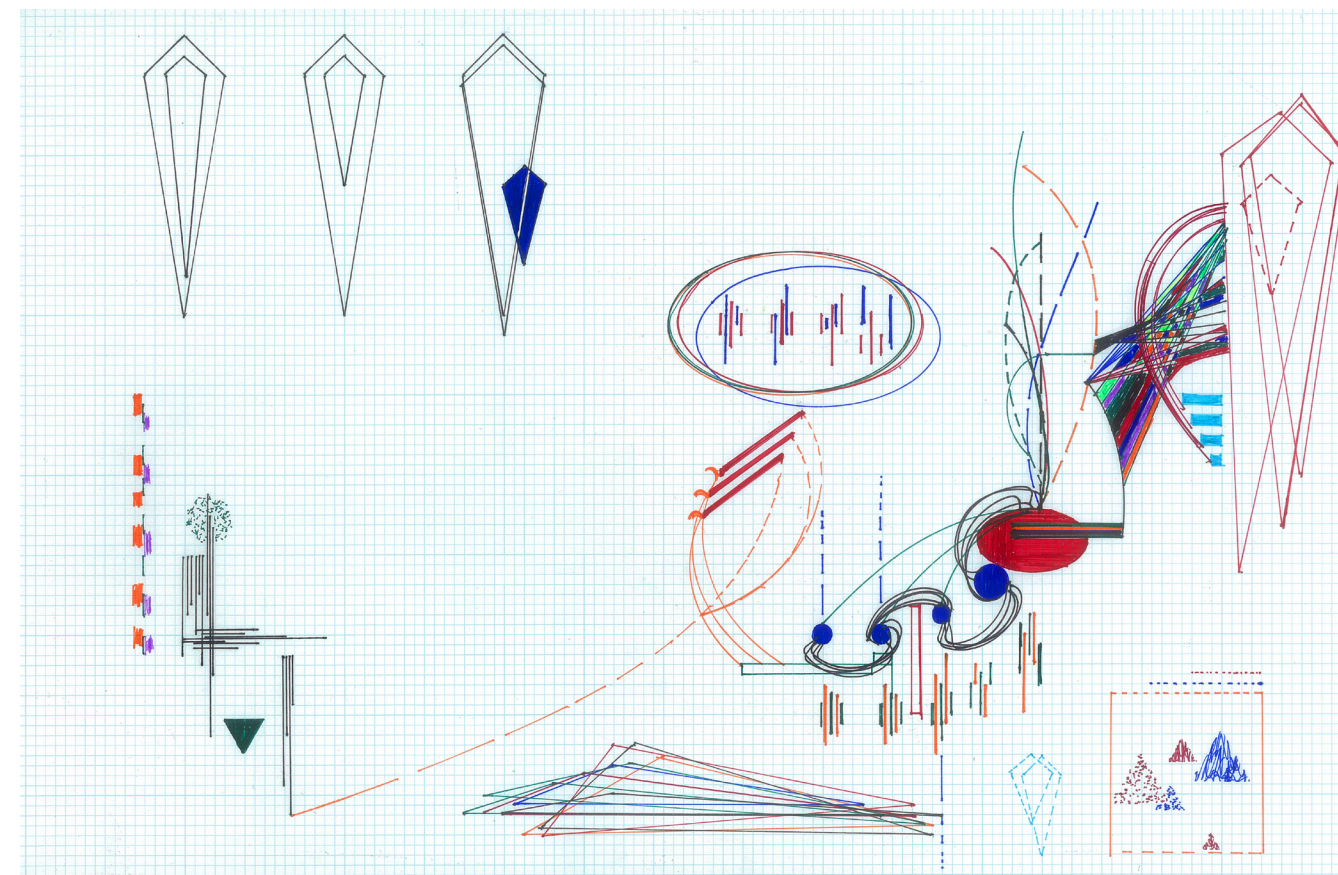
Jean-Paul Perrotte’s recent recreation of **Kurt Schwitters’s** *Ursonate* (1922–32) pays homage to the long history of such approaches. For a decade

after World War I, Schwitters obsessively reworked this epic sound poem to fuse the spontaneous, onomatopoeic languages of Dada art with the structure of a classical sonata. Schwitters, declared a “degenerate artist” by the Nazi party for his *avant-garde* art and anti-fascist politics, left Germany for Scandinavia and the U.K. as a refugee after the completion of *Ursonate*, and died before he could record it. Using a later recording of the poem by Schwitters’s son Ernst, and with the help of contemporary digital tools, Perrotte has produced a musical score and recording of the piece that captures the still-astonishing sensibility of this 100-year-old composition, using methods appropriate to, but not yet dreamed of at the dawn of what we today might call “sound art.”

The two-channel sound piece by **C. Spencer Yeh, Mei-Jia & Ting-Ting & Chih-Fu & Sin-Ji** conjures a much more ancient sonic tradition—the Kouji style of vocal mimicry whose earliest recorded performances were in the 3rd century BC. Kouji was, arguably, an ancient form of *musique concrète*, in which skilled vocalists imitated sounds of the human and natural world—different voices, accents, animal and bird calls, and the sounds of commonplace activities. In Yeh’s piece, however, the “singers” are text-to-speech computer voices imitating women speaking in different regional Chinese dialects. From these digital-age imitations, Yeh returns to the ancient art of Kouji as he himself sings in a composition and style that imitates the stilted computer voices.



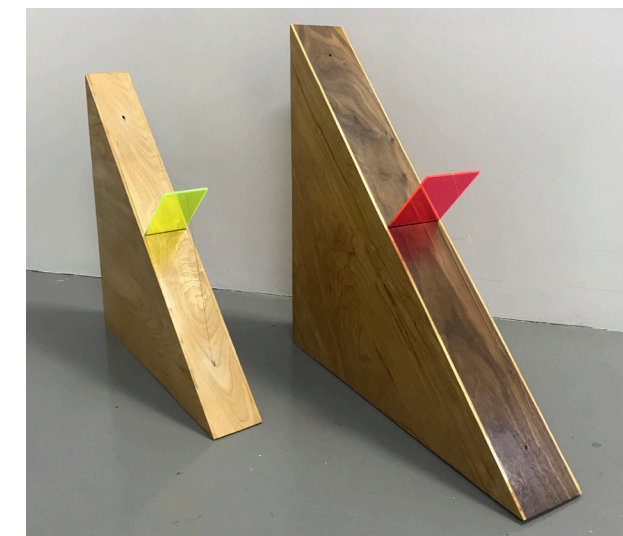
C. Spencer Yeh; *Mei-Jia & Ting-Ting & Chih-Fu & Sin-Ji* (detail), 2018; Digital audio file; Duration and channels variable; Courtesy of the artist.



Tyondai Braxton; *Drawing #3*, 2017; Color pen and graph paper; 11 x 17 inches; Courtesy of the artist.

More obliquely, **Tyondai Braxton’s** graphic scores also resonate with the influence of historical *avant-gardes*. Tyondai Braxton’s work as a composer is orchestral and maximalist, reflective of the influence of Modernists such as Igor Stravinsky and Edgard Varèse. Unsurprisingly, the scores he exhibits here resemble the aesthetics of these composers’ contemporaries and collaborators—in particular, Wassily Kandinsky, whose synesthesia brought about in his own creative practice the kind of sensory-spanning experiences many of the artists in *Inner Ear Vision* similarly strive to represent.

Where Braxton’s compositions tend toward the maximal, **Lea Bertucci** is known for her minimalism. Yet, as is evident in her score *Ampheres: For Quadraphonic Cello and Electronics*, the complexity of her thinking manifests itself in visually-explosive scores. Bertucci’s compositions often merge acoustic and electronic instruments in performances that use their surroundings to shape the sound—hence, her interest in quadrasonics, which she endeavors to visually score in the notations seen in this piece. But, Bertucci is also invested in the pure visual potential of musical notation itself, reflected in her 2017 collaboration with Michael Anzuoni, *The Tonebook*, in which they co-edited a collection of graphic scores by 17 contemporary *avant-garde* composers. They are currently at work on a second volume.



Chris Duncan; *Single String Instrument 01 and 02*, 2018; Mixed media; 21 x 21 x 4 inches; Courtesy of the artist and Halsey McKay Gallery, New York, NY.

Chris Duncan is also a prolific publisher, founding his *LAND AND SEA* imprint in 2009, through which he has released both books and music by like-minded artists. Duncan’s wildly interdisciplinary work ranges from found-object sculptural installations to lumen prints to abstract paintings. Duncan’s *Single String Instrument #1 and #2* are sculptural exercises in consideration of sound and movement on a minimal level, focused on slow, deliberate activations.

Bemis alumni **Kevin Cooley’s** and **Phillip Andrew Lewis’** *Harmony of the Spheres* takes its title from the Pythagorean concept of the musicality of celestial bodies’ movements. Cooley and Lewis take as their starting point the notion that “vinyl is essentially a form of compressed carbon—the building block of the universe itself”—to create, destroy, then re-create a series of works made of the material. The video on display documents the destruction of 500 black and 500 white, silent 12” vinyl records the pair pressed, whose shards they collected and reconstituted into LPs that replay the sound of their original creation in the pressing plant on side A, and their destruction in the studio on side B: symbolic of the “harmonic” cycles by which our universe was formed and continues to evolve.

Tarek Atoui’s *Sub-Ink* is part of an ongoing series of musical instruments and performances begun in 2002, entitled *WITHIN*, that emphasizes deafness or hearing loss as an expertise for compositional techniques. In collaboration with different musicians and hearing communities, Atoui seeks to rethink how sound is perceived, and might, therefore, be produced through new instruments. *Sub-Ink* was developed with musician Julia Alsarraf, and consists of a sub-woofer connected to a drawing mounted on a music stand, which produces sounds when fingers trace the marks of the drawing. In its consideration of the fact that we “feel” sound, *Sub-Ink* proposes the gesture of

drawing as a starting point for instruments that similarly allow sounds to be “created” by touch.

Touch is crucial for piece *Bodies of Water* by **Nadia Botello**. In the case of Botello’s “instruments,” touch is required to hear the sounds they produce. A former competitive synchronized swimmer, Botello is interested in how sound passes through water, and how we “hear” those sounds in an expanded manner: in the ear, in the bones, and collectively. *Bodies of Water* requires that we touch and move around the object—indeed, even touch others touching the object—in order to experience what is beyond the purely auditory.



Nadia Botello; *Bodies of Water* (detail), 2015; Installation view, Little Berlin Gallery, 2015; Glass tank, water, transducers, sound recordings of the San Antonio River; Dimensions variable; Courtesy of the artist.



Tarek Atoui, *WITHIN - Sub-Ink* (detail); Workshop view, Bergen Assembly, 2016; Photo: Thor Brødreskift; Courtesy Bergen Assembly and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

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For more than three decades, Bemis has provided artists from around the world dedicated time, space, and resources to conduct research and to create new work. Bemis offers artists private live/work studios, financial support, technical/administrative assistance, and opportunities for intellectual discourse about contemporary art. Nearly 900 artists have participated in the residency program.

Bemis's Curator-in-Residence Program provides a curator the opportunity to participate in the Bemis Residency Program, serve as a professional resource to Bemis artists-in-residence and the Greater Omaha arts community, and organize exhibitions and public programs at Bemis Center.

Bemis's Sound Art + Experimental Music Program, launched in 2019, is a special track within the Residency Program for artists working in sound, composition, voice, and music of all genres. Participating artists receive financial, technical, and administrative support, along with dedicated facilities for rehearsing, recording, and performing. The program includes a performance venue offering free live shows for the public to experience the latest innovations by local, national, and international sound artists and experimental musicians.

EXHIBITION PROGRAM

Bemis Center's exhibition program features solo and group exhibitions of artwork in all media by local, national, and international artists. Exhibitions are always free, open to the public, and frequently introduce the community of Omaha to the most experimental and provocative art forms today.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Throughout the organization's history, Bemis Center has offered artist-driven, community-responsive programs that bolster civic engagement in the creation and understanding of art. Public programs provide regular opportunities for the public to learn about and be inspired by the visual arts. Through artist-led classes and workshops, ARTalks, open studio events, panel discussions, film screenings, and performances, the community has direct access to artists and to their diverse approaches to art-making and interpreting the world around us.

Like Botello's piece, the sounds in **Jessica Ekomane's** *Unrealities* are felt—no touching required. This sonic environment takes the form of what seems to be a fabricated, minimalist sculpture, which is “heard” long before it is seen. The work is comprised of large aluminum plates, vibrating with frequencies from attached transducers that our bodies feel, but at frequencies so low that we cannot hear them. Ekomane is perhaps best-known as an electronic music composer, but she has also created architectural and virtual reality environments, as well as a series of different works dedicated to “street calls”—including her contribution to Natascha Süder Happelmann's recently-opened installation at the German Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale.

The concept of the “street call” is shared in *El Grito (The Scream)*, by **Benvenuto Chavajay**. Chavajay's instrument is a giant *matraca*, or a winding wooden noisemaker, associated with religious, sporting, and community festivals in Latin America. For Chavajay, this instrument has a different resonance, as the artist's performances with the massive *matraca* demonstrate. In urban environments like his home in Guatemala City, the instrument resounds terrifyingly, like the timbre and intensity of automatic gunfire. Like much of Chavajay's work, *El Grito* uses a decolonial sensibility to frame the uncomfortable intersections of indigenous art and languages with those imposed by European colonization, in order to critique the oppressive aspects of the latter.



Benvenuto Chavajay; *El Grito (The Scream)*, 2002; Performance in Guatemala City; Courtesy of the artist.



Suzanne Kite and Devin Ronneberg; *Iryáŋ lyé (Telling Rock)* (detail), 2019; Translation by Alex Firethunder; Song, power, sound, processors, machine learning decisions, handmade circuitry, gold, silver, copper, aluminum, silicon, fiberglass; Dimensions variable; Courtesy of the artists; Photo: Kyle Smith.

Musicians and multimedia artists **Suzanne Kite** and **Devin Ronneberg** have long collaborated on work that brings together sculpture, sound, moving images, and performance to represent the complexities of Indigenous North American identities. *Iryáŋ lyé (Telling Rock)* is a new piece, commissioned specifically for *Inner Ear Vision* by Bemis. Of their intentions for this new work, the artists write: “This sculpture interrogates the relationships between human and non-human entities and intelligences. Through Oglala Lakota ontologies, even materials such as metals, rocks, and minerals can be capable of volition. By considering the ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’ capabilities of nonhuman entities, a method of engagement reliant upon mutual respect and responsibility becomes possible.”

Nikita Gale's *INTERCEPTOR* is not a sound-making object, so much as a sound-referencing object. Her recent sculptural installations relate to music as a galvanizing, community-building force, using musical instruments and sound-producing technology as a sculptural medium that seems to set a stage in which the assembled audience are inspired to act. In *INTERCEPTOR*, Gale uses microphones, mic cords, and mic stands to reproduce a form derived from her studies of the barricades utilized by working-class protestors during the French Revolution of 1848. Her exploration of what she calls “the legacies of protest” are a reminder of their necessity today.

In *Awakening Emmett Till*, **Wadada Leo Smith (with Josie Holtzman and Nick Michael)** calls upon a much more recent “legacy of protest.” In this installation, the viewer accompanies the musician as he performs his own composition “Emmett Till: Defiant, Fearless,” while canoeing under the Black Bayou Bridge in Glendora, Mississippi, where in 1955 14-year-old Till's body was left after he was violently beaten and lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman. (An allegation that the accuser later admitted was false.) Following the publication of photographs of Till's body and the acquittal of the two accused men, the clear miscarriage of justice surrounding Till's death became a catalyst for the American Civil Rights Movement. Born the same year as Till, and raised just a few miles away from the Black Bayou Bridge, Smith's connection to this place, this tragedy, and the “defiance” it provoked is conjured for audiences through his



Nikita Gale; *INTERCEPTOR*, 2019; Galvanized steel, TS audio cables, microphone stands; 85 x 138 x 89 inches; Courtesy of the artist and 56 Henry, New York, NY.

haunting trumpet as it sounds out along the Little Tallahatchie River.

Sabrina Ratté's *Inscape* uses its immersivity toward very different ends. Ratté's work collages 3-D animation, photography, and digital and analog technologies to create spaces where the boundaries between the virtual and the real blur in astoundingly illusionistic ways. No sooner is the audience in *Inscape* grounded in a seemingly straightforward interior than their perspective shifts and floats, the sound and, quickly, the image catch on digital glitches, and one's surroundings morph into surreal abstractions that occasionally take on or push against the contours of the space—whether physical or projected, aural or visual, it is difficult to tell. The vertiginous experience of *Inscape* jarringly expresses the in-between, the synesthetic of our *Inner Ear Vision*.

– Maria Elena Buszek, Raven Chacon, and Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe

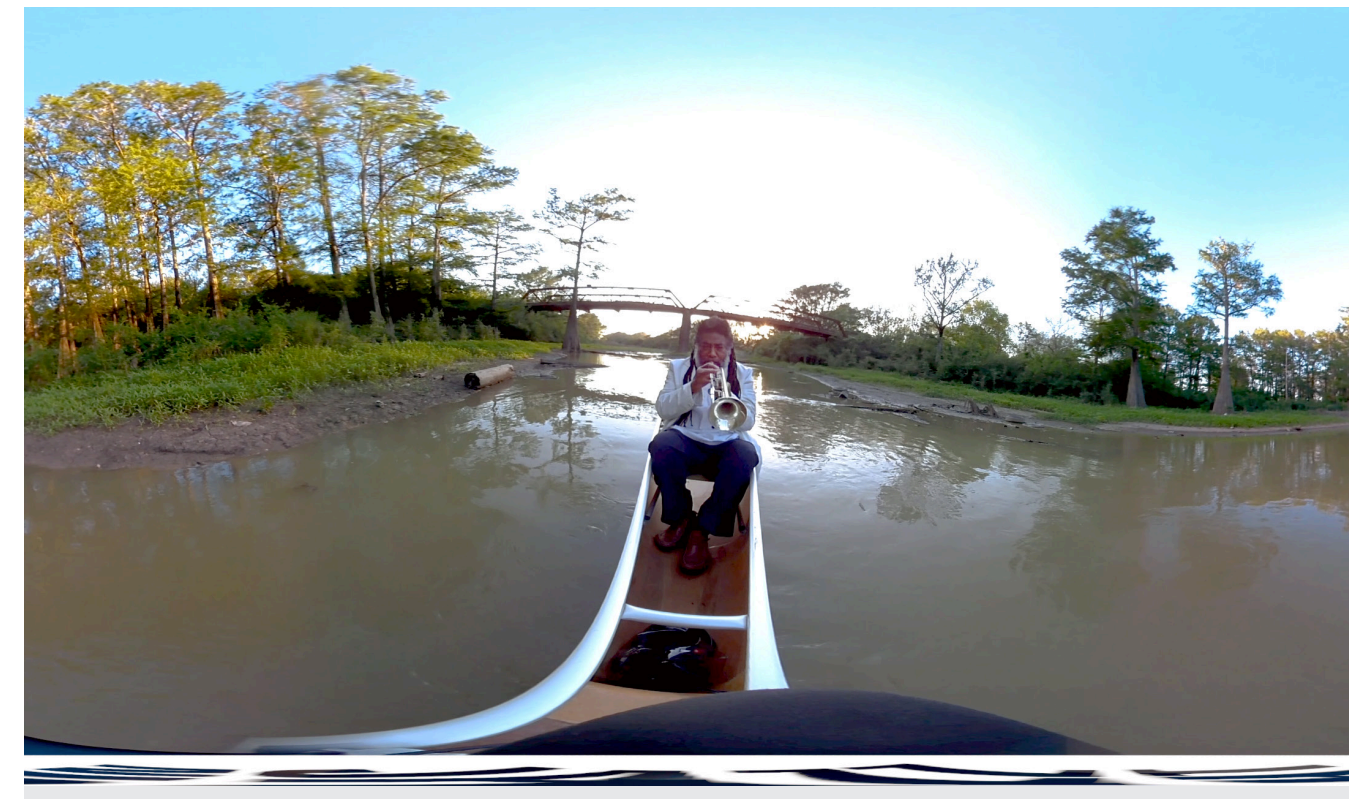
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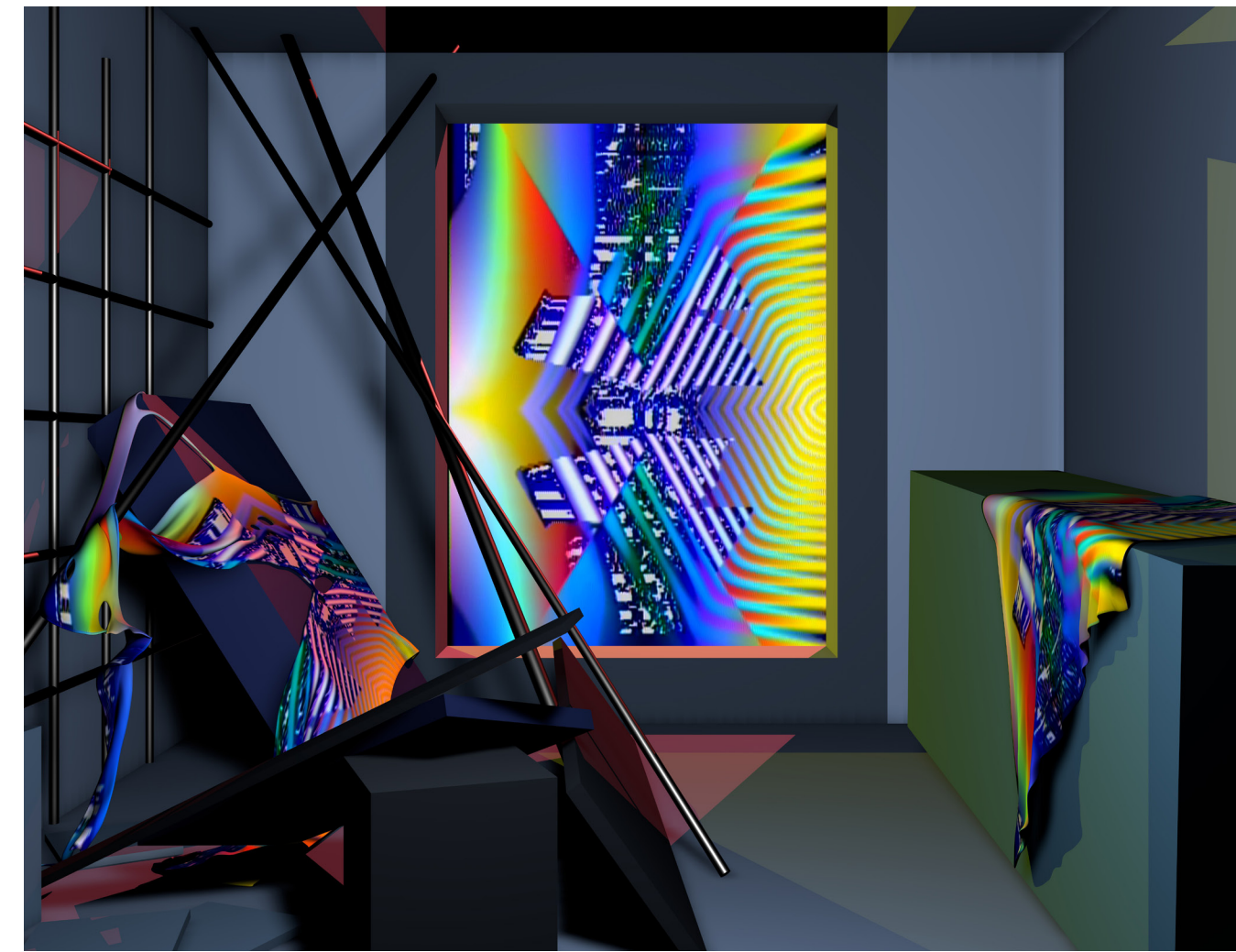
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Wadada Leo Smith with Josie Holtzman and Nick Michael; *Awakening Emmett Till*, 2017; Audio mix by Andy Huether, 360 video, 4 channel monitors, BrightSign; Courtesy of the artist and NPR.



Sabrina Ratté; *INSCAPE* (still), 2019; Video HD; 5 mins; Original sounds by Roger Tellier-Craig; Soundtrack composition by Sabrina Ratté; Courtesy of the artist.

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