



View of “*Aura Satz*,” 2018. Foreground: *The Wail That Was Warning*, 2018. Background: works from the series “*She Recalibrates*,” 2018. Photo: Adam Reich.

Aura Satz

FRIDMAN GALLERY

In Aura Satz’s numinous exhibition “Listen, Recalibrate” at Fridman Gallery, pieces exploring generations of sound-making women—such as Delia Derbyshire, Pauline Oliveros, and Éliane Radigue—resonated profoundly, while elsewhere in the show the trauma of living with state-sponsored sonic warfare ominously hummed. The works, though unshowy, were rigorously conceived and continued to unfold weeks after viewing.

The Wail That Was Warning, 2018, was a handsome, hand-cranked siren: a stainless-steel barrel laid horizontally on a stand shaped like an inverted V. I turned it at an unhurried pace, not wanting to be the loon going nuts near Fridman’s storefront window. As the slotted drum spun slowly, I heard something like an animal moan—but as the cries of fire trucks drifted in from outdoors, I remembered that this big goofy thing was built to be an alarm. So I churned the handle and brought its awful whine to life. I found some respite

with *Dial Tone Drone*, 2014. Originally conceived for a London phone box, here it was presented as a wooden chair set next to a wall-mounted phone. You could take a seat and listen to experimental composers Oliveros and Laurie Spiegel talk about the dial tone, the sonic signature of the telephone operator's workplace—a space that, once upon a time, was almost always occupied by women. The siren and telephone represent the resting frequencies of civic authority: The dial tone acts as evidence of a functioning infrastructure; the siren, the breakdown of all that.

In the work, Oliveros explains that “350 hertz plus 440 hertz” are the “frequencies that are mixed together to give you the dial tone.” What sounded very much like Oliveros's accordion breathes out exactly those notes. We then heard her and Spiegel move into a discussion of sustained tones (sounds, not necessarily in intonation, that happen for an indefinite period). This concept functioned as the tuning fork, so to speak, for the whole show. Oliveros goes on to explain that things like melody and harmony make “movement” harder to hear in music, while sustained tones, according to Spiegel, allow you “to put direct sensuality inside of a note.” “If you go with the sound and enter into the realm of the sound,” continues Oliveros, “then your mind changes.” In the field of sound art—subtly pitched here against, well, you know, *music*—sustained tones involve both more feeling and a stronger ability to perceive and generate ideas. This is where Satz does her work.

“She Recalibrates,” 2018, a series of fifteen drawings, in graphite on black paper, was hung nearby. The images were set into circular frames and covered with plastic Fresnels, striated lenses originally designed for lighthouses. (Because there is no distance between the image and the lens, the Fresnel doesn't magnify—it just creates a diffractive interference pattern.) Each drawing shows the hands of women, all pioneers of electronic music—Derbyshire's on a reel-to-reel tape, Beatriz Ferreyra with one hand on a mixing board, Radigue with both hands on her ARP 2500 synthesizer—using machines, but without the tacit social approval granted the telephone operator. These silent works turned us back to what was already heard and seen, deepening the historical thread. What, for instance, would Wendy Carlos have done with a hand-cranked noisemaker?

Preemptive Listening (Part 1: The Fork in the Road), 2018, a short film installed in the back of the gallery, was a meditation on civic disintegration. In it, Lebanese trumpeter Mazen

Kerbaj pulled off one of the best audio effects of the whole exhibit, a kind of aural diffraction. Using nothing but a trumpet, Kerbaj makes a keening, wobbling drone that sounds absolutely like electronic music and, more to the point, a siren. Actor and activist Khalid Abdalla speaks over the sound, his voice triggering a police light that rotates in response to his talking. Abdalla elliptically describes a “moment of emergency” over the sustained tone of the trumpet, turning his narrative into a bodily experience. Whether or not you felt that it changed your mind depended on whether you remembered where your head was before you came in.

— Sasha Frere-Jones

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