James Woodfill, *Harmony*, 2002, installation views at Joseph Nease Gallery.

Radio Active

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James Woodfill: *Harmony*
Joseph Nease Gallery
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In 1953, upon hearing the indeterminate clinking of pebbles against nails in Robert Rauschenberg's driftwood *Music Box (Elemental Sculpture)*, Marcel Duchamp famously uttered that he thought he might have heard that tune before. As with all Duchampian quips, the utterance seems to have gathered relevance across the decades — a simple witicism spurs a chuckle, then a second thought, and further persists as it reveals an underlying consequence to Rauschenberg's sculpture and to Duchamp's chance encounter with a humble little sound box.

I first visited *Harmony* during its opening reception at the Joseph Nease Gallery and immediately recalled Duchamp's remark — a truism now in the field of sound art as the division between experimental recorded music and installation-driven sound has effectively vanished. For those only listening to the sound, James Woodfill's installation contained plenty of similarities to the early Minimalist drone music of LaMonte Young, Phill Niblock, and, particularly, Tony Conrad's *Early Minimalism*. Further, as the music of such composers has exerted tremendous influence over experimental music since the early 60s, extended drones have resurfaced everywhere from Velvet Underground's early material to Sonic Youth's recent *Silver Sessions*. However, I don't think Woodfill's intention was to glorify, or even persuade adventurous listeners of the virtues of drone music. Although a reasonable association with which to approach *Harmony*, it is an unlikely conclusion to be discerned from the installation.

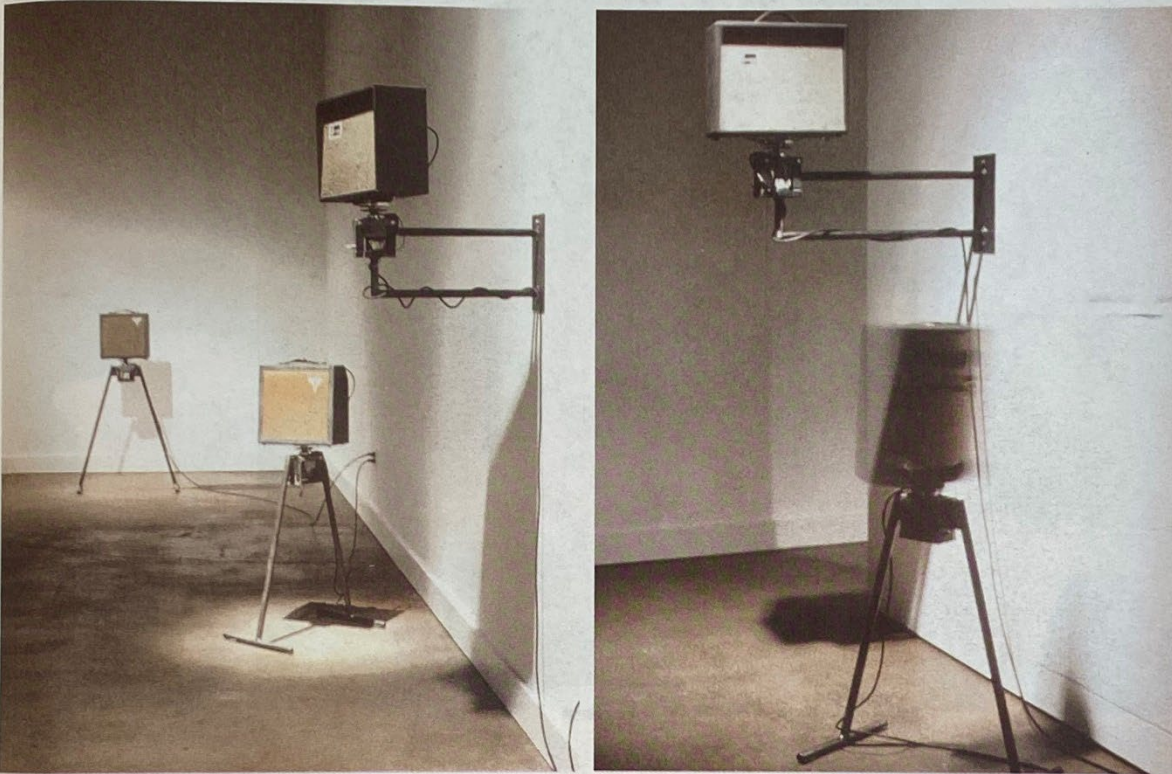
Admittedly, I listen to such music, albeit in lonely settings as quick vetoes invariably emerge from cohabitants and visitors. Thus, a second

concern hijacked associative recollections at the opening reception. *Harmony* was overwhelming; it emitted a heaving drone of immense weight, intricate variation, and subtle tonal shift — all of this at an amazing volume. And in public! As with all formidable gestures against the precedence of social interaction at exhibition openings, the installation seemed to elicit a kind of preternatural response from its guests. Confronted with the uncompromising aural presence of *Harmony*, bodies of unwitting listeners gathered along the outskirts of the installation, in quieter conversational spaces and at the refreshments table. Not to say that exits were swift, but durations of attention appeared limited. The social activity within the space faltered, its foundation removed and reinstated as a death drone for lonely listeners. Observing unsettled exchanges and excessive compensation applied to normal conversational volumes, I briefly wondered if these social slippages were to be *Harmony*'s primary effect — a well-attended social space impeded by audible terror; this, too, a temporary solution to the complex network of meaning and implication produced by Woodfill's orchestration.

Harmony was named after the kinetic sound installation that filled the gallery's main space, comprised of ten vintage tube guitar amplifiers, each mounted onto sign rotators that rotated clockwise at varying speeds atop industrial looking steel frameworks. Five of the steel armatures were mounted on the wall at heights ranging from four to seven feet, while the remaining five were two-legged pedestals designed to rest on the floor. The steel presentation devices maintained stylistic consistency throughout the installation and provided one of five key variable elements. The positioning of each amplifier in the space was endowed with the same level of importance as the tuning of individual amplifier tones, their volume, the speed at which they rotated, and the manner in

which they were lit. Any adjustment to a single amplifier's position, tonal value, volume, or speed, would prove profound to the range of perceptions available in the given space. This led to another imperative observation: the range of available perceptions was immense. Contingent upon the aforementioned variables and, ultimately, a viewer's mobile presence, perceived notions of *Harmony* were themselves shifting, tunable, and fleeting.

In the rear exhibition space, alongside works by Karen Owsley Nease, Marcie Miller Gross, and James Brinsfield, Woodfill positioned the twin works *vibrato circuit* and *vibrato circuit (test)*. In *vibrato circuit*, a bank of four outmoded computer monitors betray their intended function — an eternally determined, repetitive cycle of blue and red bands move to and fro. This primitive push/pull animation was complemented in the leisurely gestures of cascading yellow and blue blips on the two monitors of *vibrato circuit (test)*. Supported by steel carts aesthetically similar to the pedestals in *Harmony*, these two works produce a minor gesture — one that would perhaps go unrecognized in an autonomous setting, but that here resonated. As the percussive clinking of *vibrato circuit* ticked in time with the color band's perpetual movement, an overarching time signature developed and provided an objective structure that governed the sculpture's activity and ordered its abstract habits recognizably into real time. As a function of real time unfolding repetitively over a predictable course, *vibrato circuit*'s apparent role, one that it performed remarkably well, was to prevent *Harmony*'s drone from consuming all trace of objective time. *Harmony* resisted quantification and absolved its viewer of reliance on time, occurring outside of such tyrannical constraints. *Vibrato circuit* humbly tugged at the howling insouciance and disregard of *Harmony*



Installation views of *Harmony* and *vibrato circuit*.

and subtly reinserted time into its contracted system. A fortunate reclamation given that, left to its own churning whim, *Harmony* would resolutely choose to belong *outside* of time — readily willing to bring vulnerable viewers along with it.

With *Harmony*, as with Woodfill's other installations and interventions into the expected function of ordinary equipment, there are exquisite object lessons to be learned. The guitar amplifiers used in *Harmony* are the easily recognizable sort generally given to teenage bedroom guitar enthusiasts by their parents to both satiate rock stardom fantasies and keep the volume to a minimum. Per result of Woodfill's detournement, these spinning amps amassed to produce something akin to a fleet of injured warplanes howling over the Pacific. A level of misuse unequalled by even the most determined teenage rebels, what may appear largely as subversive action also mingles with Woodfill's playful ingenuity such that they become indistinguishable. Characteristic of Woodfill's work is this kind of subjective interaction between the associative properties of the objects he chooses, their aesthetic character, his disturbance of their intended function, and a given viewer's ultimate response to the complex network of suggestions therein. Woodfill refers to these phenomena as the interaction between disparate systems: "I am aware that my installations (a system containing systems) can interact with a person and their mood or beliefs (system) and create a broader scenario of meaning. This as a whole is a system that can interact with other systems." All of which leads into Woodfill's intent "to create some sort of singular experience that allows for attachments from many directions."

Effectively, *Harmony* experienced as many "attachments" as it had visitors; and it is unlikely that any perception of that experience was replicated by another. *Harmony* constructed an unavoidable scenario even for passersby along Central Street as its drone emanated from the gallery's open door; with just a few steps into the space, viewers were incorporated into the work — their movements and decisions occurring within the space were mapped and, perhaps, predestined by

Woodfill's pulsating epic. It is significant to consider that even for visitors whose impenetrable sensibilities would prevent further consideration of the installation, the frustrated moments they did spend inside the space, even if only to enter and furiously depart, were profoundly affected by their experience of *Harmony*.

Two simultaneous frames of reference extend from the experience of the installation. One concerns the relationship between the work and the architectural space containing it, the other centers on the physiological relationship that develops between the viewer and the work. Woodfill poses certain questions to this effect: "What is this space like? What does this space feel like? How does it compare to another space and how did I feel there? Further... how does this work affect my perception of this space and how does it affect my perception of my own body?" It is best to approach these frames of reference as modes of inquiry into one "oscillation" rather than two exclusive perspectives. The inseparable nature of these questions is precisely the point of *Harmony*, as a successfully engaged viewer's response will continually revert back to them.

Discussing the interaction between acoustic information and architectural space in *The Wire*, Brandon Labelle outlines phenomena applicable to *Harmony*: "each wave of sound is heard because it is contained within a definable space, in turn, sound, as it bounces off surfaces, helps to define a space. In this ongoing conversation of sound and space, we locate ourselves, situating the body inside the physical vibrations of reverberating surfaces, in the agitations of the environment. In tracing this phenomenon one butts up against architecture and music, buildings and composition." Within the immersive psycho-acoustic space of *Harmony* — dense torrents of sound ricocheted off the containing surfaces of the gallery and, along with the monolithic presence of an ear-splitting howl, a family of pure tones drifted across the beautifully orchestrated terrain of bagpipes and Farfisa swells — the acoustic element arrived at an equivalent plane of interaction with the architecture of the space and the body. At the point one realized this, the work began

to unfold and its implications multiplied; spectators returned to the self, becoming acutely aware of their own perception, its fallibility, then of the space occupied by their body and of the ability to affect or alter perception of the sound by moving one's body. You moved around and you saw sound! Other movements became captivating: reflective logos affixed to the amps sent out flying signals that orbited the gallery, assembling a multi-centered solar system of light that careened across walls, skidded along the floor, and deflected from the ceiling. Simultaneously, the play of light and advance of the drone as it appeared to contract/expand and seep into the solid surfaces of the walls and floor formed a precise map of the space and its architectural composition. Then, with a single step in any direction, everything changed.

I spoke to Joseph Nease during a subsequent visit to the gallery about the daunting prospect of remaining with *Harmony* for hours at a time. Quite ecstatically, he explained that the installation could not tire him due to its malleable nature — if at a certain stance or position you found yourself losing interest, you just needed to shift a few paces to attain a more compelling perspective. He had also learned to *play* the installation. By walking very quickly through the space, Nease could traverse multiple layers of shifting sound and light to experience a rapid, almost musical, tonal variation. And, as he put it, this made him very happy.

Wanting to avoid patronizing pronouncements regarding any supposed bravery or audacity in the work, it being imperative that *Harmony* does not settle into classification as a curious stunt, accept this firm assertion: Woodfill is producing serious, thoroughly intelligent work that demands a kind of attention seldom deserved in this region or elsewhere. What it does ask of its viewers — time, a willingness to immerse oneself in the sonic environment and to consider the implications of that environment in relation to the individual elements and variables contained — pales in light of the eventual return on this relatively limited investment.