



June 23 – October 9, 2016

IOWA ARTISTS 2016 ALEX BRAIDWOOD

Most definitions of art categorize it as a visual medium. Even contemporary media such as video, digital, and performance still rely primarily on seeing. But for several decades, sound art has made its way into galleries and museums, asking “viewers” to concentrate on a sense other than vision. Alex Braidwood’s *Listen Right Here: DSM* project directs our focus literally in that title, asking for attention to be paid to our immediate surroundings, and opening the ears to noises that fill our everyday experiences but are often ignored, unnoticed, or even maligned. Every landscape has a soundscape, and

Braidwood’s work outlines its complex existence in relation to our own.

Braidwood came to working with sound from a childhood interest in music, recording devices, and performance. This led to studying graphic design (specifically motion and interaction design), and eventually teaching and working professionally in those disciplines (at present the artist teaches design at Iowa State University). Extensive travels, and making recordings at his destinations, led to a fascination with each location’s unique sound experience. Eventually,

Braidwood founded Listening Instruments, a long term initiative by the artist that “explores sound and listening as ways of collecting, creating, and sharing experience,” achieved through workshops, tours, and art-making activities. These collaborative activities are critical to Braidwood’s practice as an artist, as the following attests:

“Whether it be to a piece that I’ve made, a piece by someone else, or simply to their surrounding environment, I want to encourage people at some level to reengage with their sense of hearing. We’ve found ourselves in a society that prioritizes the visual, so any opportunity to refocus on listening is a move in a positive direction... These acts of collaborative exploration and learning are important to me as an artist because it is one of the ways in which I can expose people to issues I think are important and worth considering new approaches to. Listening to the surrounding soundscape, wherever you are, is an experience I hope more people will embrace. It provides so much information about place and community, about priorities and opportunities. Sound requires time to exist and time is one of the few things anyone has to spare these days. As life gets faster and faster providing these types of focused listening experiences is one way that I can use my art practice to encourage people to connect with whatever soundscape they might be in.”

For the *Listen Right Here: DSM* project, Braidwood was interested in collecting sounds related to urban infrastructure such as roads and railways, and their respective mechanized and human traffic flow. The process began with a series of devices of the artist’s own creation. Small, and running on solar power, these recorders are capable of picking up a few hours of sound each week, which is saved digitally for the artist to collect as needed. He then identified several sites around downtown Des Moines to install the devices, leaving them in situ for about a month. The device on the Crane Artist lofts was exposed to residential noises, a nearby train track, and occasional bursts of sirens from the fire station on the adjacent block. Another recorder behind the Kitchen Collage shop captured the residential and market flavor of the East Village neighborhood. One on the beacon in the central courtyard of the Des Moines Social Club was positioned to not only get the sound of that venue’s performance events and audiences, but also the busy viaduct that whisks traffic out of the city to the south side. Nearby, the DART bus station allowed a recorder to be installed in their loading bay to collect the sounds of dozens of buses coming and going. Finally, a device was

installed on the property that also holds the foreclosed house on which Braidwood’s fellow *Iowa Artist 2016* participant Jordan Weber was creating an art installation. Traffic noise from Keo Way, as well as the crowded westbound lanes of I-235 could be caught in combination with the construction sounds of Weber working on the house. Each recorder was also indicated with a sign, pictured here, not only letting the public know what the machines were, but asking the viewer to “listen to the sound of the city.” After weeks of recording, Braidwood describes the sounds his devices collected as follows:

“I’ve captured trains, buses, traffic, and evidence of weather. There are some train crossing alert sounds, construction noise, heavy equipment beeping. Birds make an appearance in several recordings as do distant voices of people. There are helicopters and jets flying overhead, motorcycles ripping past, and sirens at different distance. There’s what sounds like adults yelling in the background of one recording and kids skateboarding in another, and some sort of party in yet another. I am incredibly excited for the range of sounds that were captured and the different interactions happening between infrastructure and people.”

All of these elements make up the sound composition on “view” in this exhibition. The language of art is based in visual terms, so even describing such a work highlights what makes this type of art different than what one usually encounters in the gallery. Visitors enter a darkened room, and instead of seeing will hear a “multi-channel, dynamic listening experience.” Using mixing software, the sounds will be played in an ever-changing pattern, so no two moments in the space will be the same. Braidwood also manipulates the sounds, rendering some unrecognizable and leaving others as recorded. “Like a city,” says the artist, “while some sounds may be familiar, the way in which they are presented in the space will be in a constant state of flux.”

Even if we live outside the city, true silence is something most Americans rarely, if ever, experience. The quietest of rooms still hum with electronics, nature sounds, and our own breathing. Braidwood’s art not only focuses our attention on these sounds, but repurposes them into new forms and patterns. The familiar terms we use to define sound, such as “noise” or “music,” become value judgements that aren’t productive descriptors of this type of art. Like the Modernist artists who attempted to make art celebrating formal elements rather than illusions of reality, Braidwood’s work presents sounds as a sensation on its own terms. His conceptual projects turn



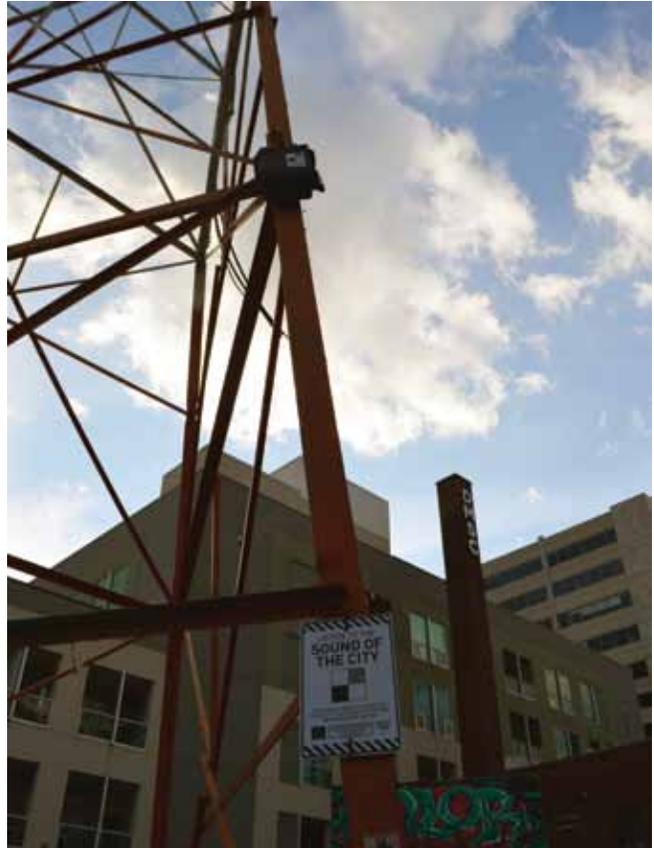
**LISTEN TO THE
SOUND OF
THE CITY**



*LISTEN RIGHT HERE IS A SOUND ART
PROJECT IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE
DES MOINES ART CENTER*

**DE/
MOINE/
ART
CENTER**

THE DEVICE ABOVE IS PERIODICALLY RECORDING
SOUNDS FROM THE CITY. THESE SOUNDS WILL BE
USED FOR A SOUND ART INSTALLATION AT THE
ART CENTER, OPENING IN JUNE 2016.
www.desmoinesartcenter.org
www.listenrighthere.com





our ears to the sounds that make up our everyday sensory landscapes, while his compositions present those same sounds removed from context and transformed into aural experiences that seem both familiar and otherworldly. They offer a new way of hearing the world.

Laura Burkhalter, curator

All quotes taken from email interview between author and artist, June 2016.

Alex Braidwood
Born Des Moines, Iowa, 1978
Listen Right Here: DSM, 2016
6-channel digital composition
Duration variable
Courtesy of the artist



4700 Grand Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
515.277.4405
www.desmoinesartcenter.org

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