## **Arts & Culture**

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## Have You Ever Heard the Sound of...

By Kenton Smith

Presently and strikingly isolated within the space of the accart Gallery are the two devices that are the basis of Catherine Bechard's and Sabin Hudon's installation Between Sounds and Abstractions.

One consists of two long brooms being drawn across the surface of a large pile of crumpled newspaper. The other arranges two metal buckets facing away from each other, connected by a network of strings across which an arrangement of coarse paper is drawn, creating a roughly textured sound while simultaneously triggering the plucking of one of the same strings.

At first glance, the cockamamic designs of Rube Goldberg's devices spring to mind, but the ingenuity of such functioning yet oddball mechanics is all part of the pleasure of this exhibition of sensory and temporal experience, the opening of which was the inauguration of Send + Receive: A Festival of Sound, which runs until Oct. 22 in various venues here in downtown Winnipeg.

While Bechard's and Hudon's contraptions may incorporate familiar objects into their designs (curiously of the janitorial variety in both cases), their installation is also aided - and indeed fundamentally shaped - by more sophisticated technology. Both devices are set in motion by computer programs that, while pre-set, also re-adjust themselves based upon stimuli picked by motion sensors and video cameras. The stimulus is created by the viewers themselves as they move about the space, which constitutes one of the elements of the installation's interactive character. The sounds created by the varying movements of both mechanisms are picked up by microphones and projected through a speaker system within the gallery. Alternatively, one can put one's ear inside one of the metal buckets and listen to the amplified sound of the paper against the string, or of the intermittent plucking (which, transformed by the acoustics of the bucket, sounds not unlike the snap of popcorn).

What she and Hudon are attempting to do, Bechard explains, is isolate specific sounds within the environment of the exhibition space for the visitor to encounter directly. In the case of the broom mechanism, an everyday sound – the rustle of newspaper – has been taken out of the context of the commonplace, where it is forgotten or simply overlooked amidst the soundscape of the everyday theatre of noise.

Bechard and Hudon agree that there is perhaps a Zen quality to this approach. "Have you ever really listened to the sound of...?" would perhaps not be a misplaced caption for this show. Bechard in fact refers to the exhibition several times as a "proposition." Indeed, the artists are asking visitors to partake in an opportunity to approach and enjoy the available sounds with fresh ears.

Hudon talks about the piece as a series of moments, how he and Bechard have attempted to create a series of specific, unique, individual moments in time. Both artists mention how the inclusion of pauses and silences are also integral to the overall effect - how the experience has as much to do with the spaces found between sound and silence. wherein lies "breathing room" to process what has been heard and wait upon whatever will be heard next. Hudon tells me that the use of newspaper was employed specifically towards this end, as the variations in its surface texture and shape allow for the creation of irregular sound as the brooms are drawn across it.

specific The functional characteristics of the artists' devices are also directed towards the desired goal. Bechard and Hudon mention how amusing it can be to watch people's reactions to the irregular workings of their machines, which are not programmed to react specifically to visitors' detected presence: that is, standing in x spot will not cause y result. The artists point out how people seem to be almost naturally driven to try to assert control in such an interactive environment - they want to be able to "push a button" and achieve a given response. The visitor causes the device to react, but the visitor cannot dictate the reaction. Thus the visitor is left immersed in perpetual and unpredictable variation.

Bechard and Hudon agree that this could perhaps be considered a microcosm of everyday life; that one's very presence in the world, on the street, etc., causes perhaps an inestimable number of unseen and unknown reactions that may simultaneously double back upon our own field of (sensory) experience. There is thus perhaps an underlying philosophical dimension to the work that is simultaneously theoretical, yet also practical in how it allows opportunity for people to adapt their actions and expectations to the nature of the enterprise

Would you, I ask, like to think that people may be able to walk away from this exhibition and apply the principles we see at work here, this "proposition" you speak of, to their everyday lives?

It's enough, reply Bechard and Hudon, for people to come to the show and have an experience...but yes, although to think that people will take something with them is perhaps something that can only, at best, be hoped for; people will get from the show what they will.

The proposition remains open,

Between Sounds and Abstractions is showing at the Aceartinc., 2nd floor, 290 McDermot Ave. until Oct. 22. For more info, visit www.aceart.org