

q/a

**Untitled (Plexus),
2022.**

Brass, sine waves,
autonomous feedback
system, and archival
radio static,
60 in. high x 65 in.
diameter; installation
size including
microphones variable.

A Conversation with Camille Norment

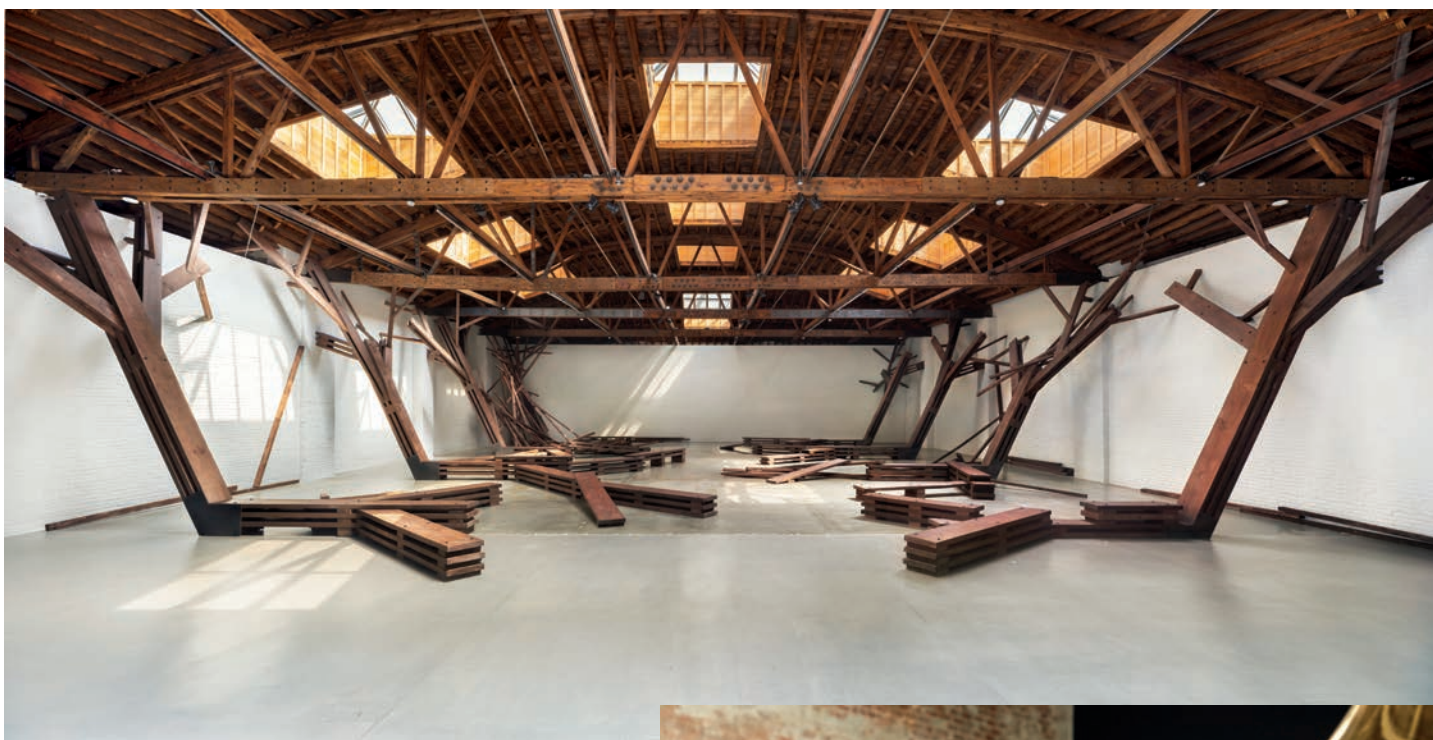
by Jan Garden Castro

Suspended
States

Untitled (Plexus)
(detail),
2022.

Wood, steel, and audio
recording of voices
and teeth grinding,
dimensions variable.





Camille Norment shapes sound in relation to time, space, and the human body. Her work, which embraces sculpture, architecture, and history, explores sonic and social dissonance—as well as harmony—through her notion of cultural psychoacoustics, which includes the investigation of sound as a force over cultures, societies, and minds, as well as human and non-human bodies. In her installations, live performances, and recordings, Norment combines aesthetic experience with political engagement, often employing specific cultural symbols as “quiet” but potent elements.

The two interconnected installations in “Plexus,” her recent exhibition at Dia Chelsea, entangled visitors in allusive visual and sonic systems. In one gallery, a maze of heavy wooden beams stretched across the floor and climbed the walls, spreading into the rafters. Construction site, the wreckage of a ship, or a future world being born, these enigmatic forms (which visitors could touch and sit on) vibrated with a flow of voices simultaneously mournful and joyous. The second gallery contained a single luminous brass sculpture—a bell/horn with a clapper/mute hanging above it. Four microphones picked up the sounds of visitors moving through the space, generating sometimes jarring



THIS PAGE,
FROM TOP:
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Camille Norment



feedback that echoed through the sculpture to punctuate the wide-ranging tones of its low hum. As in all of Norment's installations, sound and visual form came together to immerse visitors in a full emotional spectrum suspended between construction and destruction.

Jan Garden Castro: "Plexus" addressed the history of Dia's Chelsea neighborhood, the architecture of the buildings and their vibrations, and bodies in space. You said that you pictured the upward-sloping ceiling in the first space as an upside-down ship. In that context, the sky through the skylights became water. Could you discuss these aspects of the work?

Camille Norment: That location in Chelsea is essentially a territorial landfill, so its physical history is that of water. This becomes evident during hurricanes. The vaulted ceiling at 545 West 22nd Street recalls the framing of a wooden ship. The maritime has long been concerned with the transportation of

goods, both non-human and human commodities. This type of relating and categorizing "non-living" and "living"/"non-human" and "human" served to create and maintain those power structures that could best support the economic and ethno-political positioning of those who already had power. It also describes the more complex root of the entanglement of problems we refer to today as the Anthropocene.

JGC: "Plexus" explored three tones in particular: the bell, feedback, and the sine wave. How do these differ from the everyday frequencies that we hear? How did you factor in the Dia building, the sculpture, and audiences?

CN: Actually, the sound of the bell and the sound of feedback are not only recognizable, but likely to be considered unsurprising if encountered. They could be heard as any wide range of tonal frequencies depending on the bell itself, or the electronics and environment producing the feedback. The sine wave is heard less frequently by



the average person—it is the tone historically used in American emergency broadcast alerts—but it is a staple for electronic musicians as well as scientists. It is the fictive—and fetishized—“tone with no overtones.”

Every architectural space has its own voice. In “Plexus,” I mapped the primary resonant frequencies, or voices, of both rooms and used those frequencies as the palette from which I would compose the sonic experiences. So, in 541 West 22nd Street, I created the sound of a bell drone from three of the space’s resonant frequencies, which created an even more potent site for sonic feedback. In 545, I asked vocalists to sing the specific frequencies of the room itself. Accordingly, their vocalization could not be easily accompanied by conventional instrument tunings since the tones they produced did not equate to conventional musical notes.

JGC: How did the sculptures at Dia Chelsea probe the disciplines of physics and psychology?

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE:

Rapture, 2015.

Sonic and sculptural mixed-media installation, including 12-voice chorus, glass armonica tones, and audio devices, dimensions variable.

CN: Both installations actively engaged the resonant frequencies of their respective spaces, which is to make use of physics phenomenology. Resonant frequency constitutes the base tone for sonic feedback, a sound most attempt to censor. In the case of the 541 installation, sonic feedback was produced and negotiated to suspend as an ambient musicality in relation to the space’s sonic activity—including that triggered by the movement of bodies in the space. When the sound of feedback begins to grow, many people are placed in a slight state of alarm, anticipating that it might grow out of control. The striking visual element and soft sonic beauty of the installation were coupled with this psychological unease, which heightened the experience and underlined its conceptual premise.

Physics and psychology are also considered as degrees in relation to quantum and cosmological physics, as well as perception and consciousness itself. We are in an era that is grappling with the paradoxes of

Using sonic feedback to activate a subtle, suspended state of alarm becomes an alert, an awakening, and a potential. ”

quantum physics in scientific terms, which can also be likened to more metaphysical notions of consciousness—there is a challenge to the very notion of reality that we have as humans. The intersection of these thought spaces creates a similar type of suspension that I seek to create sonically with feedback. It is destabilizing, but it also offers a kind of comfort if you are willing to follow an alternate way of knowing.

JGC: Did the installation in the 545 gallery, with its sounds and standing, slanted, and piled-up beams, allude to the specific history of slavery, perhaps to the repressed voices of workers today?

CN: That installation was sculpted as simultaneous deconstruction, construction, and biological growth. So yes, but to take a more expanded perspective, the voices are representations of an entanglement of histories that interconnect human experience, as well as its full spectrum, from sorrow to joy, pain to ecstasy.

JGC: The 541 gallery held a large inverted brass bell shape with a clapper or tongue hanging above it. How were the forms constructed?

CN: The brass element pouring down from the ceiling could certainly recall both a bell clapper and a horn mute. Aesthetically, it was more important to craft a feeling of a slow pour, such as a drip of brass-honey. I created physical and CAD models before the sculptural elements were cast in brass. I'm interested in touch and liquid, so referring to it as a tongue is interesting.

JGC: Are the sounds related to fire? How did they activate the space?

CN: For me, the sound of feedback will always have an association with alarm, but also with potential. The event of fire is one of the most intuitively alarming states, but it is also a giver of warmth, energy, and regrowth. Fire is a force of great destruction, but when associated with the energies of the human body—the solar plexus, for example—it is a central hearth of life. Using sonic feedback to activate a subtle, suspended state of alarm becomes an alert, an awakening, and a potential. We can be reminded of fire as a gift, physically and metaphorically.

JGC: Why did you use brass?

CN: The properties of brass make it particularly apt for



sonic applications, as evidenced by the plethora of brass instruments. In this work, the highly reflective polished surface is also important in the way it mirrors and distorts the environment it reflects.

JGC: Is the clapper also a huge microphone?

CN: No. Four speakers inside the clapper/mute object create the feedback circuit, along with four visible microphones mounted on the ceiling.

JGC: Your performance at Dia Chelsea featured both spaces—audience members first sat informally in the “construction site” with its ambient live and recorded sounds, and then they were led into seats organized around the bell space to hear a live concert. Could you elaborate on how you asked people to sit, hear, and see in different ways?

CN: I often like to start a performance before there is a chance to settle into conventional stage/audience situations. It's an opportunity to activate engaged listening before audience habits take hold. Expectations are low then, or off, so an audience is often more receptive to experiences that might otherwise be filtered in relation to “performance” or “entertainment.”

JGC: For me, Lisa E. Harris's singing of Sonia Sanchez's poem about the Tulsa fire was the program's climax. Could you discuss the psychoacoustic message and the technologies you used to control the sound and the feedback loops?

OPPOSITE:

Rapture,
2015.

Sonic and sculptural mixed-media installation, including 12-voice chorus, glass harmonica tones, and audio devices, dimensions variable.

THIS PAGE:

Pulse—Formations,
2018.

Wood sculptures, 8 pairs, dimensions variable. View of outdoor installation at Thailand Biennial, 2018.



CN: I engaged Lisa Harris (vocalist), Randy Gibson (voice), Mariel Roberts (cello), and Nate Wooley (trumpet) to perform in response to and along with the tones dynamically created by the feedback. The primary instrument in the performance was the installation itself, and it was always asserting its voice. I was also present, adding a second, live layer of feedback through the microphone/speaker array of the system to give chordal density to the flow of harmonic and dissonant tones produced by the installation. Much of the composition was situated within the same sonic world of contemporary music as the installation itself, so when Lisa's solo arose, it appeared as a clear psychological and emotive shift that was unexpected.

JGC: Your Park Avenue Armory performances, also late last year, with pianist/composer

Craig Taborn were in a more formal, historic setting. How did you use the space there?

CN: At the Armory, my sculptural focus was on two things. One, the prelude—inviting audience members to start the performance as they entered the space by activating bell-like instruments with long resonant tails. And two, the production of feedback through three feedback stations in the room and one local to my glass armonica. The sound itself was a production of the relationship between the microphone, speaker, architectural environment, and the bodies (human and non-human) in the space.

JGC: You've lived in Oslo for years, after beginning your professional career in New York. Who is your audience in Norway and internationally?

CN: Primarily art and contemporary music audiences.



JGC: You have a full schedule for 2023. What are you planning for your shows in Norway, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki, and the Munch Museum in Oslo?

CN: It's too overwhelming to think of it all at once. I have been preparing for a solo exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall as the 2023 Festival Exhibition artist, a great historical honor in Norway. I will be the first person to simultaneously produce a new music composition for the concurrent Festspillene i Bergen (Bergen International Festival). This ensemble performance will take place in the medieval Håkons-hallen in Bergen. In the fall, I will premiere a performance for the Munch Museum. After spending so much time out of Norway this past year, I'm happy to be able to ground more projects there. In addition, I have a host of other exhibitions, from Venice to

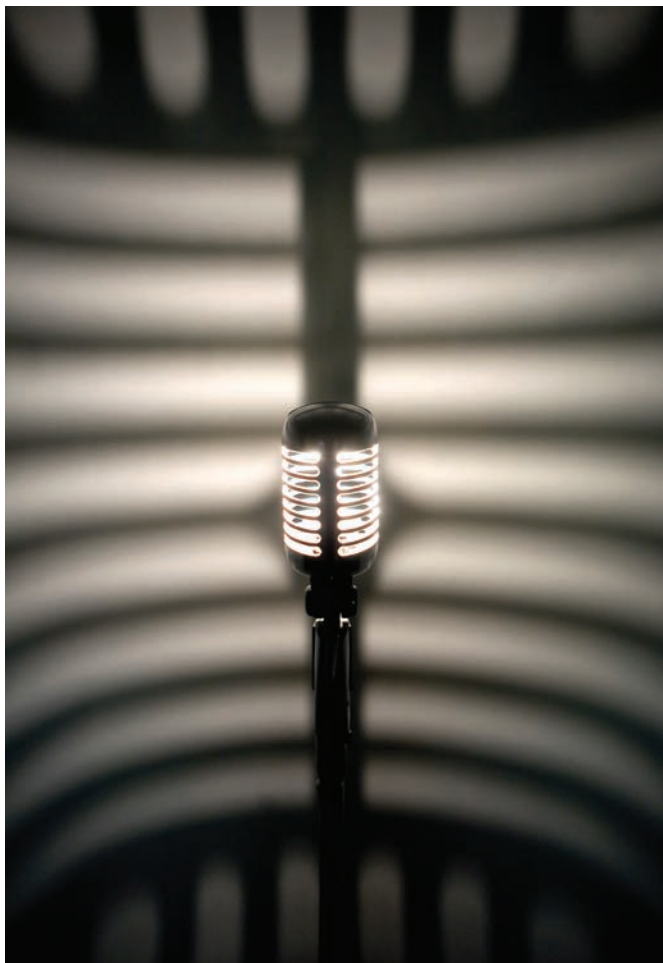
Helsinki and beyond. I am also happy to finally be able to schedule my Rauschenberg Residency. I was invited in 2019, but unable to attend until fall 2023.

JGC: *Rapture*, your installation representing Norway at the 2015 Venice Biennale, used a broken-glass field to represent two terrorist incidents in Norway in 2011, one that killed eight people and injured 209, and a mass shooting at a summer camp that killed 69 people. Could you discuss the physical and acoustic components and symbolism of that work?

CN: *Rapture* was first and foremost about vibration and the global zeitgeist, responding to an exponentially increasing fear about the state of the world, not to mention the future. The tragedies in Norway were a local representation of an alarming increase in global anxiety prompted by shocking social and political

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE:

***Rapture*, 2015.**
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events. What amazes me is how much worse it has become around the world since then. None of my work is meant to reference a single event, rather it creates a set of constellations through zooming in and out on intersecting ideas, phenomena, and events. This is a fundamental positioning of my work.

JGC: *Lull*, which was shown at the 2016 Biennale de Montreal, also explored dissonant states, combining a female voice repeating a phrase from a lullaby and a microphone swinging like a metronome. *Toll*, at Art Basel, Miami Beach 2015, explored the same psychological terrain with more complexity. Could you describe the instruments used in that work?

CN: In 2015, I presented a version of *Toll* remastered for 5.1 surround sound on the outdoor 160-speaker array system of the New World Symphony Center. There were three instruments—the glass armonica, the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle, and the electric guitar. Each one was once banned for fear of the psychologi-

cal, physical, or social effects it had on the body. As the broadcast description explained, they “came together in a visceral soundscape of resonance and overtone that levels beauty and noise.” The title composition was influenced by Arvo Pärt’s “Fratres,” meaning “brotherhood,” and it puts the notion of social harmony and dissonance into question through lulling, taunting, and abrasive textures.

JGC: Could you describe your work with the musician and writer David Toop?

CN: David and I have been friends and collaborators for many years. We have performed together several times, have participated on panels together, and he has contributed several amazing texts in relation to my work, including for *Rapture*, *Lull*, and “Plexus.” We share an openness to perception beyond borders, an equalizing (but non-determinant) embrace of the metaphysical in relation to all else, a natural constellation-making way of perceiving and relating to the inevitable interconnectedness of everything, and an interest in using sound to work through these curiosities and investigations.

JGC: The “Plexus” reading library included *Fear of a Black Universe: An Outsider’s Guide to the Future of Physics* by the physicist Stephon Alexander. Does part of your practice involve pointing out hidden discrimination and xenophobia using psychoacoustic approaches—i.e., uncovering the past to repair the future?

CN: It is an important part of my practice to raise many issues to the surface, but not with a hierarchical importance. Many pasts have been destroyed or at least wounded and need to be repaired. Of course, discrimination and xenophobia constitute a substantial focus for consideration today, and rightly so. In addition to taking a somewhat science-fiction, speculative approach to looking at various spectrums of dystopia/utopia, my work is also occupied with spirituality and transcendence, and again unfolds a constellation of interconnections. Like sound, it is meant to be multilayered and dynamic in conceptual approach. ■■■

Camille Norment’s concert at the Bergen Håkonshallen takes place on May 26, 2023; her solo exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall is on view May 25–August 20, 2023.

THIS PAGE:

***Triplight*, 2008.**

Dynamic light sculpture with 1955 Shure microphone, light, and electronic components, dimensions variable.

OPPOSITE:

***Rhythm Wars—Interval*, 2016.**

Stainless steel, fiberglass, and LEDs, approx. 2 x 5 meters. View of permanent installation at Løren train station, Oslo, Norway.

THIS PAGE: DAVID OLIVEIRA / OPPOSITE: DAMIAN HEINISCH



