

Shannon Novak: Listening Forms

Balamohan Shingade and Erena Johnson

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Shannon Novak, *Listening Forms* (detail), NZME Building, Auckland, New Zealand, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

Listening Forms listens to the sounds of passersby. It hears the conversations of guests who arrive through the double-doors and the clicking of their heels on the stone floor. With each pitch, each tone, each noise, *Listening Forms* lights up. Its colours correspond to the frequencies of noise in its surrounds, and the louder the sound, the brighter the sculpture glows.

The in-situ installation by artist Shannon Novak comprises of acrylic light boxes that climb the entrance-way walls of the New Zealand Media and Entertainment (NZME) building. The vertical lines of *Listening Forms* echo the panels that bespeckle the building's exterior. Mansons TCLM Limited, who completed the building late 2015, had commissioned the public artwork as part of their application to the Auckland Council for the floor bonus scheme. The scheme charges developers with improving public space in exchange for increased floor area for their building, an agreement often resulting in constructions of a monolithic sculptures or fountains. And so, Mansons' choice to commission a site-specific public artwork that avoids the clichés of a monumental corporate statement is sure to elicit greater interest in the artwork, and in turn, contemporary art itself.

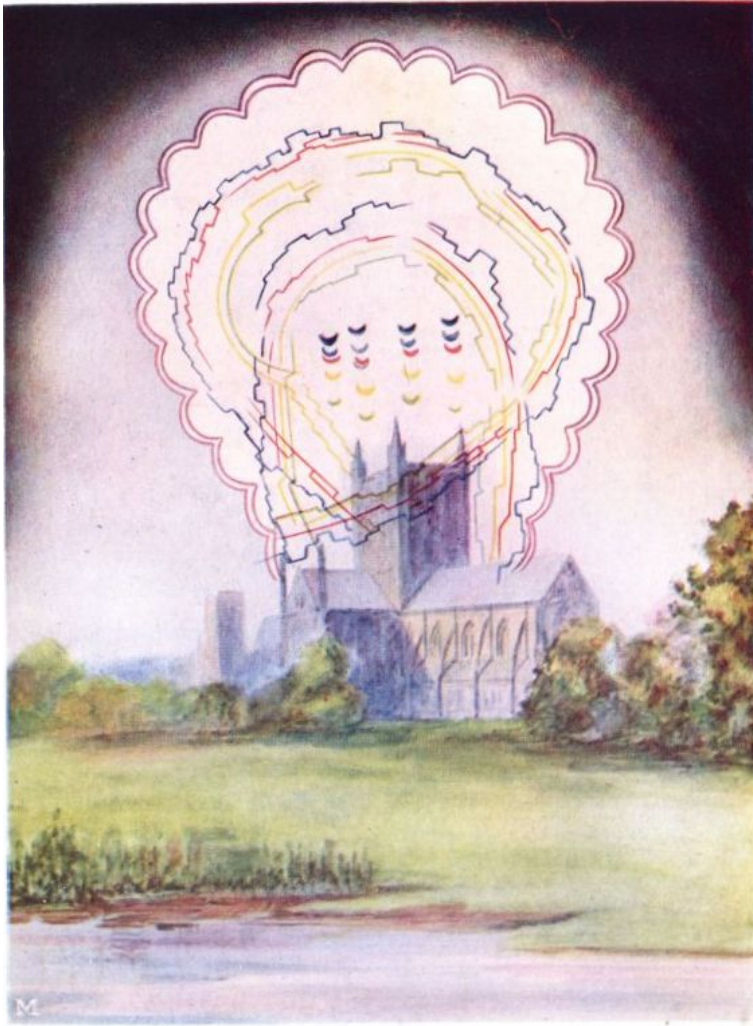
Novak's artworks are always an invitation to participate. A pianist and a synaesthete, much has been made of his representation of sound through visual forms. The geometric shapes which characterize his work developed as graphic codes for notating sound. His earliest works acted as visual representations of music, which viewers could sound out once they became familiar with the code. Later works were digital provocations, with visual scores appearing on screen when viewers glossed electronic devices over particular sites. While the visual motifs recur in different contexts and different mediums across his practice, it is their engagement with architecture that is most compelling. *Listening Forms*, while still an invitation to participate, is the first artwork which is itself the recipient of provocations from the public.

We met the artist earlier this year, when curating the inaugural exhibition for Malcolm Smith Gallery. The show, *Soft Architecture*, concerned itself with works which are responsive to their environments, which reveal architecture to be an intelligent or sensitive structure capable of rewiring itself as it is acted upon by humans, weather, machines. Some of the works chosen were materially soft, others transient and relying on the quality of light at certain times of the day. It was at this time we were introduced to *Listening Forms*, an artwork embodying the idea of an architecture that yields to human influence.

Architecture has always been mindful of sound. Churches pour out the voices of choirs and organs, concert halls vent orchestras, and radio towers, like the NZME building, secrete sound waves. Novak's artwork, however, makes a building do the opposite. It requires the building to become a structure that receives sound. The sculpture is difficult to distinguish as an entity separate from the building itself, and it plays on this relationship, causing the building assume living qualities. As *Listening Forms* recedes into the atrium walls, as though it is an organ (a lung, perhaps), the building itself becomes a listening form—an intelligent, receptive structure.

Part of the inspiration for *Listening Forms* comes from a mystic text authored at the turn of the twentieth-century by Annie Besant, one of the presidents of the Theosophical Society. The book, *Thought Forms*, proposes that thoughts and sounds occur visually as much as aurally or psychologically. It is not unlike the experience of synaesthesia, which itself might be described as an occult condition that reveals hidden resonances between sensory phenomena. The drawing on the following page, which depicts a church as animated by music, comes from *Thought Forms*. Surrounded by pastures and a river, and engulfed in a sound cloud, the church has life force. It is an organic, zoetic structure.

The animism evoked by *Listening Forms* is part of Novak's wider project to enliven utilitarian architecture. A number of the artist's projects have been engaged in augmenting the responsiveness of a building's architecture through an app that creates sound and visual forms around infrastructural details. When one holds their digital device over a sign such as FIRE HOSE REEL, or CCTV OPERATING, or, our favourite, SPRINKLER SHUT-OFF FEET OPPOSITE THIS SIGN, dissonant piano strokes sound and Novak's signature geometric shapes construct themselves around the sign. These series of works draw attention to the architectural fine print of a building, playfully embellishing their sensible aims. Using functional signage as the identity markers of buildings, Novak suggests that architecture, too, is connected to auditory and visual phenomena in hidden ways.



Thought-form of the *Music of Mendelssohn*, according to Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater in *Thought Forms* (1901).

If “modernity brings with it a degree of regret related to its disenchantment,”¹ then Novak has been attempting to reclaim the dynamism and responsiveness accorded to material structures in pre-modern times. But in order to evoke the organic animism of architectural constructs, he is ironically using the machine: modernity’s archetypal organism. With acrylic boxes, sensors and LED lights, Novak’s forms gesture toward the same futuristic dreams that science fiction has inspired within us: a world that responds to our slightest movements. And already, there are doors that open as we walk towards them, lighting controlled by the clap of our hands, information obtained by a swipe across a screen. But *Listening Forms* does not inspire the will to colonise the next frontier or have the universe rearrange itself according to our interests, which so many science fiction storylines propose, but rather expresses the will to have our material environment interact with us, commune with us. Novak’s work does not want us to manipulate and master the world, but play with it.

The surprise elicited by passersby as *Listening Forms* responds to their movement draws a small opening in the fabric of what seems possible in a functionalist foyer. And Novak shows us, through his assemblage of mechanical bodies, that our enchantment with the material world is possible anywhere.

Balamohan Shingade is a curator and writer. He is a Masters graduate of Elam School of Fine Arts where he was employed as a Professional Teaching Fellow 2012–15. Currently, he is the Manager and Curator of Malcolm Smith Gallery, a contemporary art space for East Auckland. Selected curated exhibitions include *Soft Architecture, Joyce Campbell: Te Taniwha and the Thread* (Malcolm Smith Gallery, Auckland) and *Thirty-six Views of Mount Taranaki* (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth). His recent publications include *Repositioning the Centre: Bepen Bhana's Frankie Goes to Bollywood* (Pantograph Punch), *The Adda Community* (Localise Newspaper), and *Joyce Campbell: Hide* (Ilam Campus Gallery).

Erena Johnson is a poet, essayist, and musician. She holds a BA(Hons) and a BMus in Jazz, and is currently working towards an MA on the poetry of Richard von Sturmer. Her research is concerned with religiosity in the arts. Previously, she has composed and performed music for the poetry of von Sturmer, Lyn Hejinian, Wallace Stevens and others, and has worked as a teaching assistant for the University of Auckland.

¹ McCann, Andrew. "The Savage Metropolis: Animism, Aesthetics and the Pleasures of a Vanished Race." *Textual Practice* 13 (2003): 325.