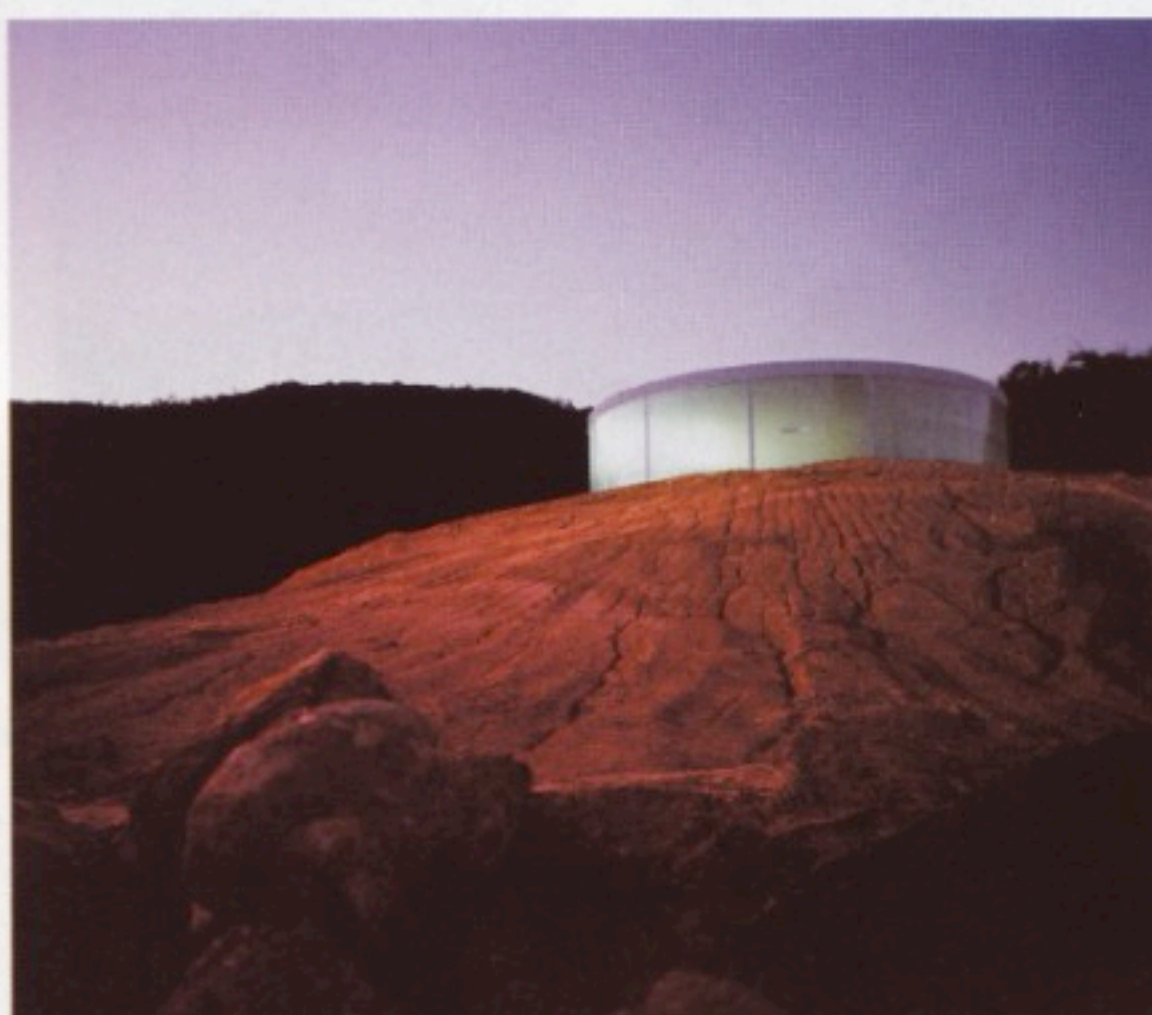


The Hole Truth

SETH KIM-COHEN ON DOUG AITKEN'S SONIC PAVILION

Doug Aitken, *Sonic Pavilion*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, Inhotim, Brumadinho, Brazil.

EVEN BEFORE I KNEW I would be going to Brazil, I had begun reading *Conquest of the Useless*, Werner Herzog's journals during the making of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). Had I been reading something else, I'd perhaps have been less attuned to the pervasive sense of folly I encountered at Inhotim, the sprawling botanical/art paradise in Brumadinho in the state of Minas Gerais that mining magnate Bernardo Paz has established to display a small portion of his world-class collection of art.* To say he has spared no expense is to vastly underreport both the magnitude and the aspirations of the place. Paz employs three curators, led by New York-based Allan Schwartzman and including Jochen Volz (recently artistic organizer of the Venice Biennale) and Rodrigo Moura, who have recently augmented an already overwhelming array of art with nine large-scale commissions, all inaugurated this year.

Inhotim, which takes its name from a contraction of "Senhor Tim" (a reference to an Englishman who once owned some of the land it occupies), morphs and distorts simple identifications such as museum, sculpture park, and botanical garden, becoming something

Everything about *Sonic Pavilion*—the emptiness of the interior, the austere geometry, the foggy visual frame—is designed to induce the impression of unprecedented access to secret sensory experience.

hitherto unnamed and unimagined. The best analogy I've come up with for Paz and Inhotim is Willy Wonka and his chocolate factory, which actually gives a fairly good sense of the scale, ambition, and style of the man and the place. The 110-acre complex contains a spatially diffuse constellation of grand projects by the celestial figures of contemporary art: Janine Antoni, Matthew Barney, Chris Burden, Janet Cardiff, Olafur Eliasson, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Dan Graham,

* See Anne M. Wagner, "Being There: Art and the Politics of Place," *Artforum* 43, no. 10 (Summer 2005): 264-69, for further discussion of Inhotim.

Hélio Oiticica, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, to name but a few.

The nine new projects are installed in forest and farmland outside the coiffed inner section of the complex, referred to as "the park." A new sculptural installation by Barney echoes the themes and forms in his video *De Lama Lâmina* (From Mud, a Blade), 2004, which runs continuously elsewhere. Burden's *Beam Drop*, 2008—a game of pickup sticks played with steel I beams dropped from a crane into a pool of wet cement—thornily crowns a barren hilltop, looking like a 3-D Pollock made by God. A purpose-built pavilion houses a piece by Cardiff and George Bures Miller, and a swimming pool by Jorge Macchi mimics the form of an address book: the deck verso, the pool recto, alphabetic tabs forming the stairs leading down into the water.

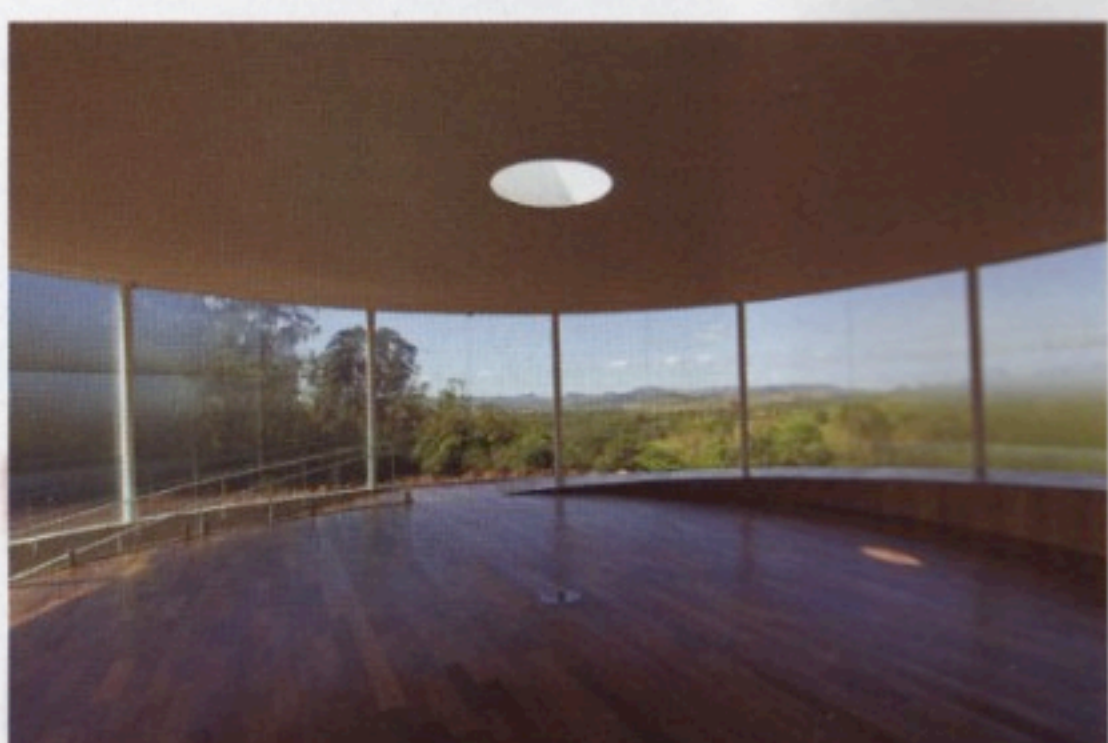
Perhaps the most ambitious of these ambitious projects is Doug Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion*, 2009, which is located on a thickly forested hilltop at the north end of the property. After five years of planning and construction, *Sonic Pavilion* was up and running when I visited in the third week of August, a few weeks before its October launch. As Aitken explained to me, the unusually long construction time was necessitated by the work's central feature: a hole approximately one mile deep and one foot in diameter. Using specialized equipment, the hole was painstakingly drilled, emptied, drilled deeper, emptied again, and so on before being lined with concrete. Aitken then lowered a battery of microphones and accelerometers into the hole at varying depths. At the top, the sounds that result—of the earth's rotation and the shifting of seismic plates—are transposed into the range of human hearing and amplified by eight loudspeakers arrayed around the circular interior of the structure. The printed project description speaks of "translating" the earth's movement: "This artwork strives to provide a new

relationship to the earth we constantly walk upon and occupy, revealing its mysterious and living dialogue."

During my visit, Aitken described the temporal experience of *Sonic Pavilion* as "a moment that doesn't rely on past or future." This mythical moment, or *Augenblick* (the blink of an eye), found purchase in visual art with the advent of Minimalism in the 1960s: Donald Judd's "specific objects" seemed to demand an all-at-once response that indicated phenomenology as the apposite theoretical rubric for decoding Minimalism's apparent objectivity. But in the 1970s, taking their lead from Jacques Derrida's critique of phenomenology, theorists of art began to require more of the encounter with a Minimalist sculpture than the instantaneous "now." Instead, they proposed, Minimalism demands an encounter not merely with the object but with its context: the exhibition space, the institution, economics, gender, sociality, and politics. In a 1990 essay titled "The Blink of an Eye," Rosalind Krauss issued a damning indictment of traditional art history's confidence in the "natural sign" of the art object, characterizing the concept of the now as "myth, spatial or mechanical metaphor, and inherited metaphysical concept." If the artwork's meaning making necessarily relies on its context, then investment in instantaneous experience is wasted on the empty promise of metaphysical abundance.

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ON SITE

Doug Aitken, *Sonic Pavilion*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, Inhotim, Brumadinho, Brazil. Photo: Pedro Motta.

Aitken is not the first artist to turn to the medium of sound in an effort to create, as he put it, an experience with "no beginning and no end, deep, pure, and direct." There is a pervasive sense—not just among visual artists who turn to sound as an alternative but also among artists who work primarily with sound—that the sonic is truer, more immediate, less susceptible to manipulation, than the visual, as if the adjective *sound* (meaning "solid, durable, stable") should somehow constitute the noun. This tendency has a history. In "Primal Sound," an essay written in 1919, Rainer Maria Rilke fantasizes about dropping a phonograph needle into a skull's coronal suture (the line created by the fusing of bone plates during infancy):

What would happen? A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music. . . . [W]hat variety of lines then, occurring anywhere, could one not put under the needle and try out? Is there any contour that one could not, in a sense, complete in this way and then experience it, as it makes itself felt, thus transformed, in another field of sense?"

Rilke's fantasy announces the dream of a unified field of the senses, bridging "the abysses which divide the one order of sense experience from the other" and "completing," to use Rilke's verb, our experience of the world. The implication is that there is a wholeness *out there* and that any feeling we may have of insufficient understanding is merely a product of our inadequate perceptual faculties *in here*.

Unaware of the book in my bag, Aitken at one point conjured the name *Fitzcarraldo*, relating the folly of his project to Herzog's. Yet, while Herzog's film and Aitken's installation both offer challenges to the intransigence of the earth, Rilke's hypothetical experiment offers a way to describe the fundamental

difference between them: For Herzog, dropping a phonographic needle into the suture's groove would be meaningless, except for the act of having done it. The resultant sound would not get us any closer to the "truth" of the skull or its onetime inhabitant (brain, soul, self); it would document only the act qua act. Here, in the self-aware presentation of doing something—rather than in the faithful re-presentation of something—resides the only experience to which we can convincingly ascribe the adjective *true*. Herzog warns against the seduction of thinking that the truth is something out there and that knowing is simply a matter of quantifying and transporting that something in here: "Facts do not create truth." Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion*, on the other hand, equates the facticity of sensory experience with truth, but then dodges the responsibilities of this equation, clinging to the justifying premise that, ultimately, there is a something, a telos, backstopping experience.

The pavilion is accessed by means of a spiraling, inclined walkway that starts outside, following the contour of the hill, before turning into a winding concrete corridor that appears to move inevitably toward this evasive something. The spiral path continues inside on a raised wooden ramp that doubles as the room's only seating. As the sloped corridor emerges into the glass pavilion, the earth appears through the panoramic windows in its primeval virginity, the Brazilian forest receding endlessly in every direction. When the visitor nears the glass, a lenticular film blurs the periphery of the field of vision as in cinematic depictions of a dream or a memory. Everything—the corridor leading inward like a cathedral labyrinth, the emptiness of the interior, the austere geometry, the foggy visual frame—is designed to induce the impression of unprecedented access to secret sensory experience.

The sound of the pavilion is unpredictable, or, as it is called in music, aleatory. During my visit, the speakers emitted a low, steady rumble. Occasionally, a brief, higher-pitched moment of friction intervened, like the sound of rubbing your hands together in the cold. I take Aitken at his word when he says the primal churning of the audio is the sound of the earth a mile below its surface. But what was I actually hearing? Stone moving against stone? Loose material shifting as

solid material beneath it gave way? To pedantically supply this information would reduce the "mysterious and living dialogue" to the didactic monologue of a science exhibit. I found myself relating the sound of the earth to more familiar, worldly sounds: wind across a microphone, jet engines from inside the jet, the massive transformer outside my bedroom window; and to musical and artistic sounds: the Theatre of Eternal Music's *Inside the Dream Syndicate, Volume 1: Day of Niagara* (1965), Peter Ablinger's *Weiss/Weisslich 6* for twelve cassette recorders (1992), and, most uncannily, Nurse with Wound's *Salt Marie Celeste* (2003). The sound itself is nothing special: Only the suggestion of its source solicits our attention and grants it meaning. Of course, this is always the case. Meaning does not simply inhere within the *in-itself*, regardless of whether it is the thing-in-itself or sound-in-itself. Meaning is only ever produced by the frictions between things. Like every medium, sound derives its meaning from context, from intertextuality, from the play of difference in its conceptual and material strata. It is the worldly, rather than the earthly, that presents the possibility of meaning.

The situation and design of *Sonic Pavilion* insist that there is something sacrosanct beneath the superficial stratum we occupy. The sound emanating from the hole and amplified in the pavilion is the cipher that will unlock the coded mystery of the deep. The Rilkean implication is that a phenomenal entity, like the earth, possesses immanent, essential properties that are consistently expressed across different sensory manifestations. It might be comforting to think that phenomena can be "solved" and that experience can be completed by filling in the blanks in our senses. But confronting the existential burden of knowing that experience inevitably evades completion is surely more honest. *Sonic Pavilion* denies the visitor the privilege of assuming this burden, offering blissful ignorance in its place. Too bad. It's not every day that an artist is given the opportunity, the site, and the resources to dig a mile-deep hole in the ground. *Sonic Pavilion* comes so close to initiating a genuine act of consciousness, of conscientiousness, of conscience. But ultimately it refuses to gaze into the void at its core, abdicating the responsibility of facing up to what Wallace Stevens describes as "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." □

SETH KIM-COHEN IS AN ARTIST AND THEORIST. HIS BOOK *IN THE BLINK OF AN EAR: TOWARD A NON-COCHLEAR SONIC ART* WAS PUBLISHED BY CONTINUUM THIS YEAR. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

CONTRIBUTORS



ALISON MCMAHAN

Writer and filmmaker ALISON MCMAHAN is president of Homunculus Productions. She has taught film history, theory, and new media at the University of Amsterdam and at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, and is the author of two scholarly books, including *Alice Guy Blaché: Lost Visionary of the Cinema* (Continuum, 2002). Currently writing a novelized biography of that early cinematic pioneer, McMahan here provides a critical account of the director's life and work as a major retrospective of Guy Blaché's films opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York this month.



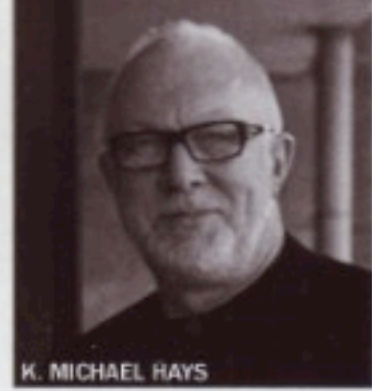
SETH KIM-COHEN

Artist and theorist SETH KIM-COHEN is director of the Institute for Doctoral Studies in Visual Arts, a Ph.D. program in philosophy for studio artists. His most recent book, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*, was published by Continuum this year, and he is currently at work on a Twitter-based novel, *A Thousand Apparatus*. His situation-specific videos and performances have been screened and staged at Tate Modern, London, and CBGB and Issue Project Room in New York, among other venues. In this issue, Kim-Cohen gives a look and a listen to Doug Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion*, a site-specific work installed last month at Inhotim in Brumadinho, Brazil.



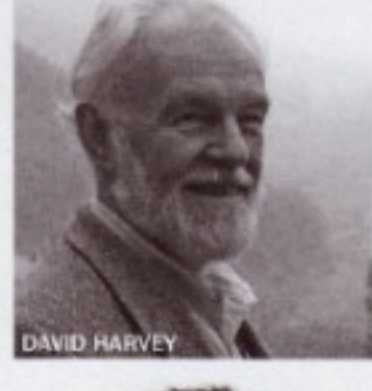
KATHARINA FRITSCH

Düsseldorf-based artist KATHARINA FRITSCH is a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Münster. Since 1984, Fritsch's work has appeared, most prominently, at Tate Modern, London; Dia Center for the Arts, New York; and Kunsthalle Basel and has been acquired by museums including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Schaulager, Basel. In 1991, she participated in the Fifty-first Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, and she represented Germany at the 1995 Venice Biennale. As a major retrospective of her sculptures and silk-screened works, organized by Bice Curiger, travels from the Kunsthau Zürich to the Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Fritsch curates for these pages a project of objects and images that, while visible, are never wholly seen. PHOTO: INEZ VAN LAMSWEERDE AND VINOODH MATADIN



K. MICHAEL HAYS

K. MICHAEL HAYS is Eliot Noyes Professor of Architectural Theory at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. From 2000 to 2009, he also served as the first adjunct curator of architecture at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, where (with Dana Miller) he curated the exhibition "Buckminster Fuller: Starting with the Universe" (2008). He was the founder and editor of *Assemblage* (1986-2000), an influential journal of architecture and design, and is the author of numerous books, including *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject* (1992, MIT Press) and *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* (also MIT), which arrives in bookstores this month. In anticipation of the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Bauhaus 1919-1938: Workshops in Modernity," opening November 8, Hays gives a future-forward look at the legendary design school's legacy. PHOTO: MARTHA STEWART



DAVID HARVEY

DAVID HARVEY is Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, where he also directs the Center for Place, Culture and Politics. He is the author of sixteen books, including *Social Justice and the City* (John Hopkins University Press, 1973), *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, 1989), and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005). His online lectures "Reading Marx's *Capital*" are to be published in book form by Verso, and his new study, *Enigma of Capital*, is forthcoming from Profile Books. In these pages, Harvey responds to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth* (Harvard, 2009), selections from which were presented in *Artforum's* October issue in advance of the book's publication.



MATTHEW JESSE JACKSON

MATTHEW JESSE JACKSON teaches in the Departments of Visual Arts and Art History at the University of Chicago. His book-length study *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* is forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press next year. Since 2006, in collaboration with Christopher P. Heuer, Andrew Perchuk, and the Jackson Pollock Bar, he has been associated with "Our Literal Speed." His writing has been published in various journals and magazines, including the *New Left Review*, *October*, and *BlackBook*, as well as in James Elkins and Michael Newman's anthology *The State of Art Criticism* (Routledge, 2007). For this issue, Jackson considers curator Peter Eleay's group show "The Quick and the Dead," recently on view at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

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France, Germany, Austria, and Belgium
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E-mail: melanie@artforum.com

Italy and Switzerland
Giorgia Cadenazzi
Tel and Fax +39 (02) 545 75 01
E-mail: giorgia@artforum.com

Spain, Portugal, and Mexico
Teresa López-Castro
New York Office
E-mail: teresa@artforum.com

United Kingdom
Zoe Panting
Tel +44 (0) 7791 382 813
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