
*Overtoon – Platform for Sound Practitioners
presents*

**Instead of “sound art,” say: abrasion, a dirge,
willed from the other side of a leaky room,
undisciplined, celebrative, dangerous, always
emerging.**

An 8-part Podcast by Bill Dietz

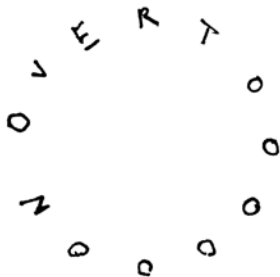
In conversation with Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Nikita Gale, Jennie C. Jones,
Aurélié Nyirabikali Lierman, Benjamin Piekut, Marina Rosenfeld, Lauren Tosswill,
& Hong-Kai Wang

<https://overtone.org/podcasts/instead-of-sound-art-say/>

Episode 01: Nikita Gale

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Audio Transcript



Audio Intro

[Sounds of a cassette tape mechanism and tape hiss, followed by voices of all eight participants in the series uttering variations on the word “sound” and “sound art.” More cassette tape sounds, followed by the voices of all eight participants simultaneously saying the word “SOUND” in a loop. More cassette tape sounds, followed by “male” and “female” computer voices read the complete title of the series (“Instead of “sound art,” say: abrasion, a dirge, willed from the other side of a leaky room, undisciplined, celebrative, dangerous, always emerging.”) and the Episode Number. Cassette tape sounds cut out.]

Conversation

[Throughout the conversation there is series of unpredictably and frequently shifting virtual audio backgrounds – atmospheres recorded by Bill Dietz & Bryce Hackford including children playing outdoors, howling wind, a public bus trip, rain and thunder, nature sounds with a distant saxophone, a quiet field, electrical buzz, and an outdoor scene populated by cicadas.]

Nikita Gale: Cool. Should I do a clap? There ´s going to be a delay, but [inaudible]-

Bill Dietz: I know. Sure, why not?

Nikita Gale: [inaudible] clap, okay.

Bill Dietz: Thank you.

Nikita Gale: You get that?

Bill Dietz: Yes. Perfect.

Nikita Gale: Cool. All right, great. Now we ´re on time.

Bill Dietz: I know.

Nikita Gale: We ´re in sync.

Bill Dietz: Now. It ´s official. Now we ´re officially talking. Yeah. What I thought to sort of start with all of them is also to maybe sort of provincialize the idea of sound art, so that we ´re not just talking about it as a generality, but that it ´s a specific thing with a specific limited history. Of course, it can mean a lot of things, but it also means that thing

that was invented by specific people in the late '70s in the US and Europe.

Nikita Gale: Right, yeah. And I would say even my knowledge of that is fairly limited and pretty generalized.

Bill Dietz: Well, I was curious about that too, if it's useful for you at all to think of your work in relation to that history of sound art.

Nikita Gale: Yeah. It's funny, because when you reached out to me about using the title or the label, sound art, it made me think of this ... Don't judge me for this. It's a John Mayer. He was doing a TikTok live stream or an Instagram, and he was describing his relationship to playing guitar. And he was talking about how he has a luthier set up his guitars. He doesn't do that himself. And he said something along the lines of, "I'm not on that side of the guitar. I'm on the other side." And so I really liked that phrasing of saying you're not on this side of the thing, you're on another side.

And I feel like in many ways, that's my relationship to sound art. In most cases, I feel like I'm approaching it from more of a social aspect or something that's more conceptual, specifically around material history. I feel like a few years ago, I started feeling like there were these conversations around sound art that were kind of weaving into my practice, or conversations around listening. They started to feel a bit limiting, but also there's this kind of ableist angle to the whole thing, sort of rooting concepts around a practice to one particular sense. And I've recently sort of come to this realization that the work is about listening, to some extent, but I think it's more so about attention and structures that shape and manipulate attention, because I think that term encompasses all the various ways that senses can interact, or a sensory system can interact. Yeah.

Bill Dietz: That's great.

Nikita Gale: That was sort of a long response, but ...

Bill Dietz: No, no, no, it's great. It's great. You touched on a lot of things that I wanted to bring up, too, like that sense of the sort of sound art as something which I think originally was meant to specify something, but actually kind of ends up limiting and excluding.

Nikita Gale: Yeah, yeah. But I think it's like both are necessary, which is why it feels really complicated. It's not unlike conversations around identity

politics and identity-based art, right? Because it's necessary to define the thing, but at some point it starts to overdetermine, thus actually limiting the kinds of conversations that can come out of it. Yeah. I mean, we haven't mentioned this word yet, but genre is something I think about quite a lot.

Bill Dietz: Well, I mean, there's so many different things I wanted to go to. And maybe to come back to genre a bit, when you're talking about attention and materiality vis-a-vis sound, there's something I think really interesting in there where somehow sound is often supposed or tasked with having this special relationship to materiality. And in my mind, that's also kind of always a kind of myth. It's what people imagine sound to be. It's this kind of projection onto it as this other thing. And yet at the same time, it's interesting to think of using sound because it allows you to find sociality and meaning in materiality in a particular kind of way, something like that.

Nikita Gale: Yeah. I mean, there's this thing ... Gosh, where do I want to start with this idea? Because there's the conversation about thinking of sound as like a physical, mechanical form of energy. It's the consequence of things touching other things. And so that's always been a really provocative premise for art-making, thinking of sound as a kind of friction, because then if you were to extend that idea to ... or try to play it out to a various number of conclusions, it gets really interesting. You're like, "Okay, well, if sound is material, what happens when it's" ... I'm kind of rambling, but there's this short story by J.G. Ballard called *The Sound Sweep*. I don't know if you've heard of this story.

Bill Dietz: [inaudible]-

Nikita Gale: Yeah, *Sound Sweep*. I feel like it's the one. And that's the kind of thing ... I read a lot of sci-fi, because often a lot of these theories or propositions have already been explored 50 to 60 years ago in science fiction. It almost feels like a lot of sound art practices are actually really aligned with that way of producing or exploring knowledge. Even if they don't say that, there's elements of it, for sure.

Bill Dietz: It's amazing that you mentioned that story, because it was a favorite of Maryanne Amacher, who was a kind of mentor of mine. And she always said that if she taught a class, she would want Ballard's *Vermilion Sands* collection of stories to be the textbook.

Nikita Gale: That's amazing. And that is not surprising.

Bill Dietz: You were saying before ... I'm trying to weave it together [inaudible]-

Nikita Gale: Yeah, no, it's cool. We're just vibing.

Bill Dietz: ... about genre. And when you mentioned genre, I'm also thinking of what other kind of histories of sound and music do you position yourselves with, especially if not canonical quote, unquote, "sound art."

Nikita Gale: Yeah. I mean, for me, it's like everything about my practice is deeply biographical. It's autobiographical. So for me, it's like my relationship to sound is pretty unapologetically linked to pop music, rock music, forms of Black cultural, mostly musical production. And also, the way that images tie into all of that, mostly around performance and live performance. And so for me, it's like my earliest exposures to artist contracts, which I feel there's a pretty dense conceptual history around artist contracts ... But my first time ever hearing about an artist contract was when Prince was in his fight with the record labels and was drawing "slave" across the side of his face when he would do live performances.

And so all of those things kind of tie into each other. And it's one of the reasons why I really love the work of Stuart Hall. He really understood that there were no boundaries between high and low art. I mean, it's even problematic to say that, but it feels like the most efficient way of getting that point across. And so for me, it's like what we see presented in pop culture and pop music right now is just a reflection of what our culture seems to value and is willing to put attention towards. And where resources go, attention flows often. So those things feel like really deeply social and political issues. Even if on the surface they don't seem serious, I think they're extremely serious.

Bill Dietz: But I love, and I think it's so much maybe in queue with your work, drawing a connection between Prince's contract stuff and then Michael Asher's conceptual contract stuff.

Nikita Gale: Yeah, totally. Yeah, it's kind of the same thing, in many ways.

Bill Dietz: That's perfect.

Nikita Gale: Yeah, or Seth Siegelaub. I hate to say it, I was going to try to avoid bringing it up, but the Taylor Swift thing, like Taylor Swift not

owning her masters and having to rerecord everything in order to own the work, is pretty interesting.

Bill Dietz: There is something really interesting in that what makes a musical work is a very particular set of institutional and legal practices. The thing is actually ... it's a particular set of vibrations in the air, and somehow you make it into property.

Nikita Gale: Yeah, 100%.

Bill Dietz: And so the way that that happens is so interesting.

Nikita Gale: It is really interesting. I love that you brought that up because I'm working on a project right now that is about this very thing. My question is around when images intersect with that, it's like the mechanisms to produce the sound versus the sound itself. Where does the notion of property lie in that? Is it just about the sense of hearing or, like you said, the vibrations?

Bill Dietz: Yeah, it's actually, funnily, not so far from some things I've been thinking about too. I think the direction I go with it is also more about how internalized it is for us to turn something into a containable thing, into an object-like thing or something like that. And so in a funny way, I think the way I've been sort of thinking about is how not to experience something as property. Is it even possible perceptually, from where we are now as beings and such?

Nikita Gale: Yeah. I mean, last year I did this project also at LAXART with Hamza Walker, who's the curator now. And Hamza is a book in music freak, in the best way possible. I say that as a high compliment. But when he approached me about doing a show there, we were coming up on the 100 year ... it would've been Charlie Parker's 100th birthday. And so we were talking about the history of the space, because when LAXART was that their now-former space at 7000 Santa Monica Boulevard, that space used to be a recording studio. And a lot of really famous, well-known musicians recorded there, like Charlie Parker, I think Billie Holiday, Elvis. Elvis was the one that kept coming up. And so in the research I was doing, I was like, "Hamza, I don't know if this is going to be about ... not Charlie Parker. I think it's going to be about Big Mama Thornton, because she recorded Hound Dog there. But it will tangentially be about Elvis, because he covered it a few years later and it became a huge hit."

But one of the things that always comes up for me in these conversations about the history of rock music and covering, it always sort of lands on this kind of very binary concept around white artists stealing Black artists' work, and it got me to thinking about this idea of property, who owns what? But also, I was trying to unpack it a bit more and think about the context of making work, particularly music in the South, the kind of post-Civil War, post-Jim Crow South, where ... I grew up in Atlanta, so I have a very sort of personal relationship to the American South, because I've always experienced that place, particularly Atlanta, as somewhere where everyone is just living on top of each other in very close proximity. And there's a level of respect and integration that I really haven't experienced in any other cities where I've lived.

But anyway, I started to think about this condition of just closeness and proximity. In Elvis's case, there's been many stories about how he would've been overhearing a lot of stuff and being influenced by these sounds of gospel music and blues and all this stuff. Obviously, I'm not trying to defend him in any way, but it feels like the larger issue is the machinery around these kinds of performances or this production of music that's kind of this extractive thing.

Bill Dietz: Yeah. It's like the problem is not contagion or that his sort of being there and participating in something, but rather that his structural position as white man allowed it to be capitalized in a different way, and for him to make all the money out of it.

Nikita Gale: Yeah, yeah. So there's this idea of influence that I've always found really interesting, particularly in this moment where on social media, it's like you're just consuming or being exposed to so many things that sometimes you don't even remember ... An idea might feel like you dreamt it up, but then you're like, "Oh shit, somebody posted that a year ago."

Bill Dietz: But what I love is the things you're mentioning are also these informal places where in everyday life, we don't necessarily do that. It's great that that thing that we heard last year on TikTok is somewhere in us, in a way. And yet as soon as we're confronted with institutional formal space or whatever, it's like, "Whose is that?"

Nikita Gale: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Bill Dietz: I mean, one funny question, which can totally be off the record if you don't ... I'm just curious how you actually think about selling work.

Nikita Gale: Yeah. I deeply believe that artists should be paid for their work. With sound work specifically ... because I also make art objects, so it's like I sell that work. But with sound work, I'm always thinking about how to, well, one, make certain kinds of work accessible, because there is a precedent for selling sound-based work as physical media, like albums, CDs, cassettes, MP3s, what have you.

And I actually have a show that's up right now at Emalin, London, called Blur Ballad. And there's a sound work that's sort of a central piece of the installation, that I am also releasing as a limited edition CD and vinyl record. And a part of that was because often in installations, it's like there's sound and video, and then it sort of goes away. It's collected or it goes away and it's in storage, and then it doesn't really have a life beyond the exhibition. And with this show, it's like I really wanted there to be some accessible part of the installation. And for me, the thing that made the most sense was to actually create another kind of art object that could circulate in a way that a musical recording would.

Bill Dietz: I think I've said this somewhere else to someone, but I think it's a really funny example. Years and years ago, I think MoMA collected Alvin Lucier's piece, I Am Sitting in a Room. They got the original recording and the score. And I think they gave him, from what I heard anyway, six figures. But the funny thing to me is that that recording, you could buy on CD, and the score, you could buy online for like \$10. And so there's something really funny about property and original and these kind of things that's in there that's a funny confusion about sound, where that would never happen in another medium.

Nikita Gale: Yeah, yeah. It's funny, because I think about this with ... I have some works that are ... they basically, when the works are acquired, the acquiring institution essentially receives a set of instructions with the original version of the software for the work, so that they have the ability to adjust it according to where it's installed. So for me, when I think of something like that, it's like what you're buying is essentially kind of a license to not just exhibit the work and possibly, depending on what the parameters are, to reproduce it in whatever form you see fit. But it's also giving you a license to adjust the work as it needs to be adjusted for whatever exhibition conditions. But

yeah, I think a lot of it is just like, what is a contract besides just an agreement between parties to conduct themselves in a certain way? So I don't know. I think there's something about the contract being this sort of direct interfacing between the artist and the institution, whereas with a recording or a CD, it's a kind of one-way, monodirectional thing.

Bill Dietz: I love that. Yeah, I love that. I don't know, I'm being slightly careful and mindful of time, but just maybe a few more things.

Nikita Gale: Yeah, of course.

Bill Dietz: One just super broad, funny question. I don't know if it's that interesting, but I was just sort of curious, particularly if quote, unquote, "sound art" is not necessarily the place where the most interesting stuff is happening, and your attention is elsewhere anyway, I'm just sort of curious where outside of sound art you see the most interesting sound stuff happening?

Nikita Gale: Man, I've been going to a lot of concerts lately, and so that's been just taking over my brain. I mean, I went to the Beyoncé concert when she was in LA. I went twice, and the sound is ... it's like nothing I've ever seen. And I wouldn't consider myself a hardcore Beyoncé fan, but there is something about ... Because what I like to do is I like to research. I'm really into stage design and that kind of thing. So I love reading about who is behind the production on these really big shows. Hold on, production ...

Oh, and I came across this video that showed the kind of production process of making Beyoncé's in-ear monitors for her show. And I just think that technology is so interesting, because it's like this thing that is necessary, because when you're working, when you're making sound in a space that's so huge, because sound is so messy, it's like you need that in order to sound like you're in sync with the music to everyone in the auditorium. And I don't know, it's like all those little technical production details are really fascinating to me, more fascinating probably than the actual show itself, but just how it's like people dealing with the messiness of sound.

Bill Dietz: It reminds me of an old early piece of Ei Arakawa's, where I think he was really into Super Bowl halftime shows, where there would be a team of like 1,000 people who would build a stage two minutes. And I was also following the Beyoncé tour too, because we went in Wales, here in England.

Nikita Gale: Amazing. Oh, my God.

Bill Dietz: But just the logistics of it are so incredible. I think there was something like more than 100 semis' of equipment.

Nikita Gale: Oh yeah, the logistics are unbelievable; also, the carbon footprint.

Bill Dietz: Oh yeah, I saw some think pieces about how Beyoncé was ruining the environment, and I don't know ...

Nikita Gale: Taylor Swift's ruining it way more than Beyoncé. Can I just say that?

Bill Dietz: Yes. Thank you.

Nikita Gale: She's booked a whole second part of her tour.

Bill Dietz: I mean, to go from the sublime to the ridiculous in terms of logistics and tech, a sort of closing-ish direction of question I just sort of was thinking, on the one hand, do you even think it makes sense to have an organization specialized in quote, unquote "sound art"? And if maybe yes, then what infrastructure would you actually want from a place like that? What would even make sense, or can one even say such a thing? Sorry, that's a very question-y question.

Nikita Gale: Well, no, but I really like it because one of the things that I've appreciated about sometimes being in conversation with an institution or a thinker who is working in a field that is connected to what I'm doing, but maybe in a more specific or technical way ... I don't think I've ever regretted having a conversation like that. And I would like to imagine that the other side of that conversation has not had any regrets about the conversation either. All of these things have a place in the greater universe of ... at least for me as an artist, what I'm doing. So I think there's very much a need for institutions that still specialize in things, because you still need facts and research and real data to make things. That's what I think, anyway.

Bill Dietz: That's perfect.