

# fair.

Stephan Moore

April 8-June 17 2011



The connection between smell and memory is well documented. One sniff and Grandma's kitchen or an overfilled camp latrine can vividly emerge from the recesses of the mind. Stephan Moore's exhibition "Fair" demonstrates how sound can play an equally similar role, transporting listeners to a time and place of their past. With its samplings of sound, his complex audio installation takes visitors on a sensorial journey that is both riotous and fantastical.

The focal point of the minimally-installed gallery is a set of black headphones, which rest on top of a white pedestal. Casually tacked to the wall in front of them is a small page torn from a notebook with the word "fair" written in ink. The white walls are otherwise bare, the only break in their presence being a small window-like aperture. The space, however, is by no means empty. Layers of sound from four speakers outside the gallery walls blend with another track on the headphones, creating what the artist describes as "both an inner and outer listening experience."

The natural impulse is to latch on to the word "fair" and try to construct a narrative from the audio track. There's what sounds like a shooting gallery in an arcade, the click of metal as a carnival ride is securely latched, the fear-tinged screams of riders on a roller coaster and the tinny organ music of the merry-go-round. Perhaps we're at a county fair or an amusement park? But there's also the sound of the doors closing in the New York subway. Are we at Coney Island? How does the Indian music fit in? Or the European train schedule announced in various languages?

Contemporary sound artists like Bill Fontana or Janet Cardiff record sound that builds to a single experience such as standing at Niagara Falls or listening to a choir sing a Forty Part Motet. Moore's work functions quite differently. While the artist refers to the work as a "composition," the effect is less the blending of sounds than a sampling of field recordings Moore collected between 2003 and 2011 that fade in and out. Once the impulse to make a single narrative from the piece is let go is when the real magic begins.

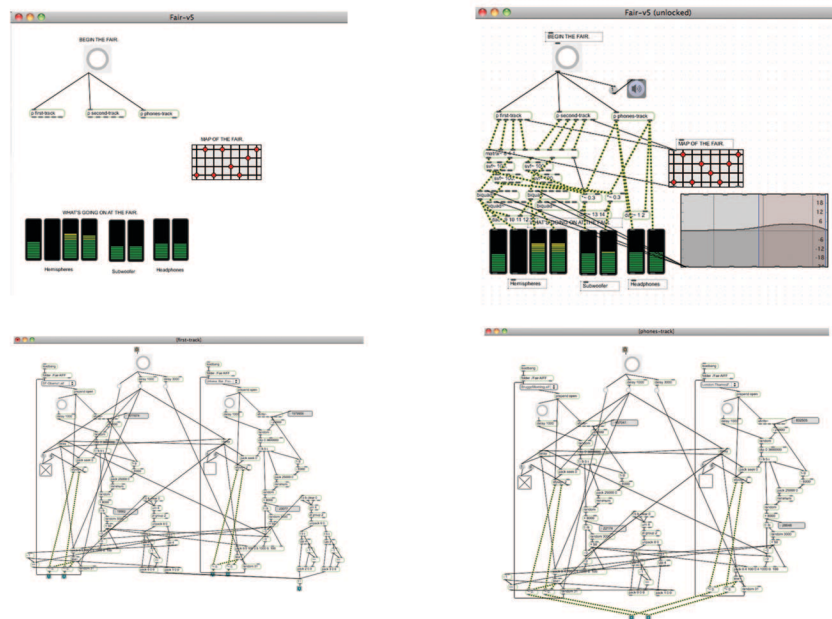
In a period of about two minutes, I went from teenage memories of a 4th of July parade on the island of St. Johns, Virgin Islands to commuting via the New Haven commuter line to my summer internship at the Whitney Museum; from riding in a horse-drawn carriage through the cobblestone streets of Charleston to waiting in the lounge at London's Gatwick airport; from attend-

a Cincinnati Reds game as a kid to taking my own child on her first roller-coaster ride. These were not seminal moments but ordinary ones, excavated out of the recesses of my mind by prompts provided by Moore.

Interestingly, if I went back, I would never hear the same audio sequence. Moore programmed a computer mixing system to control the output through the headphones and the additional four speakers. It not only selects the sounds and rotates them amongst the speakers but actually splits them so that the right and left channels of a single sound never come from the same source.

The direction and quality of the sound are what make the sense of dislocation so successful. Using a six-channel speaker called a "Hemisphere," which he designed and sells, Moore radiates the audio in various directions, bouncing it off the walls, floor and ceiling to totally envelop the visitor. In many ways, it is like being at a fair, where you are barraged by sights, sounds, smells: a kind of sensory overload of sorts. Perhaps this is what Moore was insinuating all the time.

*Text by Rebecca Dimling Cochran, independent critic and curator based in Atlanta, GA*



Screenshots of computer software used in "Fair"

You're in Basel, Switzerland at a Thai Karaoke bar. Amidst the murmur of conversations and the sound of clinking glass, you hear a brave soul on stage singing a foreign tune. Suddenly, you hear the doors open and close in a New York City subway. A rowdy mob of people surrounds you. A few feet away, a drunken man shouts "EVERYBODY GET NAKED!!!" The bustling crowd fades into echoing high heel footsteps behind you.

This is just one possible scenario you may encounter when listening to artist Stephan Moore's sound installation "Fair" (2011) at Seed Space, where thirty unique field recordings are broadcast through four [expertly] hand-made, six-sided speakers and wireless headphones. The organization of sounds is never the same: their order, the amount of time in which they are played, and the source they are played from is spontaneously determined by a computer. As a result, a unique story unfolds right before your ears. It's like watching a movie with your eyes closed (but with super surround sound). What's interesting about sound is that it's constant. As the artist once pointed out: "you can't blink your ears." In "Fair," Moore examines the way that sound shapes the narrative of our everyday lives.

Within Seed Space, a pair of headphones rests on top of a white platform surrounded by white packing peanuts on the floor. Above the headphones is a piece of notebook paper tacked to the wall, the word "fair" handwritten across it in black marker. Four hemisphere speakers visibly hang around the outside of the space. Recordings range from a celebratory crowd after Barack Obama's presidential victory to slot machines at a Reno, Nevada casino to a platform in an Amsterdam train station. No less important is the additional layer of silent/empty sounds that play into the equation and unforeseen noises happening in the surrounding space: the sound of a passing train, for example, or a buzz saw in the downstairs woodshop. In addition to natural sound, each recording weaves in and out of the four speakers and headphones, according to the computer's whim.

"Fair" is hardly random or solely computer generated, however. Moore carefully selected and edited each recording, determining the balance of sound content. He laid the groundwork and set the scene, then let the computer take over from there: "It's a bit like a nascent life-form -- I had to set it into motion to be able to observe its behavior and make adjustments." This aleatoric method, in which the course is determined in general but depends on chance in detail, was made popular in the 1940s by composer/music theorist John Cage. Cage's experimental music later influenced Fluxus artists such as Alison Knowles, whose poem "House of Dust" (1967) relies on randomly generated combinations of variables that decide a poem's form. In contemporary film music, such as composer John Williams' score for the

latest Jurassic Park movie, aleatoric music is used to increase a sense of drama and urgency.

Moore also achieves this heightened sense of drama through the work's indeterminacy. Filtered through the chance-formatting software, the recordings suggest distillations of places and objects and disconnected parts of larger scenarios, each centered around the concept of agora: the public, the exposed, and the crowded space. In an age where society has become increasingly more public, we often tune out most of the sounds we hear--the pile of packing peanuts perhaps a visualization of such discarded, extraneous noise. Moore's work, however, makes you pay attention to the rise and fall of a crowd's energy, or the distinct way a church bell rings. It also transports you to the places and sounds of your past, where you insert your own associations and emotional logic in a personal, private reflection of the sound narrative. In providing headphones as a listening option, Moore references this dichotomy between private and public.

In a 1957 lecture, Experimental Music, John Cage described his process as "a purposeless play" which is "an affirmation of life - not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living..." In dissolving fixed properties of sound into a fluid process, doing away with the traditional control of the composer/artist of the material, Moore creates a portrait of sound as an affirmation of life.

*Rachel Bubis is an independent arts writer and curator in Nashville, TN.*



**Photograph of Stephan Moore's hemisphere speaker.**



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#### **Artist**

Stephan Moore is a sound artist based in Providence and Brooklyn who makes improvised performance systems; scores for dance, theater, and video productions; recordings; sound installations; and custom-built speakers and software. He is also an experienced performer, teacher, and freelance programmer. He holds an undergraduate music degree from Western Michigan University and an MFA in Electronic Art from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He is currently enrolled in the MEME Ph.D. program at Brown University.

#### **Curator**

Rachel Bubis is an independent arts writer and curator of Seed Space. Her writing has appeared in Art Art Zine, The Examiner and The Nashville Wire. She recieved a B.A. in Art History from Rollins College.

#### **Writer**

Rebecca Dimling Cochran is an independent critic and curator based in Atlanta. She has published in Art in America, Art & Antiques, Art Review, Flash Art, Frieze, New Art Examiner and Sculpture magazines; on the web at Artforum.com and ArtsriticATL.com; architecture and design writing in Atlanta Magazine and Atlanta Magazine Home, as well as doing radio commentary on WABE Atlanta. She holds a BFA from the Portland School of Art, a certificate in Fine and Decorative Arts from Sotheby's and an MA in contemporary curating from the Royal College of Art, London.