

Surround



Scott Sherk

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Surround is about sound and listening. In these sound works I am approaching sound as a physical material that can be manipulated and sculpted like traditional materials of sculpture. With careful listening, sound can take us to many places, near and far.

As a sculptor I have long been fascinated with the effects of the ethereal on one's perception. My early efforts observing the human figure led to an interest in the effects of light on surfaces. I spent many years in the shadows working on sculptures that were reduced to elements of light and darkness. This led more and more deeply into an experience of sculpture as a practice of deep sensitivity to subtle effects.

Sometimes one is just in the right place at the right time-- conceptually and physically. I was walking along a small road outside of Nara, Japan when I passed a field that had been flooded for farming small fish. The farmer had strung red fishing line across the top of the water to prevent birds from eating the fish. This image of the plane of red floating above the field suddenly made that space real and palpable, as space had never been before!

Later, at the Zen temple Ryoan-ji, I experienced a similar catharsis when I first caught sight of its simple, dry rock garden. I experienced space, this ether that we inhabit and travel through, as a material that could be squeezed, molded and shaped. Most importantly, as I sat in Ryoan-ji and stared at the garden, I realized that space could be perceived and "felt" as an invisible presence.

Making art can be like hiking through a whiteout. You can see where you are standing, just barely, but you can't see where you are going, or where you have come from. And you try not to travel in circles or panic. I've traveled this path for many years-- bumped into things, reversed directions, stumbled into and out of cul-de-sacs, and frequently discovered surprising and often delightful things.

It sounds silly to discuss now, but when I first bought an MP3 player, I didn't want one that was white. While exploring the black device that I bought, I discovered that it had a microphone and made recordings. I pushed the record button, while my headphones were on, and discovered a new world-- sound in space.

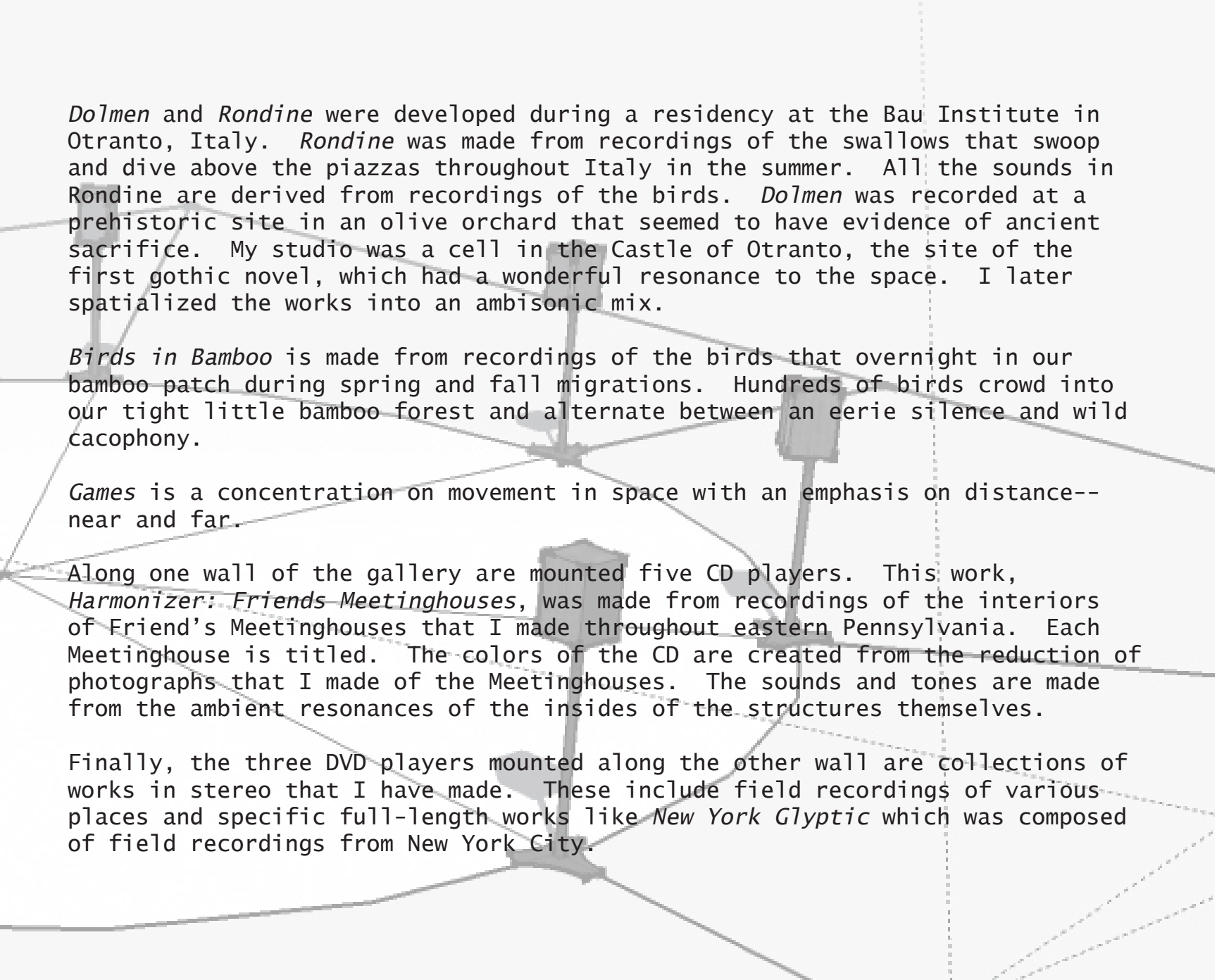
The sculpture of Alberto Giacometti, which I have always loved, taught me that an object in space can be about both that object and all the space surrounding the object. His tall, skinny objects stand alone in space and draw their surrounding environment around them like a toga. The lone object in space makes that space real. My experiences in Japan taught me that one can remove the object from the space, and a tangible sense of the space can remain. A similar experience occurs with sound. When I turned on my audio recorder and turned up the gain, I heard sounds and realized that those sounds were sounds in space, and that each sound revealed the space in which it existed. You clap your hands in a large room and you hear both the clap, and the effects that the room has on the handclap-- the reflections of sound off the walls, floor and ceiling. You hear a train whistle across the valley, and you hear the absorption of the sound by trees, the reflections off of buildings and parking lots and the hills behind you. When we hear a sound, we hear that event (handclap, whistle, foot-step) along with the space of that event. When we hear something, we hear space!

This discovery led me to begin playing with sound-- making recordings and finding ways to play them back. I realized that the gulf between sound in our environment, a recording of that sound, and the playback of that sound is huge. I made experiments with recording specific sounds, and then with recordings of environments or soundscapes. I've come to love soundscapes with their textures of sounds and layers of space. As with Ryoan-ji, the space of a soundscape becomes material, and as material it can be sculpted.

Surround is the result of my most recent experiments with sound. Over the past few years technology has become available to distribute sound into multiple speakers. I have begun working with eight speakers organized in a circle. I use two different techniques for distributing the sound into space-- ambisonics and vector-based-amplitude panning (VBAP). Ambisonics is very effective at creating a convincing illusion of an ambient space, and VBAP is useful in creating the illusion of a particular sound in a specific place.

The work in **Surround** is primarily sound. The videos can be thought of as titles or, better yet-- Album Covers. As a kid I would love to listen to a vinyl record while staring at the album cover. These videos focus one's attention on the individual sound works, although they should not be considered the sources of the sound.

A few words about the works in **Surround**: *Running* is a recent work that I developed while walking around the Central Park Reservoir in New York City. I was struck by how each jogger's running cadence was specific to their style and body. I would listen to the sound of the runner and try to picture what they would look like. In this work I used field recordings made at the Reservoir to create movement and an awareness of space.



Dolmen and *Rondine* were developed during a residency at the Bau Institute in Otranto, Italy. *Rondine* was made from recordings of the swallows that swoop and dive above the piazzas throughout Italy in the summer. All the sounds in *Rondine* are derived from recordings of the birds. *Dolmen* was recorded at a prehistoric site in an olive orchard that seemed to have evidence of ancient sacrifice. My studio was a cell in the Castle of Otranto, the site of the first gothic novel, which had a wonderful resonance to the space. I later spatialized the works into an ambisonic mix.

Birds in Bamboo is made from recordings of the birds that overnight in our bamboo patch during spring and fall migrations. Hundreds of birds crowd into our tight little bamboo forest and alternate between an eerie silence and wild cacophony.

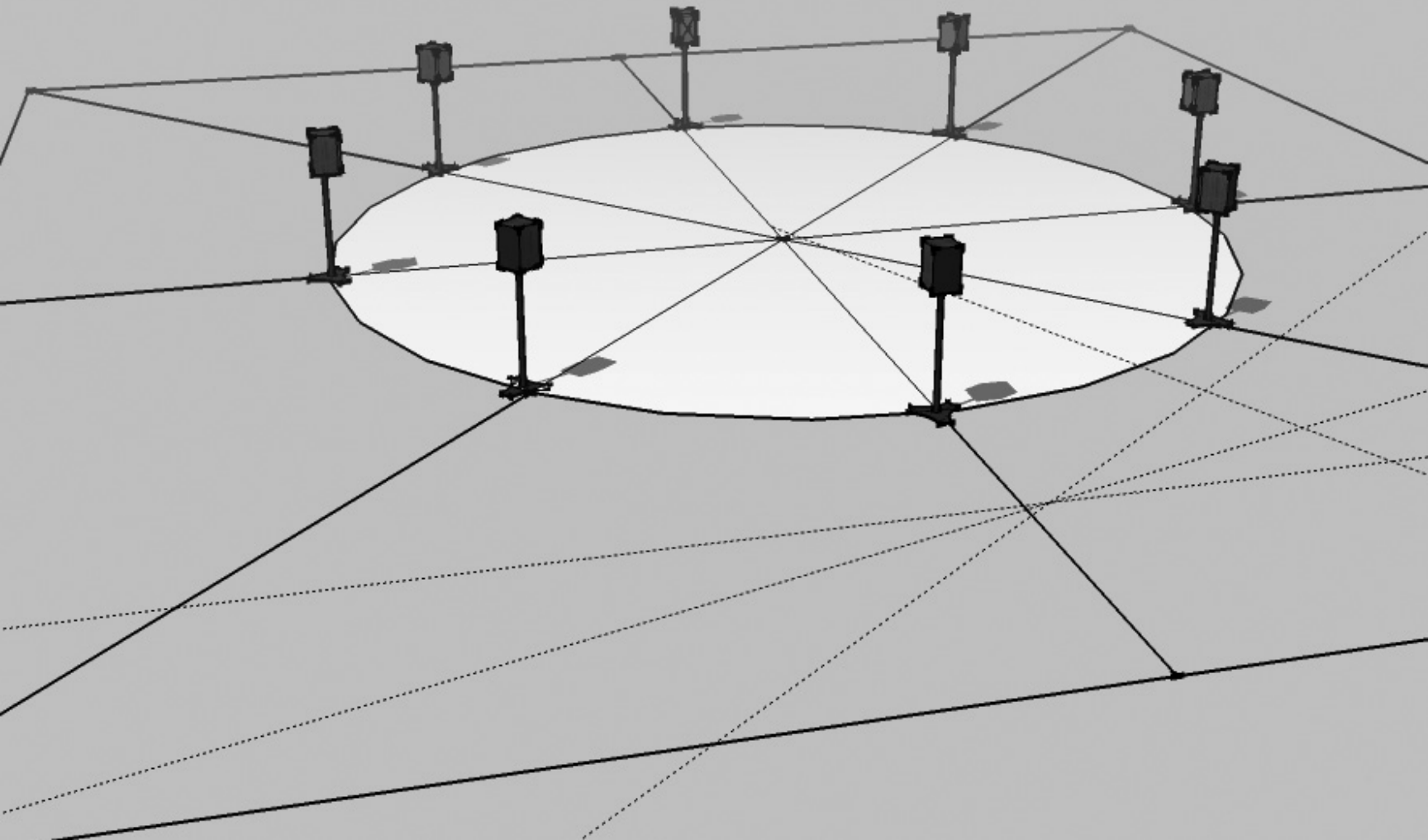
Games is a concentration on movement in space with an emphasis on distance--near and far.

Along one wall of the gallery are mounted five CD players. This work, *Harmonizer: Friends Meetinghouses*, was made from recordings of the interiors of Friend's Meetinghouses that I made throughout eastern Pennsylvania. Each Meetinghouse is titled. The colors of the CD are created from the reduction of photographs that I made of the Meetinghouses. The sounds and tones are made from the ambient resonances of the insides of the structures themselves.

Finally, the three DVD players mounted along the other wall are collections of works in stereo that I have made. These include field recordings of various places and specific full-length works like *New York Glyptic* which was composed of field recordings from New York City.

I hope that this work will in some way make us all pay more attention to the world around us. Visitors used to the immediacy of vision, will be rewarded by spending more time listening to these works. As with a painting or a sculpture after we ask “what it is” and “what it means”, we can also begin to approach the physicality of the material itself-- in this case sound.

Scott Sherk 2013







August 28 - September 28, 2013

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