

ART

'... AND IT COMES OUT HERE'

BY SUZANNE MUCHNIC

Think of sound as lines and forms in space, shapes and colors absorbed by ears instead of eyes.

Think of sound as a soul in a mechanical body, an extra dimension of sculpture, the voice of a painting, an extension of visual perception.

Think of sound as almost anything other than plink-plank-plunk auditory impulses and you'll begin to understand what's going on at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) in a marvelously complex show, simply called "Sound."

The presentation has filled LAICA with sound sculpture, odd instruments and acoustically tuned spaces, then spilled over into installations in artists' studios and Nexus Gallery. Static exhibits have come to life in a series of performances, ending Monday. (See accompanying article for hours and locations of remaining events.)

The exhibition is unusual but not relentlessly esoteric. LAICA's display of unorthodox instruments includes a few actually capable of making music. "Sound" also has some of the zaniest bits of inventiveness we've encountered in a long time.

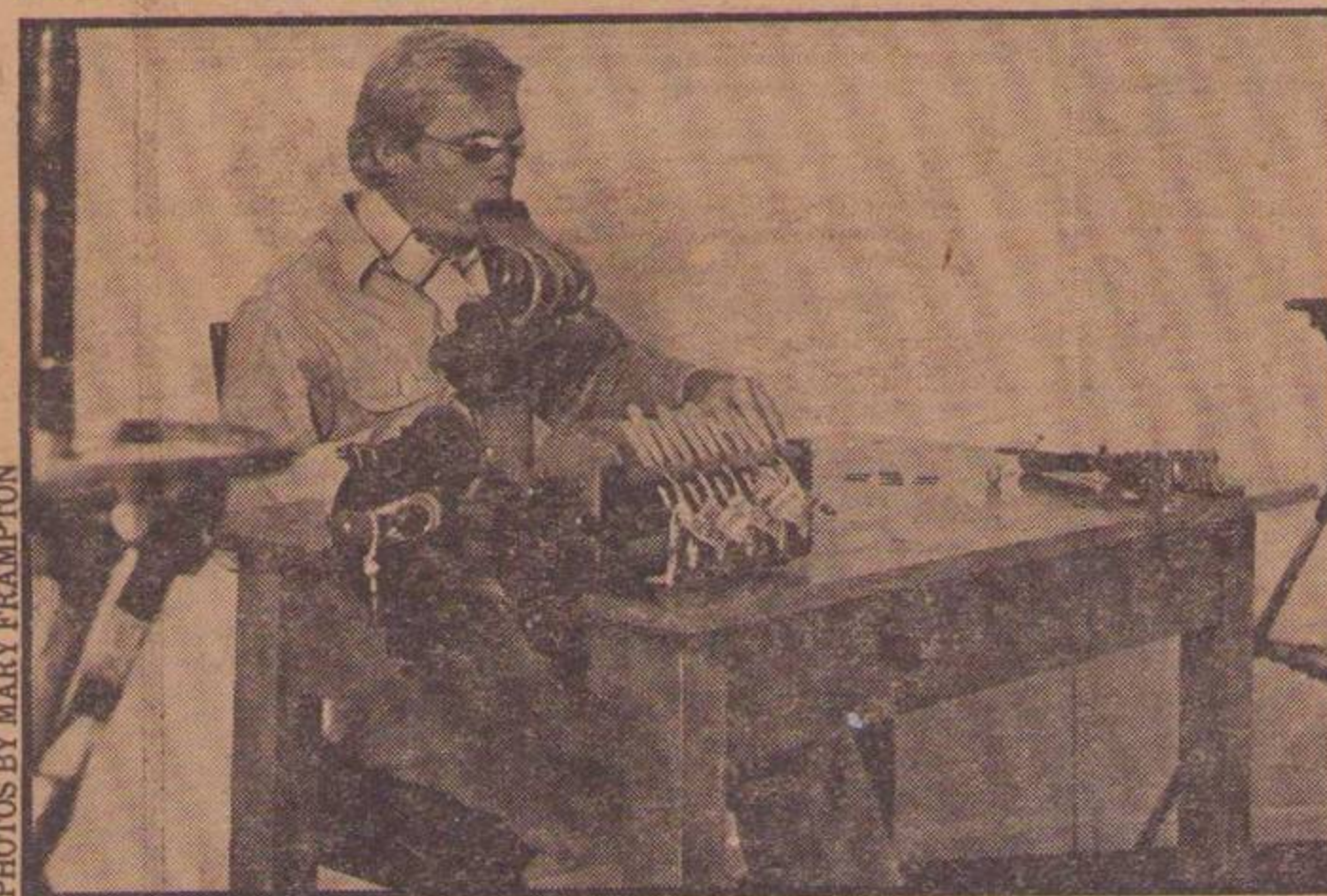
Consider Arthur Frick's "Boat" on wheels, a slick Rube Goldberg contraption a la Hong Kong or Bangkok. "Boat" defies description by a mere art critic, but if we call it a piano/rickshaw/houseboat, all decked out for the monsoon season, perhaps you may get the idea. This dry-land craft of triangular resonators bristling with plastic ruler "keyboards" apparently is played by the artist, who also rows with real oars while shaded by an Oriental umbrella. (During the show, it sits quietly in the gallery.)

A virulent case of nuttiness has taken hold of about half the "Sound" artists. Purists may grumble about a lack of decorum but this sort of irreverence unleashes creativity. Thank goodness, it's contagious.

Bob Bates, a former painter who says, "I don't know anything about music," has developed a marvel of craftsmanship and ingenuity in a double keyboard instrument called a "Fuser." He and his wife Gail play it by striking keys and pumping foot pedals. A whining sound is created by a string bearing down on rotating wheels. The "music" they play is a sort of intuitive conversation.

From the moment we discover Tom Marioni's silent violin with paper wings suspended from the ceiling and a tiny toy alligator in Paul de Marinis' gently beeping circuitry at the gallery entrance, it is clear "Sound" has no ordinary art... or music. Despite a high degree of wit, seen both in funky slapped-togetherness and meticulous technology, this is an important (and even serious) exhibition.

Beyond the spectacle of an artist making a stringed instrument by stretching rubber bands inside an infant incubator (Alex Bernstein), constructing a bagpipe from a canvas bag and metal plumbing (Yoshima-sa Wada) or playing a conventional flute with thimbles on all fingers (Christina Kubisch), "Sound" heralds a firmly grounded but seldom exhibited aesthetic movement.



Top, Richard Dunlap plays hoop of vibraphone bars, "Less Than Perfect Arrangement." Above, Tom Jenkins, wearing teaspoon eyeglasses, blows into water-filled bottles and plays handmade instruments on a hollow table. Bottom, Bob and Gail Bates play his double-keyboard "Fuser." All are at LAICA.



The show gives overdue attention to a group of artists (many of them descendants of composers John Cage and Harry Partch) who have appropriated music's raw material in unorthodox sculpture.

Exhibited works, chosen by LAICA director Robert Smith and artist Robert Wilhite, make up an extensive, rather than exhaustive, selection. Faced with an enormous range of material in the fuzzy terrain between conceptual art and music, they veered toward the art side, the handmade sculpture side, eliminating sound poetry and all but one synthesizer.

If the exhibition doesn't look much like art, it sounds less like music. Sound as a raw material is explored, stretched, squeezed, tortured, caressed and captured in passing. It is rarely molded into melodic patterns. To stroll through LAICA's galleries is to be accosted by electronic beeps, deep-throated blasts, squealing strings and clicking crickets.

A foghorn sound from Stephan von Huene's "Totem Tone" sends people bustling to the back gallery where highly polished woodwork encases two organ pipes driven by a vacuum cleaner motor. Stephen Goodman's far more elaborate ensemble of automated instruments competes for attention when tape recorded impulses (made from a touch keyboard) cause it to gear up for pipe-blowing, string-plucking, chime-striking action.

Goodman's whimsical sculptures, producing a rich variety of sounds, put us in mind of H.C. Westerman's work but we're told the instruments' looks and assortments of wood are a matter of form following function. Amazing. Not so amazing is the fact that Goodman makes his living restoring antique mechanical instruments.

The ideal way to display this show would be with one instrument or ensemble to a room, accompanied by performers or instructors where needed. That being impossible, curators placed constant sound makers next to mostly silent creations. Von Huene's and Goodman's works were programmed to play periodically. Some instruments were recorded and their sound piped into speakers near them. Recordings are a lot less fun than live performances but the show is a workable compromise.

The installations of Tom Jenkins, Robert Wilhite and Richard Dunlap are a bit hard to fathom without seeing and hearing them in performance. Jenkins' tableau consists of a hollow table functioning as a sounding board for various handmade instruments, a group of bottles that he blows and a set of candle timers. Jenkins, wearing teaspoon eye glasses, makes a strange picture as he runs through his repertoire of discovered sounds on invented instruments. He is clearly a sculptor who got productively sidetracked while listening to his materials.

Wilhite's three-piece ensemble also has the look of exotic sculpture. His one-stringed wooden box, metal gong and collection of toylike "spinners" are elegant in form and gentle in sound. Wilhite sometimes writes hieroglyphic scores for group performances, instructing participants when but not how or what to play.

Dunlap's July 27 performance on his "Less Than Perfect Arrangement," a large horizontal ring hung with vibraphone bars, was one of the show's most accessible highlights. He first walked outside the ring, striking selected bars. Then, with house

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PHOTOS BY MARY FRAMPTON

PHOTO BY MARIANNA DIAMOS

"SOUND" is at LAICA, 2020 S. Robertson Blvd., through Aug. 31. Hours: Tue.-Sat., noon-6 p.m. The show will travel to Project Studios 1, New York, Sept. 30-Nov. 18.

ADDITIONAL EXHIBITS

KAREN WOLFF and WILLIAM KING-SBURY show a "sound drawing" of straight and curved sonic lines at their studio, 127 Brooks, Venice. Hours: Saturday and Aug. 25, noon-6 p.m.

BRUCE FIER shows two "Soundworks" for audience participation (a spiral pro-

gression of tuned aluminum rods and a reed wood enclosure with programmed metal rings) at Nexus Gallery, 9616 Culver Blvd., Culver City, through Sept. 1. Hours: Tue.-Fri., 2-7 p.m.; Sat., noon-5 p.m.

PERFORMANCES

SUSAN RAWCLIFFE will play handmade clay flutes and ocarinas at Intermix, 2501 S. Robertson Blvd., today at 8 p.m. \$2.

ALVIN LUCIER will do a sound performance using a cello, several microphones and other equipment at Intermix, 2501 S. Robertson Blvd., Monday at 8 p.m. \$2.

MAKING MUSIC AS MAKING ART

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lights out, Dunlap sat on a revolving stool inside the ring. Presumably, he turned on the stool as he played faster and faster, eventually spraying the hall with tinkling music. Phosphorescent tape on the ring and bars made an accompanying light show that seem to explode with the sound.

Dunlap's performance on that and other instruments was interspersed with Jim Pomeroy's wacky efforts. Pomeroy, a consistently witty and ingenious performance artist in a field that often strangles on self-inflicted tedium, played various oddball instruments: a calculator, a series of music-box works in an attache case, a set of wrenches spread across his bent arm and his cheek which he thumped with a mallet.

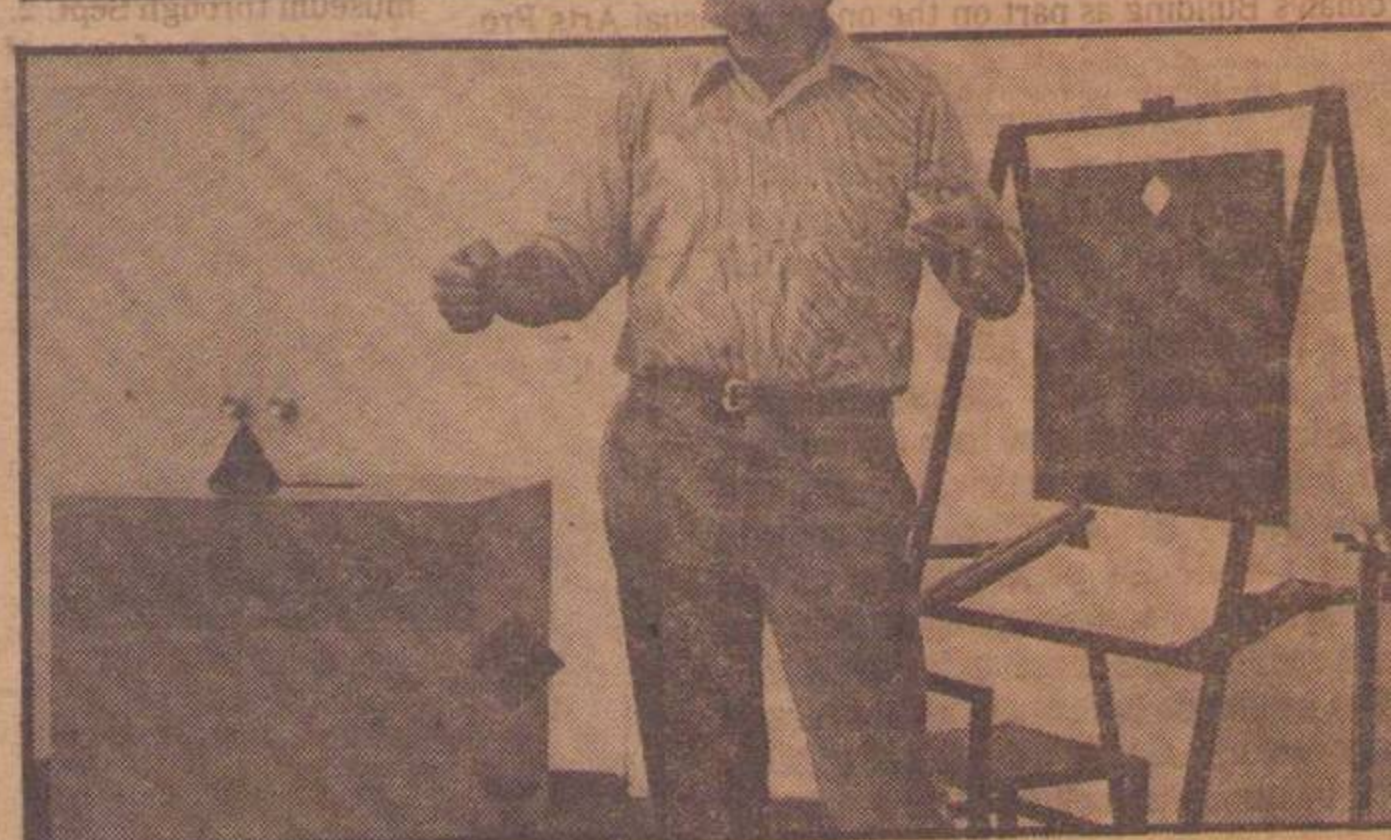
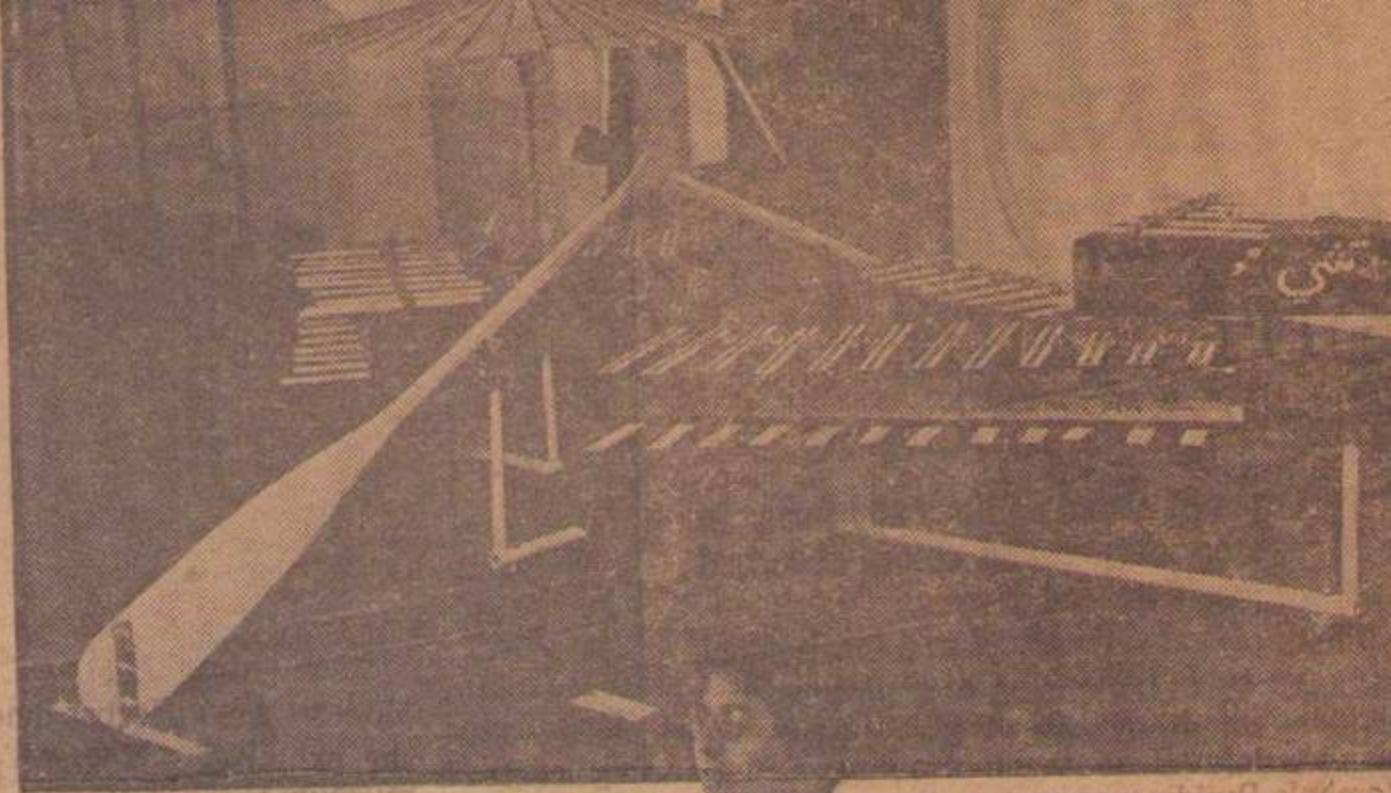
Those who missed the performances missed a healthy segment of the show but there are other pleasures such as instruments that invite audience involvement. Tom Recchion's ensemble, for example, has posted instructions: "Sit and Fidget." Sitting is accomplished on a squeaky swivel stool, attached to an amplifier.

Fidgeting on a "Strungophone" entails moving a bit of sheet plastic gripped in a surgical clamp across a stringed cymbal, also amplified.

Playing Jim Gordon's "Percussion-Synthesizer" is a more private matter. Its sound is heard only by the operator who wears earphones. The tall black box, developed to measure drumbeats to a millionth of a second, is initially intimidating. As one gets into the swing of orchestrating sound by flipping switches, the inscrutable monster takes on a rather lovable personality.

Michael Brewster is the only artist with a room to himself at LAICA—an empty room called "Buzz Bubble" inhabited by a hidden chirping mechanism. The gadget emits the same sound every few seconds, using the room as resonator and boundary. As is often true of exploratory art, the idea is more interesting than the finished product.

In a more traditional but still extraordinary vein, Susan Rawcliffe shows intriguing clay pipes capable of making enchanting melodies when played by the artist. Ivor Darreg's bright orange "Megalyra," an 8-foot tall contrabass guitar-type invention, filled an auditorium with rich sur-



Top, Arthur Frick's "Boat," meant to be rowed as well as played, is one of entries in LAICA show. Below, Robert Wilhite with exotic instrument.

prises of amplified sound during his Aug. 3 performance. LAICA's displays include works by a dozen or so other artists.

"Sound" is one of LAICA's most ambitious and successful efforts to date. It seems a thoroughly appropriate venture for

a place that calls itself an alternative. If not the last word in sonic/visual art, "Sound" is a brightly engaging introduction—a show that will be remembered. Illustrated catalog and a record are available. □



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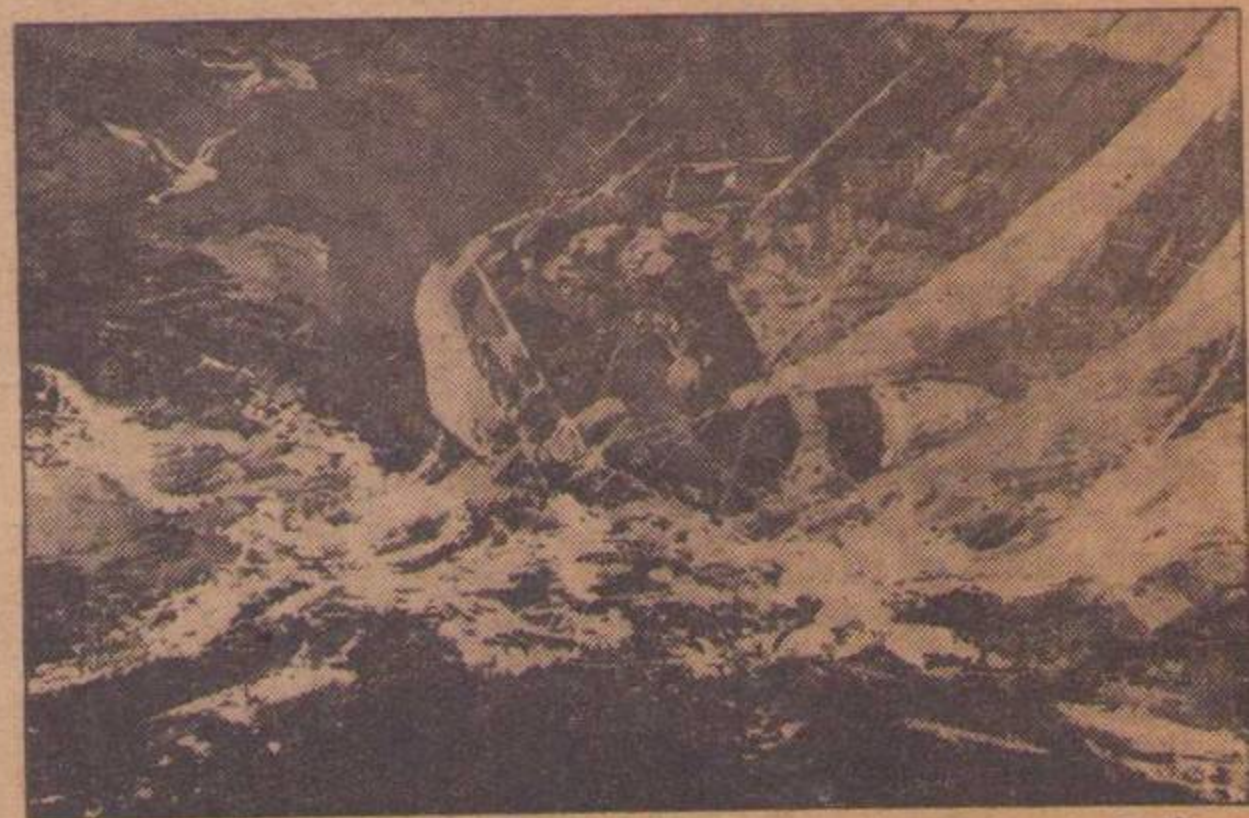
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