

Save on a great rental today.



Support the Guardian

Fund independent journalism with £12 per month

Support us →

Print subscriptions

Search jobs

Sign in

News

Opinion

Sport

Culture

Lifestyle



The Guardian

UK

Film Music TV & radio Books Art & design Stage Games Classical

Art

This article is more than 14 years old

Sound art is here to stay

Sound artist Susan Philipsz's inclusion on the Turner prize shortlist should make Britain sit up and listen



Changing the way we listen ... Susan Philipsz's sound installation Lowlands (2010). Photograph: Eoghan McTigue/Tanya Bonakdar Gallery/PA

The presence of [Susan Philipsz](#), an artist who works primarily with sound, on the [Turner prize shortlist](#) is welcome but overdue recognition for a major part of our cultural life. Sound art is nothing new: it has its roots in the early 20th century, with the dadaists and futurists – perhaps even as far back as prehistory, when someone first hung a gourd rattle in a tree just because they liked how it sounded when the wind blew.

And, in London at least, the sound art scene has never seemed so vibrant: [Céleste Boursier-Mougenot](#)'s guitar-playing finches at the Barbican; [Florian Hecker](#)'s solo exhibition at the Chisenhale gallery; the extraordinary range of work at the [AV festival](#); and [Bill Fontana](#)'s installation River Sounding in the light wells under Somerset House. The Turner judges have taken the first step in what will turn out to be a long and interesting journey .

But what actually is "sound art"? The answer is that it's hard to define narrowly. There are fruitful overlaps with contemporary classical composition, experimental rock music and improvisation. Sound artists use everything from sine wave generators to lectures, wildlife recordings, public space, bell ringing, electromagnetic fields – even the odd folk song.

More importantly, perhaps, sound art can be as much to do with the act of listening as it is with making the work. Many of us now live in a world of visual and auditory overload. We happily make do with a pixelated version of music on our MP3 players, and end up hearing things we do not want to. We tolerate buildings and public spaces that look OK, but sound terrible. We eat and shop in places where music and noise are calibrated just short of inducing hysteria. We stick our fingers in our ears when trains screech on dirty tracks. For those of us who live under flight paths or in hectic, noise-filled cities, the recent cloud of volcanic ash brought with it something astonishing – the revelation of hearing the sound of birds and insects for the first time.

Clearly it would be daft to claim that sound art can be instrumental in resolving all, or any, of the above. But maybe it's a start. And, as a more modest proposal in the meantime, I would suggest that taking some time out to visit Fontana's River Sounding, or Chris Watson's forthcoming [Whispering in the Leaves](#) in the Palm House at Kew, or [Paul Rooney's sound work McKenzie](#) in Liverpool later this month. All will change how you listen to the world.

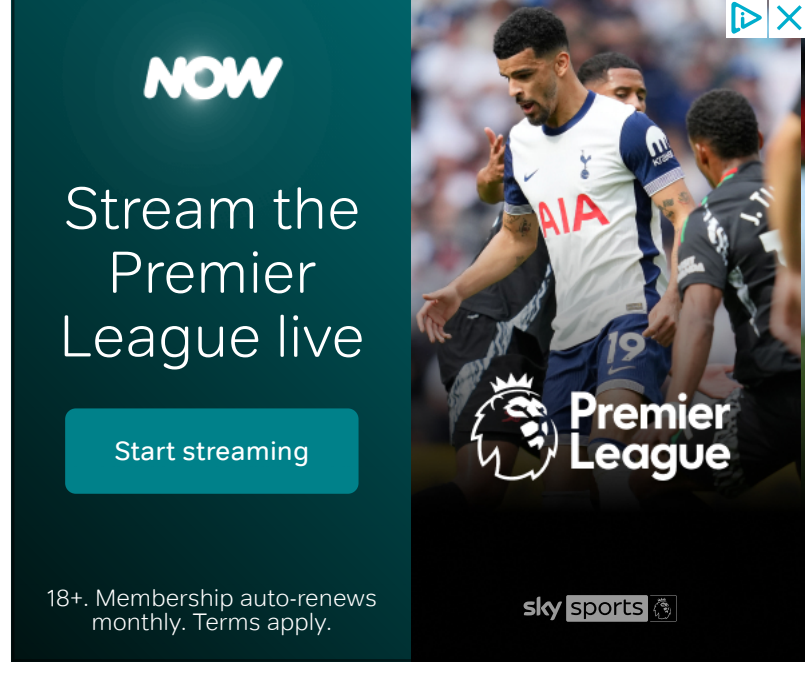
Explore more on these topics

Art Susan Philipsz Turner prize Sound art features

Share

Reuse this content

Advertisement



Most viewed

Live Trump border czar says raids targeting undocumented immigrants to begin today – live

What executive orders did Trump sign on day one?

Pauline Quirke, Birds of a Feather star, living with dementia

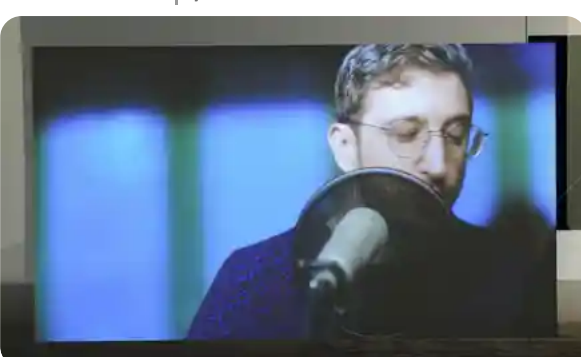
Elon Musk appears to make back-to-back fascist salutes at inauguration rally

Live Southport killer will be treated as a terrorist in jail, Yvette Cooper tells MPs – politics live

Related stories

Silence or death: Turner finalist Lawrence Abu Hamdan on recreating a horrific Syrian jail

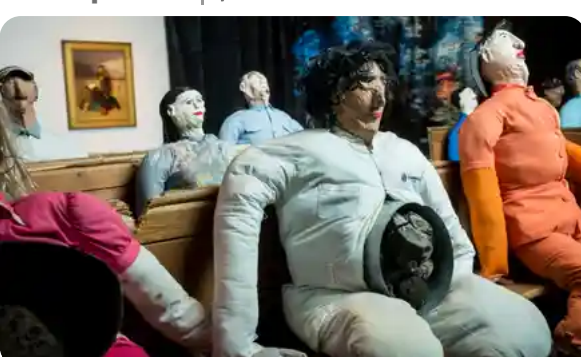
1 Oct 2019 | 17



Turner prize 2019 review: Outrages of our age, in sound, vision and papiermache

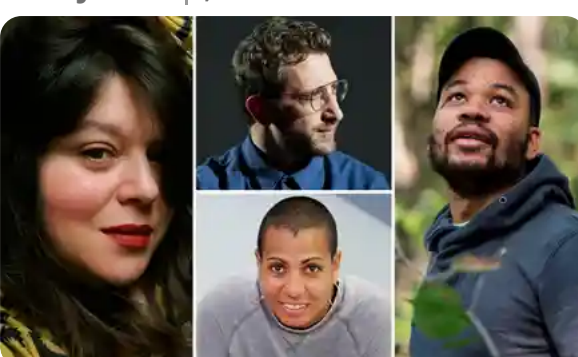
★★★★★

26 Sep 2019 | 97



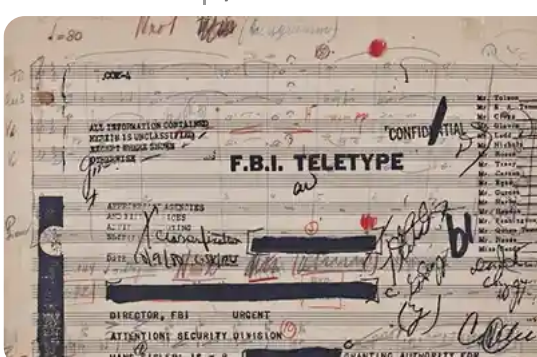
Turner prize 2019: thrilling shortlist takes in sci-fi sculpture and gunshot soundscapes

1 May 2019 | 96



Sound artist Susan Philipsz puts the FBI under surveillance

26 Feb 2014 | 4



More from Culture

Stream team The Rules of Attraction: a surprisingly poignant Bret Easton Ellis adaptation

1h ago



Music Thin Lizzy and Whitesnake guitarist John Sykes dies aged 65

7h ago



Art and design Landmarks destroyed, masterpieces incinerated, communities razed: how the LA fires ravaged culture

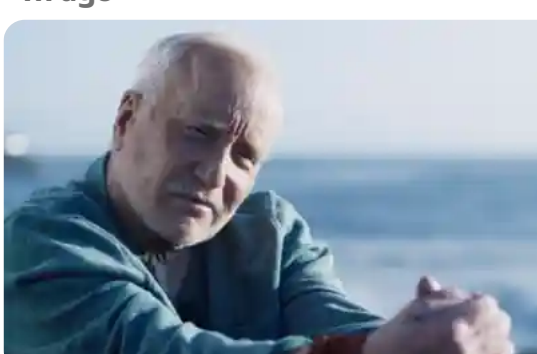
3h ago



Film Into the Deep review - Richard Dreyfuss brings the meaning to smugglers v sharks thriller

★★★★★

4h ago



Most viewed

Across The Guardian

In Art And Design

1 **Live** Trump border czar says raids targeting undocumented immigrants to begin today – live

2 What executive orders did Trump sign on day one?

3 Pauline Quirke, Birds of a Feather star, living with dementia

4 Elon Musk appears to make back-to-back fascist salutes at inauguration rally

5 **Live** Southport killer will be treated as a terrorist in jail, Yvette Cooper tells MPs – politics live

6 Novak Djokovic defeats Carlos Alcaraz in Australian Open quarter-final – as it happened

7 At least 66 people dead and 51 hurt after fire at ski resort hotel in Turkey

8 Katie Price: Making Babies review – truly repugnant television

9 Trump the wrecking ball brings chaos to order, executing a parade of grievances

10 **Live** Middle East crisis live: eight killed in Israeli raid on West Bank, say health officials

Advertisement



Film Music TV & radio Books Art & design Stage Games Classical

News

Opinion

Sport

Culture

Lifestyle

Original reporting and incisive analysis, direct from the Guardian every morning

Sign up for our email →

About us
Help
Complaints & corrections
SecureDrop
Work for us

Privacy policy
Cookie policy
Terms & conditions
Contact us

All topics
All writers
Modern Slavery Act
Tax strategy
Digital newspaper archive
Facebook
YouTube
Instagram
LinkedIn
Newsletters

Advertise with us
Guardian Labs
Search jobs
Patrons

Back to top