

## Douglas Henderson

*On the Bottom of the Sky*

Eröffnung am 12. September 2020  
15. September bis 7. November 2020

“On the bottom of the sky, there stands a man flapping his arms.”

*Russell Edson* (in an interview with Mark Tursi)

Galerie Mazzoli is proud to present *On the Bottom of the Sky*, the fourth solo exhibition by Douglas Henderson its Berlin location.

Henderson is a master sound artist. Few artists can boast comparable knowledge of and loyalty to sonic phenomena as the Baltimore native. In his work, sound has always been the driving force, the creative element from which the artistic process unfolds. Fascinated at the beginning of his career by the relation between sound and the environment, he proceeded to venture more and more into the visual realm by associating visible artifacts—normally sculptural in nature and often including loudspeakers—to his sonic concoctions. Seeking to perfect the connection between the auditory and the visual, he began in recent years to use sound to give life to static matter, setting his pieces in motion in the most unexpected ways without the aid of motors of any kind. By doing so, he has been able to establish an unbreakable tie between an object and its sonic counterpart, instantly banishing a semiotic bug that has haunted many sound works of the last decades: the problem of the cognitive hindrance that separates visual stimuli from the auditory, when the latter are not connected to the former in an evident source-outcome relation. In Douglas Henderson's works, sound and the object find sense in each other.

*On the Bottom of the Sky* follows this trail, showing us a further evolution of his research.

Upon entering the exhibition, we see no visible loudspeakers, and yet immediately become aware of the formidable presence of sound and silence disguised as motion and stillness. As we proceed to open our ears, we realize that the assertive soundtracks that have characterized Henderson's older works have been replaced with a focus on subsonic elements, namely the ones that have a direct impact on the objects' motion. Indeed, he addresses the potential of sonic artefacts on the edge of perception.

The work *Shimmer*, for example, consists of nine pieces of light blue silk cloth suspended from carbon bars which are assembled in a square grid. They hang from the wall, and through the gaps between them it is possible to glimpse the supporting structure. When active, the cloth's homogenous surface melts into dynamic wave structures, shapes and gestures. On the silk, this results in a vivid graphic game that is reminiscent of the surface of water. These ephemeral patterns are propelled by low-frequency sinusoidal tones, which are produced by loudspeakers placed behind the pieces of cloth. The outcome is an exciting play between geometric stability and transience that is perceived by the eye and ear alike.

At first glance, some of the fleeting graphic patterns appearing on the silk surface of *Shimmer* seem to have been frozen in the main structure of *Sunder II*. A collaboration with the artist's brother, sculptor David Henderson, this piece consists of a two-meter high panel made of black carbon fiber displaying the dynamic circular movements in a plastic realization. The pulsating circles of the water's surface now appear solidified and static. Itself transformed into a large speaker, the work *Sunder II* translates soundwaves into

## MAZZOLI GALLERY

mechanical vibrations. The membrane projects audible and inaudible frequencies of the sound composition, making the object resonate (sometimes visibly) and restituting a soundtrack that is different from the actual composition driving it, which is in turn based on the frequencies that were used to produce the visual image. In other words, we have specific sounds in front of our eyes—molded in the sculpture—which were also used to produce a sound composition to move the image, but we don't hear most of those sounds, rather the sculptures' own interpretation of them.

In another instance (*enter.*), Henderson confronts a completely static and quiet matter, and sound and movement are present only in the mind of the viewer, in a form of reminiscence of what the object may have overheard in the process of becoming what we see before us.

The described pieces represent the main installations in the exhibition. One should not be fooled, however, into thinking that the auditory aspect of these works is being overlooked. Quite the contrary, sound is without doubt the life of the party, only in a more subtle way than in Henderson's previous shows at Galerie Mazzoli.

In *On the Bottom of the Sky*, Henderson looks back at his origins, and references pieces that are some 15 years old (e.g., *stop*, *Untitled* 2004). In this exhibition he is more concerned with the conceptual and structural dimensions of sound rather than with its social and political implications. While not completely doing away with his wit and political satire, as the title suggests, this time Henderson invites us to reflect upon issues of recontextualization, and perhaps of disorientation—as a form of positive loss of a clear perspective—through sound. Indeed, he goes one level further in distancing himself from traditional music composition, and while actuating *de facto* some similar strategies in the preparation of the soundtracks, he is not requiring us to listen to a particular fictional narrative. Rather, he wants us to concentrate on the nature of sound itself, on its relation with its surrounding matter—its visual manifestation—and on its ability to transform in front of our eyes and fiddle with our perception.

Ultimately, *On the Bottom of the Sky* reminds us that sound depends on an object in order to exist, but once it is tied to that object our understanding of it will undergo relentless, infinite shifts.

Sound artist and composer Douglas Henderson (Baltimore, 1960) studied music composition and theory with Milton Babbitt, Paul Lansky, and J.K. Randall, receiving his PhD. in composition from Princeton University in 1991 and his Bachelor's degree in composition from Bard College in 1982. He chaired the Sound Arts Department at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 2001-2, In 2015 he was awarded the PrixArs Award of Distinction at Ars Electronica in Linz and in 2013 the Deutscher Klangkunst Preis / European Soundart Award.

Recent solo exhibitions at Stadtgalerie Saarbruecken 2020, Berman Art Museum (Pennsylvania) 2019, Galerie Mazzoli Duesseldorf 2019, Finstral Studio 2018, and Studio 10 (NYC) are complemented by participation in multiple group shows at ZKM (Karlsruhe), as well as The Drawing Center (NYC), Ars Electronica (Vienna), Humbolt Forum | Berliner Schloß, Akademie der Kuenste Berlin among others.

In 2012 he was invited to major museum exhibitions such as "Asche und Gold. Eine Weltenreise" at MARTA in Herford, "Sound Art. Klang als Medium der Kunst" at ZKM in Karlsruhe and "City Sonic Festival" in Belgium. He has been awarded a 2008 Rockefeller Foundation Multi-Arts Program Award for

## MAZZOLI GALLERY

Music for 100 Carpenters (2009), a 2007 DAAD artist-in-Berlin residency, and a 2007 Foundation for Contemporary Arts individual artist grant. He was a 2002 and 2006 artist in residence at Harvestworks Digital Media Lab, a 2004 Dance Theater Workshop ARM Fellow, and a 2005 guest artist for Resonance Magazine (London).

He received a 2005 Rockefeller Foundation Multi-Arts Program Award for work with choreographer Luis Lara Malvacías, and the New York Dance and Performance Award ("Bessie") for his work on Kriyas (1998).

He lives and works in Berlin.