

## Shelter from the Poison Rain: Jo Burzynska's *Bass Affects*

Come October every year, Universal Studios Hollywood mutates into *Halloween Horror Nights*, an extravagant showcase of walkthrough mazes based on popcorn horror classics. The theme park is submerged in a bucket of pig's blood, and for sixteen years creative director John Murdy has overseen this Sissy Spacek metamorphosis. Translating two-dimensional film moments into interactive dioramas has specific challenges, like training cast members to use night vision goggles. When interviewed recently, Murdy described how sound was used when adapting the stylish claustrophobia of *The Exorcist* (1973): "I learned that there are frequencies that you cannot hear, that are so low on the audio spectrum that they just make you feel wrong".<sup>1</sup> Murdy's anecdote perpetuates a long-standing myth about the pernicious effect of deep frequencies on the psyche. In response to stories such as this, Jo Burzynska, a sound artist, academic, and wine journalist, advocates for a more nuanced appreciation of deep frequencies. Burzynska's Audio Foundation exhibition *Bass Affects* explores this subject through field recordings, deep listening, ritual, and, like Murdy's *The Exorcist*, Christian imagery.

*Bass Affects* contains two sound installations in two rooms. Both loop in cycles of approximately sixteen minutes. *Wachet Auf* is a dual-channel composition named after a Bach cantata, and involves waves, rainfall, birdcall, thunder, humid rumbling, and organ jingles dripping slowly like molasses. An accompanying text is distributed upon spartan pews. The second piece, *Tilting at Wind Turbines*, is a quadraphonic medley of colliding metal, a sustained grind of licks and whirs that the text identifies as recordings of a Te Waipounamu wind farm. I heard skateboard wheels on cobblestones, and the flickering arpeggios from U2's "Where The Streets Have No Name". Blackout curtains embalm the gallery, and from the wick of a blue votive candle arises a wintry aroma. *Tilting at Wind Turbines* is a continuous dirge, a counterpoint to the dynamic musicality of *Wachet Auf*, the subjects of which tag in and out. This contrast rewards sustained attention. *Wachet Auf*'s climbing organ and thunderclaps add a spark of theatricality, of Hammer Horror, and a creeping fizz.

Burzynska's statement, fashioned as an antiquarian pamphlet, repudiates myths about the negative physiological effects of bass vibrations with reference to petroleum fuelled paranoias about wind farms. What Burzynska does not address so thoroughly is the Christian imagery of *Bass Affects*, which extends beyond standard black-box strategies of time-based installation. The votive candle, the organ, the cantata . . . each suggests the ritualised meditation of a church environment. In *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*, born-Lutheran writer John Updike describes the church environment: "Taken purely as a human recreation, what could be more delightful, more unexpected than to enter a venerable a lavishly scaled building kept warm and clean for use one or two hours a week".<sup>2</sup> The gallery is a secular institution, but Updike's words

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<sup>1</sup>Justin Michael, Betsy Sodaro, hosts, and John Murdy, "Halloween Horror Finale". Killer Klowns From Outer Kast (podcast), October 30, 2020, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://art19.com/shows/killer-klowns-from-outer-kast/episodes/311c655f-bc4a-4013-b284-b5675f6bea6b>

<sup>2</sup>John Updike, *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*. Penguin Books, London, 1962, p.172.

could describe Audio Foundation. In *Bass Affects*, Burzynska twists these shared qualities of gallery and church, lending to the former the contemplative mandate of the latter.

Burzynska's play with Christian motif has precedents at Audio Foundation. Jimmy Solórzano's *Echoes of the Coromandel* (2021) was a four-channel installation in which field recordings from the Coromandel Peninsula were mediated by a digitally processed electric guitar, engraving the place and process of his field recordings onto the present moment in the gallery. Solórzano's harmonic reverb and immersive paradise of trickling streams and rustling leaves recalled the "natural world as a cathedral" analogy employed by environmentalist writers from John Muir to James Lovelock. Olivia Webb's *The Choir of the Self* (2016) was a moving image and sound exhibition for which Webb transposes scales from four independent music traditions to a Gregorian Chant sequence. Through materially investigating the sung voice, Webb considered the negotiation required in the multicultural meeting place of a Catholic Church, and the community-forming power of polyphonic singing. Solórzano and Burzynska both employ field recordings with concentrated spirituality, and Webb and Burzynska share an interest in the constructive potential of sound. An important distinction between these three is that Webb explicitly cites her active Catholicism within her artistic practice.

Perhaps I am taking *Bass Affects* up the garden path. The organ is from Sydney Town Hall, a secular environment, and, it bears repeating, the gallery is a secular institution. Speaking with others who had visited *Bass Affects*, the dominant experience was of the works' calming effect. It is unclear how much this calm can be attributed to the candle-lit environment, the activity of listening, the associations which come with each natural and industrial sound, or the frequency of these recordings.