

Audium Offers Resident Artists Opportunities to Create

In a Unique Sound Art Environment-as-Instrument

Tucked away, midblock on a fairly nondescript section of Bush Street, unassuming, easy to miss amidst the hustle and flow of the Tenderloin/Civic Center area, a sound art venue that has been in this spot for over 50 years is quietly starting to make some noise.

Audium is NOT just a theater for presenting sound-as-art.

It is a venue-as-instrument. The space itself, with 176 speakers in banks of different sizes and capacities spread throughout a geometric dome, placed under, around, and over a ring of padded chairs, is an instrument to be played by the musicians and artists who are invited to work with it, and within it.

David Shaff, whose father Stan Shaff (along with his technical expert partner Doug McEachern) built Audium over 50 years ago, explains, “Stan was inspired by his collaborations with (local dance luminary) Anna Halprin. He said, ‘I want to move my trumpet sound the way dancers move their bodies.’”

Stan was a classically trained trumpet player and composer who took his fascination with how sound could move and devised a space where music and recorded sounds could... dance.

There is no other venue-as-instrument like this anywhere in the world. And for the most part, it's still a secret. A vestige of an old San Francisco from the 1960s, experimental, quirky, organic, grass-roots, that is currently reinventing itself in the 2020s as a viable and vibrant contributor to the local art scene.

David, who is also a trumpet player and assumed Theater Director duties in 2018, has taken his father's singular curiosity and turned it into an opportunity for a variety of local artists to create.

While Audium regularly presents replays from the vast library of Stan Shaff's sound-art recordings (performed, i.e.: moved in real time through the space, by David), Audium also offers two types of residencies: **Featured Artist** residencies are shorter-term engagements, with one month of exploration and composition followed by one month of performances, and an annual **Artist in Residence** program which gives the awarded artist six months of resources (finances, equipment, space, and time) to explore and create a sound-art piece within and for the space.

In line with the current mood of the culture in the Bay Area and David's personal values and goals, residencies are frequently awarded to artists from a range of historically underrepresented groups and/or to projects that have social and political import and impact.

David says, “The typical ‘experimental music show’ is generally white and male, for the most part. Here we have this space, founded by two white guys. I wanted to shift the programming, bring in artists of color and women, to offer the space back to folks in underrepresented communities as a vehicle, as a platform for people to have a voice, especially about political and social issues.”

Currently one of the projects in process at Audium that met David’s criteria is by Featured Artist Merlin Coleman, **“Explorations of Extraction and Decay : a Palliative Song Cycle for Bodies and Stuff,” opening September 7, 2023.**

Merlin Coleman is an artist, performer, composer, cellist, vocalist, poet, event producer, and organic farmer, based in Cotati, Calif. Her sound-art works often layer song and instruments (cello, piano) with found recordings, poetry, and interviews around a theme.

Coleman began exploring the concept of Extraction in 2021, as neighbors in her community were protesting a proposed Quarry that would have profound environmental and social impacts. Interviewing politicians, local residents, and scientists, Coleman composed “Extractions,” designed for quadraphonic sound, and presented it at the venue she curates, Milkbar, in Richmond, Calif., in 2022.

The featured artist commission from Audium has enabled her to expand that piece to a three-act-sound-art-play, addressing the issues surrounding the Roblar Quarry, as well as bringing in new material (interviews, sounds) exploring the practices of landfill, hoarding, and palliative care; bodies, life, death, stuff, and decay; and, of course, to expand the sound output potential exponentially.

Audium itself is composed of three spaces: the lobby gallery, the darkened and winding hallway labyrinth lined with speakers, and the inner sanctum or theater. “Explorations of Extraction and Decay : a Palliative Song Cycle for Bodies and Stuff,” takes advantage of the entirety of the spaces, including video presentations by collaborator Catherine Hollander in the lobby before, during, and after the show. Themes in the videos, sounds in the labyrinth and the stories in the theater space, all interrelate.

“There are three segments to the piece, like three acts of a play,” Coleman explains, “Each has a distinct tone and emotion — Quarry, the in-between section which has no name as yet, and Landfill. The first and third acts are more layered and focused. The middle section is more ambient. Audience members sit and listen in total darkness in parts one and three, and lights are raised to dim in part two, which is when audience members will be invited to wander through the spaces to experience the sounds while new video projections (different from the pre-show set) are on view in the lobby.

“Saturated — the whole evening is very saturated,” Coleman emphasizes.

About her creative process, she describes, “I have a pretty organic way of composing. I knew from my experience with creating the first section, “Extraction,” that for the Landfill section I would start with interviews. What I discovered was that when I bring the interviews home and start going through them, what people say and how they say it informs the direction of the piece.”

Voices are layered with sounds and the ways one can bend sound.

“There’s the interplay between my sung voice and the spoken voices and the way that I create these new melodies and harmonies and stacks, to create a whole ‘song’ out of people’s speech that also relates poetically to the meaning of what they are saying. Instrumental music and found sound recordings are illustrative, heightening the emotions and the environment and the textures.

“Piano became a big part of the piece because I’m working with this concept of decay — physical decay of stuff and bodies, but also in piano we talk about ‘sound decay.’ For example, there’s this huge piano chord, in the beginning of the Landfill section; the sound melts down as if it’s decaying into the earth.

However, Coleman notes, “Piano is not a bendy instrument! There are plenty of other instruments that bend their notes. What I’ve done is bend sound with tape decks. And then, given the history, tape decks make sense for Audium! So all these things became interconnected.

“I recorded piano melodies onto these “Sony Quarters” (vintage ¼-inch reel-to-reel recording instruments) that I then play back into my computer while I pitch shift the sound — change the time with a dial. I bend it slow or fast.”

“Spinning tape decks and body parts and compost and bugs and hillsides!” she summarizes, joyfully.

Another key collaborator to the work is Sound Engineer Eric Oberthaler. “I think this is unusual in the sound art world,” says Coleman. “We come as a team. Things wouldn’t be as beautiful and polished and professional-sounding without him.”

Collaboration, creative questions and solutions, interacting with the tools, the media, and the message, all of this is what today’s Audium is about. David says, “There are so many things artists have to think about in designing work for our space. In my time here, I have built out our tech infrastructure and created tools to make the process easier for artists.”

And the artists are teaching David what else might be needed. He adds, “The projector system that Catherine Hollander is using is still a work in progress. She’s bringing up some interesting questions. ‘Why can’t I do this?.. How can I do this?’ — which is creating innovation

opportunities. I want to be able to make the dreams and visions of artists come to life in as easy and flexible a way as possible.”

After “Explorations of Extraction and Decay : a Palliative Song Cycle for Bodies and Stuff,” closes, the Artist in Residence program “takes over Audium’s life” for six months, from October to March. Audium will continue to present a range of Stan Shaff’s recordings, as well as occasionally presenting Merlin Coleman’s piece again, in rotation, while the new work is being developed.

“Our goal is to eventually have enough new works commissioned that we can have different shows every night,” David explains.

“My dream is to make Audium a center for immersive arts. A place for artists to come and learn and have a platform. And also to provide more workshops and ways for people to get involved and learn about making this kind of art.”

To that end, David Shaff is working with art educators in San Francisco to bring in groups of high school students, and developing workshops for the public, led by his staff.

Artists interested in being considered for a short-term Featured Artist residency or for the six-month Artist in Residence program are encouraged to apply during the annual open call via Audium’s website: audium.org/residency

Learn more about Merlin Coleman at merlinman.com

Article by: Julie Feinstein Adams

Email: julie@audium.org

Writer’s Personal website: jfacommunications.com

Phone: 510-697-1917