



Museum as Instrument: an Interview with Naama Tsabar

By Nathalie Hegert
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Naama Tsabar, *Propagation (Opus 3)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist, Dvir Gallery and Spinello Projects. Photo: Rodrigo Dada.

Artist Naama Tsabar has just transformed a museum into an enormous musical instrument. The interdisciplinary artist's site-responsive installation, at MARTE Contemporary in San Salvador, entitled *Propagation (Opus 3)*, extends from floor to ceiling, comprised of strings, pickups, amplifiers, cables, and speakers, embedded within the architecture of the gallery space. Like a hybrid between a guitar and a piano, the strings can be plucked or percussed, and the sound travels through the innards of the museum's walls, resounding in, around, and throughout the space. Museum visitors are invited to play and experiment with the installation, crossing the threshold between installation, sculpture, music, and performance, through August 9, 2015.

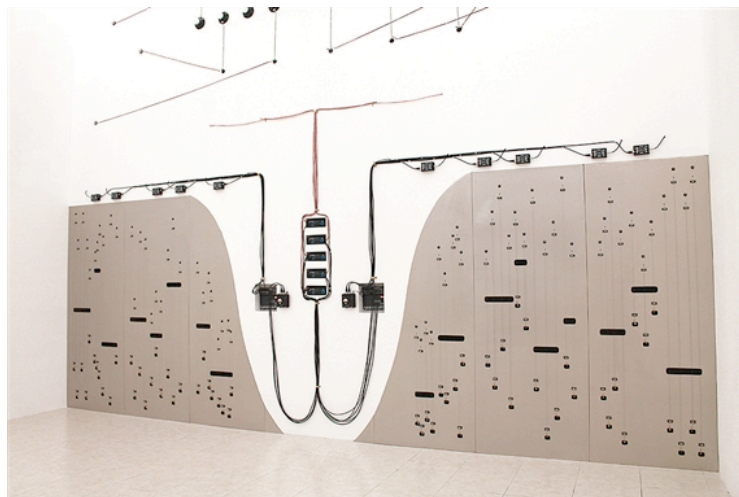
In the following exchange, I talk with the New York-based Israeli artist about the making of *Propagation (Opus 3)*, the aesthetics and constructs of the gallery and museum space, and the particularities and tensions of working within and between the worlds of art and music.

Natalie Hegert: What was it like to work in El Salvador? And with the building at MARTE Contemporary?

Naama Tsabar: When Claire Breukel, the head curator of MARTE Contemporary, asked me to propose a project for the museum it was very clear to us that the cultural visual art landscape in El Salvador was very unique as was the exhibition space with its church-like dimensions, hence the project would have to be specific and take into consideration both space and place to work well. In terms of space the exhibition hall in MARTE has a 21-foot high ceiling and is 22 feet wide; for me this meant that the height of the work would be as important as its width.

My big surprise though was the very strong community feeling when working in El Salvador. As an outsider and especially as an artist coming from New York, it felt rare and refreshing. We were able to install a very ambitious project with what is considered in NYC as a modest budget. This in part has to do with material and labor cost in El Salvador and their professional improvisational skills (a badge that is worn proudly), but just as much has to do with the generosity of the art and music community there. Local artists would come by, at times without prior arrangements, to work along[side] me and the install crew for long days.

The two-week install of *Propagation (Opus 3)* was done in the space itself. The install of the work and learning how to play it was a completely transparent and exposed process to the museum goers. An artist that worked with me replied, when I told him that I am overwhelmed and thankful for the help I am getting, “for these days we are the art work,” and indeed at the end of install and rehearsals I felt that this project’s success is that of a strong and passionate community, and not of just one artist.



Naama Tsabar, *Propagation (Opus 3)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist, Dvir Gallery and Spinello Projects. Photo: Rodrigo Dada.

NH: What’s the dynamic, in your experience, between the music scene and the art world? Both realms have an etiquette, and both can be very intimidating to outsiders. It seems like, in many of your performances, you’re inviting those worlds to overlap, so I’m curious if this is usually frictionless, or if it ever causes problems.

NT: In my projects I am interested in this place where disciplines are fused or intertwined; these moments do create frictions or problems, but I like to refer to these conflicts as a place for questions, and in my mind this is very important for the work.

This dual existence cancels the place of the insider, and in relation also the place of the outsider. The space becomes a place that takes form in real time. The installation/instrument’s history is written through the performances and the days when it is exhibited.

NH: The jumping-off points of your work—bartending, nightlife, playing in punk bands — could inspire a very crowded feeling, something chaotic, extreme, yet in your work the presentation tends to be quite minimal, spare. It seems like, in equal measure, you’re

concerned with the aesthetic of the gallery as well, its architecture and conventions. Is that true?

NT: I am interested in the components that construct such spaces into stirring, time-based and sensually stimulating environments. With their different codes and their unique relations between the private and the public.

The white box, much like nocturnal urban spaces, constructs realities and has specific rules, codes and materials that put together a hermetic experience. I try and think of these spaces as active parts and materials in the work, much like the materials taken from the urban nightly environments. The Spareness is then one of the materials.

I also view the space left empty as a place left for thoughts, emotions, and many times sound. All these unseen elements take up space, many times after a performance or when a work is activated by the viewer I feel the room is actually very dense and full, sometimes too full.

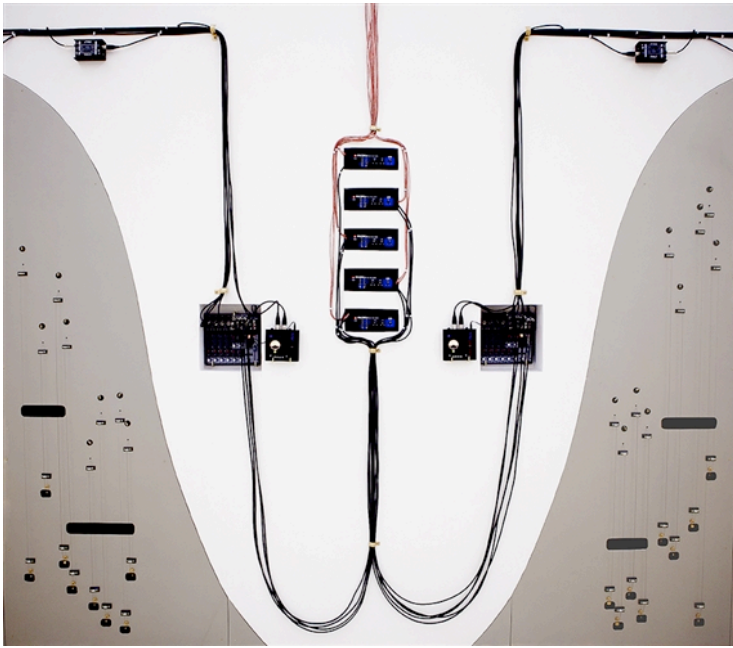


Naama Tsabar, *Propagation (Opus 2)*, 2013. Courtesy of Tel Aviv Museum of Art and APT Collection. Photo: Oded Lobl.

What is the interrelationship between *Propagation (Opus 2)*, which was shown at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 2013, and *Propagation (Opus 3)*, currently on view at MARTE Contemporary in El Salvador? What is the significance of the title *Propagation*?

Propagation refers to the spreading of a wave or energy through a medium, but I am also interested in its proximity to Propaganda. In *Propagation (Opus 1, 2 and 3)* sound waves travel through architecture. In its more literal sense, sound at those moments actually becomes solid, physical, feel-able.

The materials in common for all these works are speakers and architecture. The speaker and its elements are sculptural and visual as much as they are in the service of transmitting sound. The architecture is also rethought and becomes a material in the work. But there is a fundamental difference between *Opus 2* and *Opus 3*.



Naama Tsabar, *Propagation (Opus 3)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist, Dvir Gallery and Spinello Projects. Photo: Rodrigo Dada.

Opus 3 unifies the speaker and the instrument with the space—the museum wall, it flattens the elements and in that sense possesses painterly qualities. In a way *Opus 3* is a more communal work as it unifies all the elements and the viewers in one wall/space, much like a space where religion is practiced.

In *Opus 2* the architectural elements create a fragmented space, one which cannot be seen from just one angle; the much more aimed at the individual (performer, viewer) and the different experiences of borders and intimacy that such a fragmented space enables—between work, viewer, and performer.

NH: Many of your sculptural interventions kind of collide with the architecture of the gallery—speakers, wires, microphones embedded or penetrating into walls, etc. What is the significance of an object being “embedded” in the structure of the gallery, this breaching of borders between objects? Claire Breukel, the curator of the exhibition at MARTE Contemporary, described the installation as producing “a penetrative sound that invades the building’s architecture,” which is a rather hard, aggressive way to characterize it.

NT: I am interested in the places that exist around us but we have no access to, in both a concrete and metaphorical way. Embedding the different elements in architecture is a way to occupy such a space, the inner cavities of the wall, and the sound which is amplified or picked up by the microphones is then the sound of that specific place; it is an attempt to get closer to it, to occupy it.

Fusing objects together and in doing so breaching their borders ties back to the thought of both expansion and diversion of an object’s use and meaning while still retaining its prior form.

In *Propagation (Opus 3)* the speakers are inverted into the wall so they are throwing the output sound from the instrument below into the walls of the museum; in that sense they are spreading through the architecture, expanding through that specific medium. Propagating through it, and rendering the whole museum space into a speaker box.

NH: I’m interested too in your choices concerning the quality of sound that is provoked from your installations. When you’re designing them, are you more concerned with designing them to generate a certain type or quality of sound, or are you crafting the instrument in order to see what kind of sounds it will make? In other words, in your work do you tend more towards staging or experimentation? What role does the space play in this?

NT: The answer to this question becomes more complicated to answer over time. My first work from these space-transformative sound works was made in 2004—*Untitled (String Wall)*. This was

my undergrad thesis show. I have never attempted to build an instrument before, but there I was constructing a 45-foot long string wall because I had this fantastic idea to turn the gallery into a playable instrument and to turn the instrument into a place.

I spent a lot of time researching the different angles in which a string should break, and consulting with a luthier. But the work still sounded somewhat like a broken sitar, and mastery was still far from my reach.



Naama Tsabar, *Performance on Work on Felt (Variation 3)*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist, Dvir Gallery and Spinello Projects, copyright Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. Photo: Owen Conway.

I understood in that early stage that my driving concern is not how a certain string sounds, but how does a 45-foot wall with strings look and feel, and then how does that sound? It is the visual that predates the sound; this does not make the sound less interesting but in a way leaves it as more enigmatic and surprising. It is constantly under the regime of the visual.

However this becomes more complicated with time, as there is a very clear learning curve that goes up with each work of this nature that I make. Still, I am not interested in mastery, but rather the DIY nature of the work (a lot of my fabrication time is spent in front of youtube tutorials) but the instruments do become better with every attempt. However I remain first a visual artist and only then a failing luthier.

NH: Why do your performances predominately involve female musicians and performers?

NT: Inequality still exists—if [one is] not aware it is very easy to work with only male musicians. And for that reason I choose to consciously work with predominately female musicians. I am interested in writing a different history for my works.

NH: Do you usually seek out local musicians?

NT: In the majority of my site-specific installations I try and seek out local musicians to work with. The reason is that these are completely new space interventions and since they lack a history of play, I could explore the activation with any musicians. I am also interested in inserting different communities into the exhibition space, and I find that working with local musicians opens up the space to a wider community than just the musicians that perform.

With my more sculptural works that double as instruments, I do prefer working with certain musicians, sometimes due to the nature of the piece. For example *Untitled (Double Face)*, a sculpture that is made out of two guitars fused together at their back, takes two musicians to play it, one left-handed and one right-handed. Doing so it imposes a hyper intimate relationship between these two musicians as they hold the sculpture between them, facing each other they negotiate sound as well as movement throughout the performance. I perform on this sculpture alongside Kristin Mueller, a long-time collaborator. Mueller is both left-handed and a close friend; this makes the negotiation of public intimacy much more complex and interesting.



Naama Tsabar, *Untitled (Double Face)*, 2010/2014. Courtesy of the artist, Collection of Anthony Spinello. Performance photograph by Kristopher McKay, copyright Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

NH: How important is viewer participation in your work?

NT: I am interested in the active viewer, creating possibilities of interaction and participation. The border between the artwork and the viewer's body is a loud one. Through my works I try and create a platform for this border to be breached. I am not interested in signage promoting such interaction, but rather in the use of visual signifiers within the work. Once this border is crossed, the reading of the work expands, and in some works the viewer's action prompts the creation of sound.

I am well aware that the viewers would have to make a somewhat brave or "unlawful" choice in order to cross this border, and it's ok, not every viewer wants to move into the realm of the participator or performer. This defines the audience as much as it does the work itself.

NH: If you could choose, in what iconic gallery or museum space would you want to do an installation?

NT: There are several, but to narrow it down ...close by would be in Dia Beacon, and a bit further away would be the Schaulager in Switzerland. Both have spaces that really activate me and as institutions I feel they pose unique models for the display, and research of 20th and 21st century art.

--Natalie Hegert