

On why perception is everythir



Artist Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork discusses being aware of the space they take up, having a relationship to the past, and making work that requires the audience to be present.

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As told to Mark "Frosty" McNeill, 2981 words.

Tags: [Performance](#), [Sound](#), [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Production](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Focus](#).

Can you tell me about an acoustic space you encountered that changed your perception of sound?

Within the span of a week, I spent hours at the [Dream House](#) in New York and the anechoic chamber at [Bell Labs](#). The Dream House is a piece by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela. It's located in Tribeca and has been around for a long time. It uses a technique of sine waves that interact with each other, creating a binaural beat—an actual physical relationship of sound waves, and as you move around the space, the sound shifts and and you hear different rhythms and tones. There's no starting and stopping. You just walk in during open hours and that's that.

Anechoic chambers are spaces where there's no sonic reflection. The one at Bell Labs is quite huge. It's a big rectangle with these wedges of fiberglass that jet out from the walls and the floor. You walk on this fence in the middle of the room that is a sonically transparent floor. And the whole room is floated, so there are no vibrations coming from the outside and when you close that door. It is really, really silent. There are all these stories about anechoic chambers, like you'll go crazy if you sit there for this many minutes or whatever. I had the fortune to spend quite a bit of time there with two friends and we did everything from running around screaming to playing sounds to just laying down. We wanted to see what would happen.

We were laying down in the darkness and somebody who did not know we were in there, came in and flashed the lights. It was an incredibly jarring experience to have the sonic sensory side of my body in a whole different universe to my visual sensoriality. I was 20-years-old and really into [op art](#) and sensory perception works. And so the visual elements of the anechoic chamber contrasting with the sonic element was really interesting. Up until that moment, nobody talked about the aesthetics of an anechoic chamber.

Having those experiences so close to each other flipped the switch for me. The Dream House had so much to do with the body and movement, with listening to the room and yourself within it, where the anechoic chamber was almost like an external listening. So this idea that how we listen and our perception of listening can expand our actual physical bodies or not. Those are the two foundational experiences for me.



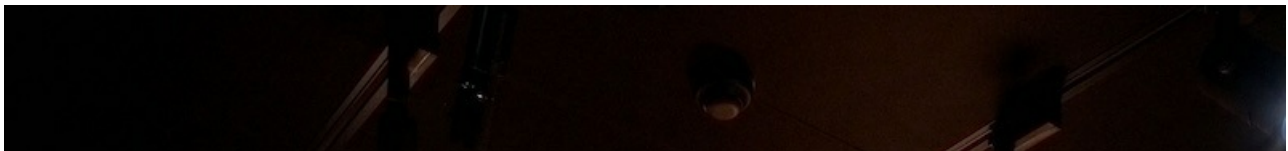
Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork, *Gama*, Empty Gallery Hong Kong, September 27 – November 15, 2025. Photo: Felix S.C. Wong

Can you talk about your experience with active listening and how your interest in it developed?

I grew up in Long Beach, CA in this tiny neighborhood in the middle of a big freeway intersection. There's a giant power plant, and oil fields right next to that. Growing up, at night, the sounds that I would hear were the freeway and intermittently, the sound of steam being released from the power plant. The sound of the freeway sounded like the ocean to me. The sound of waves has always been one of my favorite sounds and to me the freeway was the next best thing. My listening experiences started very young, just spending a lot of time by myself in my room at night and hearing the freeway sounds and the steam from the power plant which my parents always told us was *Star Wars*. So these funny fantasy narratives around what you're hearing, what you're experiencing, how you decide to think about it and how that changes your emotional experience to the space. I didn't really listen to that much music. What other kids were listening to at the time was West Coast rap, electronic music, indie rock or whatever. But nothing really grabbed me until I started experiencing noise compositional works.

What about noise music was compelling?

It just fit with what my body wanted to experience. I never really listened to records or albums. It was always live, and I was fortunate that I lived in a place where it was quite prolific, in the Bay Area in the 2000s. And it was very community-based and because of Mills College, there were a lot of female composers. [The San Francisco Tape Music Center](#) was still a reference point for a lot of people. It was a very rich and welcoming environment.





In your work, you give people encouragement and agency to become active in a sonic space. How does movement and interaction factor into the works you create?

My mom worked at a ballet studio so I danced pretty rigorously from when I was five-years-old until I had knee surgery at 17. Quitting dance was pretty abrupt for me, and I went straight into visual arts. I completely stopped doing any kind of movement-based practice whatsoever. And in the Dream House, I felt safe and comfortable. It's a very warm environment. It's carpeted, there's pillows. I could move my body in a very organic, non-choreographed way, and it allowed me a kind of freedom that I'd never experienced before. At this time I wasn't going out dancing. I didn't know how to dance. I didn't know how to just be intimate and reactive and intuitive with sound and movement. And so it was almost like therapy for me to be able to be in that space.

When I'm doing my more spatialized pieces, I'm looking for those moments when there's a *click *that happens between a movement and a sound, an awareness within yourself and the exterior world. Everybody listens differently and I want to honor that. I want to honor your ability to listen how you want to listen. That's why I've never done anything for seats or a theater or fixed positioning—a "sweet spot." If anything, I've tried to do stuff that disrupts the idea of what a sweet spot is.

Everybody experiences the world differently, and our resonant bodies change the environment as the environment changes us. It must be exciting to set pieces in motion that evolve with every new listen.

To be present, to feel vulnerable and intimate with a space is not something that everybody can do, especially in a gallery setting. But that's what my work requires you to do. So that's also a challenge that I've been inspired by. In my earlier sound pieces, a lot of it was around control, creating a specific choreography for the listener. And then realizing that was a dead end, self-reflecting on that desire for control enabled me to open up different relationships between the acoustic sculptures that I make and the multi-channel sound design stuff that I do. It's endless because it's very difficult. I'm not an acoustician, I'm not a physicist, I'm not an audio engineer. And so trying to figure it out is the challenge that is really inspiring for me.

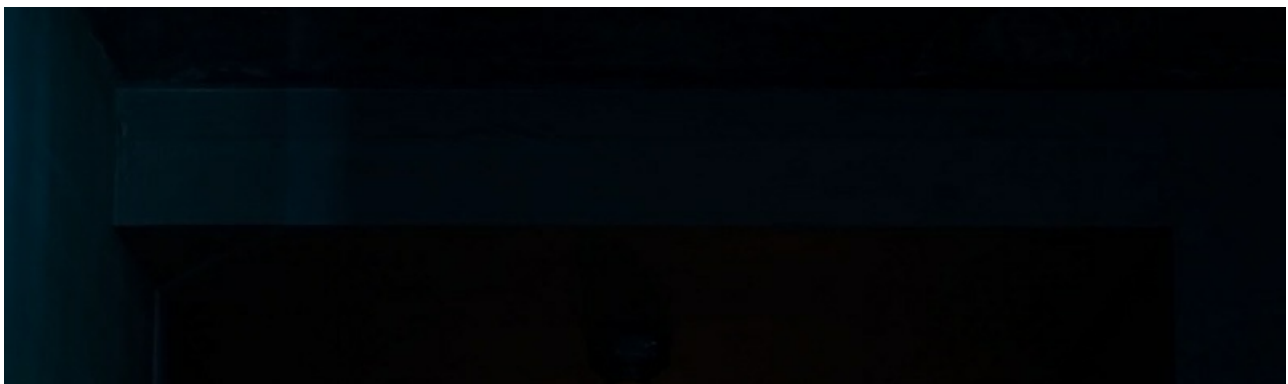


Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork, *Gama*, Empty Gallery Hong Kong, September 27 – November 15, 2025. Photo: Felix S.C. Wong

Are you extra sensitive to the acoustics of your own living spaces?

Not really. I'm not an audiophile. I live in the middle of L.A. and I always have the windows open so there's helicopter noise constantly. I'm two blocks away from the 10 freeway and there are cars doing donuts out front. I've always lived in fairly loud environments, and I don't listen to music a lot. I prefer to have more of an intentional listening experience when I'm playing music or it's a functional experience, maybe I need to clean the house so I need a beat or something to activate me. But other than that I love hearing the outside world. That's my happy place. I do love when someone else plays music, though. I'm thankful to have friends who are great DJ's.

I need ear breaks. I take a lot of walks around the block while I'm working. I love working at night. That's the most quiet in a gallery space. I need that time. And my happy place is when I can just work 24/7 during install. If I could spend 36 hours tuning a piece—really narrowing it in—I'd just be so happy.





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I've heard you refer to sound as *slippery*. Can you talk about the slipperiness of sound?

When I say slippery, I'm not necessarily referencing any kind of particular sound studies or compositional thing. For me, it's just that sound changes constantly and you could be listening to the exact same sound, but say you

just had an argument or you just woke up—that sound will be different. Physically, it's not different, but perceptually, it is different. So slipperiness is that it's constantly changing.

I think a lot about habituation: when you are experiencing something so consistently that you no longer are aware of the experience of it. We habituate to touch while wearing clothing—we're not always feeling our clothing on our skin. The same thing with ambient sound—we habituate to it. We no longer hear it but it's still interacting with us, still affecting us. We're always being affected by sound whether or not we are listening. We're hearing through vibrations. There's also the architectural side. Windows let in light, but also let in sound. Curtains can be warm and comforting in a space, but they absorb sound.





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Are there experiential feedback loops that you hope to create through your installations that encourage people to listen deeper?

Absolutely. A piece of mine called *Solutions to common noise problems* tries to highlight ways we are or are not self-aware of the noises we make by mic'ing the whole room and playing back the audio through a complex feedback system. I've always been highly—maybe to a point of destruction—aware of my own presence, the space that I take up and not wanting to take up space or wanting to take up more space. A lot of my own daily life, when I was younger, was wanting to be as small and invisible as possible with my body, but within my work, I wanted to be as big and immersible as possible. So there's always this funny juxtaposition. And I really had this strong desire for other people to be more sensitive, more self-aware. Ten years ago, a lot of my work was all about trying to bring about a new sensitivity or different kind of sensitivity between you and others, the environment, and the ways in which we might then feedback that into our own movements, our own patterns, our own ways of thinking.



I did a whole series working with dancers. I had security cameras in all the pieces, so I could watch how people were moving and interacting. If there was somebody else in the space, if they would talk to them, if they would not talk to them, if they would stand against the wall, if they would engage in the center. I was trying to understand human behavior through these pieces. I felt like there was a huge desensitization in our culture and I wanted to poke needles in that.

It's like tuning the audience. People might have an interesting engagement with your pieces and then you send them back out into the world to harmonize. Speaking of out there, do you do a lot of field recording?

I don't. I have gone through phases where I have, but then I've never listened back to them. And I realized the reason why I was doing them was because I wanted to sit in nature for a long time. Now I just sit in nature for a long time. If I have a piece that requires field recording, then yes, I do. I capture some form of information that I can then translate and transpose into my work. But as far as hanging out with my microphone, I'd rather just sit there and listen.



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It seems more pragmatic to have a reason to record something rather than collect an endless database of things that you never listen to. It's good to be present. Do you have specific aspirations around expanding how you're interacting with the world through sound and engagement with others?

Yeah. The works I just finished were quite heavy and demanding. They had a lot to do with war. They had a lot to do with my own ancestry, which is something totally new for me. The objects in which I was interacting with were loaded. I was using pieces from old fighter jets that were used in American wars. So, I'm sort of looking forward to getting back into works that are more abstracted, a bit more open-ended, less finite in focus, I guess you could say. More expansive, a little more playful even.

How much of starting something new entails starting totally fresh and then expanding outwards, as opposed to starting off by saying, "Here's my list of things I'm going to do"?

That's the thing with the brain, man. The same things keep on popping back up. I literally think I'm making the same work that I've been making for 20 years, just different variations or new versions of them for me. When I think about my foundational questions, my foundational drive, that's never changed actually since I was in my early 20s.

It goes back to that relationship of agency within sound and how do we find it and how do we make that? And what does that mean within the total environment? And there are also emotional elements to that. So often in composition or in experimental music, you don't talk about emotions. You don't talk about regular rhythms. There's certain things that are sort of like faux pas, and it's always been my interest to ask like, "Well, what is that? What are those elements and how is that affecting the ways in which we're listening?"





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I don't think I'm going through a midlife crisis kind of thing, but it is definitely interesting getting older and having different kinds of perspectives and relationships on your work and where you might see things going in the future or not. I recently made my first monosculptures, like, single-channel audio works which I never imagined I would've made before. So you have no idea. I'm just thankful that I'm able to still do this.

Maybe exploring similar core ideas or questions is actually the development of a unique artistic language. It's looking at various angles of the same questions and ideas and going deeper. That's exciting. Do you find that your work can be a way to navigate prickly issues or engage with emotional struggles?

Yeah, absolutely. One of my earliest pieces, which is one of those pieces I feel like I'm constantly remaking, was maybe 2005 or '06. I was living in a giant warehouse with a bunch of people and everybody was a musician. It was loud, it was very chaotic, and I was going through a phase of very strong depression. And all I wanted to do was be in my little space. It felt safe to be in my little space, but I could still hear everything around us. We had practice spaces, we had instruments in the living room, it was a 6,000 square foot warehouse.



Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork, Lobot Gallery, Oakland, 2005.

And so from that experience, I made this tiny one-person geodesic dome that had microphones sticking out of it on cables a hundred feet long that were going in all different directions. And it was installed in a different warehouse space in Oakland for a show. And that space also had a big gallery and live-work spaces. So I had a microphone in their kitchen, a microphone out the window and all this stuff, and this little geodesic dome was very Bucky Fuller-influenced. It was also kind of embroidered on the inside and had a lot of crafty elements to it that felt very homey and cozy. And in a way, that piece for me was an extension of how to feel safe, but connected. That's one of the pieces that I feel like I'm continually making. And it did come from a very dark time, but I was able to transform it. And I feel like that's what we're constantly doing from the personal to the external.

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork recommends:

Windows can be speakers.

Use Sichuan peppercorns in anything you want to.

Hibiscus aka jamaica aka sorrel tea is great vitamin c, lowers blood pressure, and is affordable and easy to make in cold or hot water.

Look for nature whenever wherever feeling lost.

A favorite Los Angeles activity is beach fires at Dockweiler.

Name

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Vocation

sculptor, sound artist, performance artist

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