



ART REVIEW: SVA Chelsea Gallery Presents a Cultural Matrix of Sound and Images

September 6, 2016

by Peter Malone

"The Beat Goes On," currently at the [SVA Chelsea Gallery](#), is an ambitious undertaking by a quartet of artists: [Elia Alba](#), [Paul D. Miller](#) (aka DJ Spooky), [Tameka Norris](#) and [Kevin Beasley](#). These four artists each contribute spaces within the gallery that together fulfill a concept envisioned by curator [Derrick Adams](#). For Adams, the project is "a sensory-filled exhibition bringing sound and image together across disciplines to understand space and its activation." In strictly formal terms that's true, but there is more to it. Each space functions as a room, as a place where people gather, talk, listen and sometimes dance.

Though each room is discretely partitioned from the next and expresses the unique concerns of the occupying artist, all seem to share a sense of necessity regarding the multidisciplinary aspects of their work. Sound, mostly in the form of music, is an important part of each artist's vision, while the significance of each installation's visual aspect varies from essential to almost non-existent. How each space feels matters more than how it looks.



Entrance to "The Beat Goes On." Photo courtesy SVA Chelsea Gallery.

"The Beat Goes On" creates an environment that draws visitors into a cultural matrix in which the personal experiences expressed by one artist cross over into the next room, emphasizing along the way how artists of color negotiate the mostly white art world. Themes include: musing on the South Bronx of the 1980s; recalling the gantlet of the contemporary fine arts academy; and recognizing identities expressed through popular art forms like rap and hip-hop and the confusion generated by overlapping adaptations. Whichever of these is being addressed, each artist expands upon—and in this particular exhibition celebrates—the communal relationship between artist and audience. It sounds complicated, but it's actually simple, direct, and at times poignant.

Though each space is modelled to the proclivities of the artist in charge, Adams's broadly defined curatorial concept forms a unified composition of ideas, assertions and feelings that not only compels a more heightened attention from visitors, but welcomes and invites them to greater

participation, a different sort of participation than what is typically offered in performance art.

No one visiting this exhibition will be asked to sit and absorb an artist's insipid stare, à la [Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present*](#) at the Museum of Modern Art in March 2010. Visitors are instead invited as guests—guests encouraged to join the party, join the conversation, and consider the larger perspective offered by each encounter. The exhibition is not just a representation of a social event; it is a social event.

With considerable care and apparently no small expense, the gallery has been redesigned into subdivisions fabricated to provide each artist and his or her guests an environment suited to the work. During the press preview I attended, Elia Alba spoke to how her installation was informed by a parallel drawn between Paradise Garage, a legendary South Bronx club, and the way churches offer sanctuary in a troubled neighborhood. "Saturday Mass" was how the weekly gatherings at the Paradise Garage were tagged at the time.



Installation by Elia Alba on view in "The Beat Goes On." Photo courtesy SVA Chelsea Gallery.

Her room includes historical video footage of the club itself and black and white photographs of club attendees wearing masks depicting legendary Paradise DJ, [Larry Levan](#)—the photos taken at an event staged by Alba for that purpose. Taken together, the installation forms a hybrid of homage and club environment. In almost every sense of the term, the room remains art, yet defers to its social setting. There is even a disco ball spinning through a beam of light visually penetrating an ongoing audio soundtrack.



Installation by Elia Alba on view in "The Beat Goes On." Photo courtesy SVA Chelsea Gallery.

Tameka Norris set her room up as a student lounge with beanbag furniture with a sound system that plays a CD on which she raps on subjects from grad school tensions to her upbringing by a single mom, all surrounded by oversized facsimiles of her notations for lyrics. A neon sign mounted over a mural-size photo of the artist in a laundromat reads, "Ivy League Ratchet," setting the unmistakably surreal tone of college life.



Installation by Tameka Norris on view in “The Beat Goes On.” Photo courtesy SVA Chelsea Gallery.

Through the voice of Norris’s fictional persona, “Meka Jean,” visitors are given an aural self-portrait by way of emotional rap lyrics that live up to the genre’s tradition of political invective mixed with personal expression. Insofar as curator Adams wished to emphasize the links between music and visual art, Norris’s visual-to-sound merge was the most powerful. Take any part of it away and it loses something crucial to the personal feeling it conveys.

Conversely, Kevin Beasley’s space is minimally visual, constructed instead as a room for intense listening. Dark, carpeted and somewhat isolated at the farthest end of the gallery, the only objects in the “room” are speakers of varying types and a desk with a laptop. During the exhibition’s regular hours, a sound piece will be played that was chosen by Beasley for its length—just short of 24 hours—so as not to burden any single visitor with repetition.



Installation by Kevin Beasley on view in “The Beat Goes On.” Photo courtesy SVA Chelsea Gallery.

His sound pieces—collages of gathered ambient sound and other sources—are remixed and manipulated digitally, offering each listener intuitively abstracted resonances that fill the room and in their own way create another space. In several planned events during the exhibition’s run, shorter pieces will be played for visitors. These visitors will be asked to commit to the entire two-hour session, a request in concert with Beasley’s interest in art as communal experience.

Paul Miller’s “Voyager Remix” is a tongue-in-cheek science exhibit built around the recorded messages and imagery sent into space by NASA as a time capsule in 1977. Miller is known for bringing a macrocosmic bent to his work, which in this instance forms a hybrid of popular culture, science and visual art.



Installation by Paul Miller (a.k.a DJ Spooky) on view in “The Beat Goes On.” Photo courtesy SVA Chelsea Gallery.

Applying his DJ gifts to a remix of the sounds recorded on the original 1977 LP disc, Miller takes the message-in-a-bottle idea and sends it back to Earth for reconsideration—holding a mirror up to the authors (generally speaking, that is the human visitors) of the original and somewhat presumptuous document. Large facsimile prints of the radically reductive visual imagery that was sent along with the time capsule adorn the walls.

Presenting an art exhibition as a social gathering for actual conversation, not merely the conventional encounter between an individual viewer and the artist, is what makes the show unique. Visitors have a choice of either coming during gallery hours and spending time in each of the four spaces, easily accessible by adjoining corridors, or attending special events scheduled between the opening on August 20 and its last day on September 17, 2016, that will each feature one of the four artists. The full schedule can be found [here](#).

BASIC FACTS: “The Beat Goes On” is on view August 20 through September 17, 2016 at SVA Chelsea Gallery, 601 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10010. A Reception takes place on Thursday, September 8, 2016 from 6 to 8 p.m. www.sva.edu/events/events-exhibitions/the-beat-goes-on

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