

XIBT Magazine

## Shifting Perspective: Oliver Beer in conversation with Alexandra Gilliams

By Alexandra Gilliams, April 2022



Oliver Beer portrait, 2020 / Photo: John O'Rourke

Oliver Beer's installations, performances, and sculptures welcome the possibility for new perspectives. They are invitations to listen carefully to the world around us, to question and enhance our senses, and distract them from the cultural and sensorial signifiers that we have long been conditioned with. We can, for example, hear the spaces within buildings, in addition to observing them, in a way similar to understanding how the interior architecture of a violin resounds its notes. Since he was a child, Beer has had the uncanny ability to walk into a room and detect its resonant frequencies. He works with singers by placing them in deliberate areas of a space where the sound reverberates the best and, working in harmony, their voices illuminate it in a way much like running your finger along the top of a wine glass. Every space has its note and for Beer, architecture does not solely exist as walls; he has employed this method for the human body and objects, too. In 2018, a performance that was scheduled during his residency at the Sydney Opera House for the Sydney Biennial was interrupted by a group of protestors, forcing Beer and the singers outside. His reaction was instead to have them join mouths and make their facial cavities resonate. This became a project entitled *Composition for Mouths (Songs My Mother Taught Me)*, where the singers were also asked to choose a note from a song of their childhood to sing, placing emphasis on their individual experience. Objects also have the power to tell an individual's story, who they are, where they've come from, and their socio-economic standing. Beer believes that additionally, every object has had a note ricocheting inside of it since it was first created, and that same note will continue to exist within it until the object breaks or the world as we know it ends. As an ongoing series, he places many objects together that may never have ended up in the same room before and has them "sing" in harmony, connecting different cultures over vast periods of time. In 2019, using thirty-two

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sculptures, utilitarian containers, and decorative objects from the Met Museum's collection that were ranging in origin from ancient Persia to modern America, he created an instrument that was played during multiple live performances. I witnessed one of his "vessel orchestras" in 2019 during his Household Gods exhibition at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in Paris. I remember feeling as though I was walking into some kind of cathedral with rather ordinary looking objects, some old, some new, on white plinths. A feedback loop of a unique note was amplified by microphones that descended into each piece, the group of them acted as a kind of motley choir. The diffused light pouring in from the skylight over the objects was celestial, while a hymn created by the objects was humming harmoniously. I remember wondering what the purpose was of these objects on these pedestals, what had made them so important? That collection belonged mostly to his family, and family is a tenacious thread of inspiration that ties most of his pieces together. He is greatly influenced by his late grandmother whom he refers to as Oma, who, despite a deep desire to pursue music, was denied the ability to do so because she was a woman. Much of Beer's work shines a light on the close relationship he had with her and acts as a kind of homage to the talent she could have possessed, if only she was given a proper education and the chance to pursue music. He further warps perspectives and creates narratives through what he refers to as "two dimensional sculptures," where he meticulously slices through instruments and objects and places them in resin, emphasizing the spaces within their structures that are to be taken in visually at multiple angles. In a newer series, he placed the panels on hinges where, when closed, the object is whole, and when opened, their hidden spaces are revealed. A series of these sculptures are currently on view at The Club gallery in Tokyo, where Beer will be presenting a brand new immersive and interactive sound installation in July.

**Alexandra Gilliams:** You were trained in musical composition before studying fine art at the Ruskin School of Fine Art at Oxford University. Was there one moment or something in particular that inspired you to pursue visual arts?

**Oliver Beer:** I was constantly making art and music as a kid without necessarily knowing that that's what I was doing, and without differentiating one from the other. I grew up in a strange, eccentric environment where there was really no limit for what I could do, but there was also no guidance. The house was falling down around us, so if I wanted to paint the window panes different colors or cut up an old cement mixer and weld it back into a new form, no one was going to stop me. I went to music college knowing that I was going to go to Ruskin afterwards because I didn't want to have to choose, it never made sense to me why I should have to choose between disciplines when they're so clearly interwoven. Historically, they have been even more interwoven. It's only a more recent cultural phenomenon to separate painters from sculptors from composers, so I have always been at ease with not needing to define what I am doing as a particular discipline.

**AG:** Your family has largely inspired your work. Could you describe these early relationships that have shaped you, what your childhood was like, and expand on the importance of family as a "blueprint" for your work?

**OB:** A "blueprint" is quite a fair way of describing it. Like anybody, my early life was shaped by the people around me. There weren't a great deal of them, I have a very small family. In a way, there is something intriguing about the specificity of our own relationships in relation to what we share with every other family structure in the world.

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Oliver Beer, *Recomposition (Women Playing Music, after Kitagawa Utamaro)*, 2020

Fragments of the artist's grandmother's piano, cello, coloured pencils, paintbrush, chess pieces, domino pieces, organ pipe, metronome fragments, laughing gas canister, books about music, tobacco pipe, violin fragments, bag pipe, one-string fiddle, sectioned and set in resin; gesso

Open: 132.5 x 100 x 3.9 cm (52,17 x 39,37 x 1,54 in)

Closed: 132.5 x 50 x 7.8 cm (52,17 x 19,69 x 3,07 in)

Photo: Eva Herzog Image © The Artist. Image courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac.

Every one of our mothers and grandmothers is unique to us. At the same time, as we are living through this particular moment in history where we are constantly being told about people as statistics in terms of deaths and hospitalizations, and care homes... these are being defined in terms of family relationships: the number of mothers, grandmothers, brothers, et cetera we have lost who have died in this particular context. For me, looking inwards, thinking about my own strange family unit, was a way of looking outwards. The piece of my grandmother's kitchen floor for example: yes, it's my grandmother, it's her life, her kitchen, her feet that have worn the pattern away. But when people see it, I think they immediately think of their own grandmother or someone in their own life who could've made those marks. My family, they are probably a part of my artistic vocabulary because family is something that I see as a shared vocabulary. It's a way of communicating ideas more keenly and personally.

**AG:** It seems as though you have a penchant for transformation. You have blended artistic genres by giving architecture and inanimate objects a voice, and have turned music into visual art with your two dimensional sculptures and graphic scores. Would you consider transforming objects and their meanings as a crucial part of your practice?

**OB:** In one way it really is, but in another way it's not always so much transforming an object or situation so much as it is re-perceiving it. Perceiving something that is already there, but which we've been culturally conditioned to bypass, or to not consider as important. I have been working on the Resonance Project for so many years, and ever since I was a kid, as a particular characteristic of my own cerebral make-up, I can walk into a space and hear what key the room is in. For me that's the beauty of that particular, very long ongoing project: with each building the artwork just reveals the harmony that was already there. Rather than transforming it, it's about shaking off our sensorial conditioning that makes focus on what's useful, makes us focus on what's relevant to our perception, and instead open our ears and actually hear the music of architecture rather than simply looking at the space within it.

The idea of re-perceiving is very much true for the 2D sculptures as well. The first one I ever made was a tobacco pipe called *This is a Pipe*, and it was the opposite of [René] Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, insofar as it was a pipe pretending to be a painting rather than a painting pretending to be a pipe. Magritte was dealing with perception when he made that work and it challenges the way in which we perceive signs, symbols, and objects. With the pipe that I sliced in half, nothing had changed; everything was just as it was before I interacted with it, except that I eliminated half of it and set it into a wall so that the cut became a part of a single pictorial plane. Suddenly the object became an image, which was a moment of epiphany for me as a sculptor because I realized that every object in the world can become a part of a palette to be thought about differently. [As Marcel] Duchamp once asked, why should our vision remain so stubbornly retinal and stop at the surface, when you could be thinking through the world in a completely different way?

**AG:** You have mentioned that some of your two dimensional sculptures are "detritus," or "the bits and pieces from someone's life," and for many of them, that person in particular has been your grandmother. With your piece *Recomposition (Mercury and Argus)*, however, you have taken this method into a new direction, drawing inspiration from the Velázquez painting of Mercury lulling Argus to sleep. You have cut through two violins and a Middle Eastern oud and placed them within resin as an abstract representation of ancient music that we could never hear, but only imagine.

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Though this series of “sculptures” are visually harmonious, there seem to be different ideas and inspirations coming through each one, acting both as visual, abstract portraits of both lost people and of lost sounds. What would you say is the common thread that weaves through this series of two dimensional sculptures, and could you share more ideas and inspirations that are behind other pieces from this series?

**OB:** I am often trying to perceive the objects in a new way and trying to understand the “naked existence” of a thing, as Aldous Huxley would describe it, where I try shaking off all of the visual, cultural conditioning when we look at an object, and seeing it anew — that’s the first part of the gesture. We are so deeply visually conditioned that we immediately start to look for symbols, patterns and signifiers. That’s when I realized that when I cut through these objects and they had become images of themselves, our brain immediately starts to recompose and reconstruct them into new meanings, rather like a Rorschach print.

The piece inspired by Velàzquez is very cubist, it makes me think of Braque. I’m surprised that there was no instance of this sculptural concept being explored amongst the cubists, because from the way I cut the objects, they are literally being displayed from multiple perspectives simultaneously. [Within this piece] I have used the violin, which is almost impossible to separate from the human form in the history of art. For so long its “sexy” curves have been associated with the human body, that it’s almost impossible to make a piece like this without the brain reconstructing the relationship between the instrument and the body. And then, if you allow that to happen and run with it, suddenly your abstract image becomes supercharged with these signifiers. That’s why, in that particular painting, the two bodies are represented by two violins. As for the music, as it happens, I took the oud to be the sound waves, if you like, which are represented in the [original] painting invisibly. You can’t literally paint music or sounds, but that third instrument became the symbol or signifier of sound that was tying those two bodies together.

**AG:** Your work seems to pass through time. The objects that you have used in your Vessel Orchestra, for example, belong to different cultures across many generations, and have been holding the spaces within them for thousands of years. You have given a new life to these objects by bringing forward their unique musical notes, making them “sing,” and thus utilized the universal characteristics of music and harmony to tie cultures together. Could you tell me about this intrigue that you have for uniting different cultures across civilizations and history?

**OB:** Something that we are all struggling with in contemporary society is how to recognize and celebrate the differences between our cultures, whilst also holding tight to what’s common between us. I’m not sure if that’s what I was thinking of when I first started making these works, which was at the Watermill Center in New York with Robert Wilson’s collection. There, for the first time, it occurred to me to think of a vessel as a tiny piece of architecture which I could also listen to. Bob’s collection is one of the rare ones where he actually allows the artists to interact with the pieces, and at about 3 am, as I was exploring the collection and started listening to the resonance of the empty spaces within the vessels, I suddenly realized that a pre-Colombian jaguar effigy had been singing a D sharp since the 17th or 16th century. And that it would continue to sing that until the speed of sound changes, which will never happen. It’s entirely contingent on the geometry of the object and its physical volume, and it was an amazingly humbling revelation to hold this object and to know that it will continue to sing the same note until we’ve passed on to the next dominant civilisation and this one is gone; if it survives, then the music will survive with it.

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When I did the project with the Met I listened to hundreds of objects from the collection and chose only the ones that sang in perfect harmony with each other. We were throwing aside the hierarchies that are normally attributed to an encyclopaedic collection like that. No matter where it came from, who made it, how old it was, all it had to do was sing in perfect harmony with the other objects of the collection. And that meant that the piece became a kind of democratic, non-prejudicial cross section of the collection. You had a Betty Woodman trio of ceramics, really beautiful, singing alongside a Joan Miró or a Sottsass penis-shaped 'Shiva' vase. The oldest piece was a pre-Mesopotamian ceramic that was about 7000 years old which sang a D, a really beautiful, simple thing... Some of the objects would never have been shown at all in exhibitions because they are so humble, and some would have never been shown together because they are so different. Their union in this strange, gentle, heterogenous instrument became a way of recognizing what is common between us whilst putting in a very harsh spotlight all of the cultural specificities of each object and its origins. When you see a Palaeolithic cooking vessel next to a Beatrice Wood Fish, they're so far apart, yet in one sense – musically – they are so close together.

**AG:** When explaining your architectural and sound installations, you've spoken a lot about the function of making these places and objects "sing" as similar to running a finger on the rim of a wine glass. I am curious to know if you experienced a moment of epiphany while experimenting with your idea of making objects and architecture audible for the very first time? How did you arrive at such a complex idea?

**OB:** It's a whole series of epiphanies, being an artist, that's what's so nice about it. When I was a kid there was an epiphany when I realized that I could make the pedestrian tunnel between two tube stations sing so purely and perfectly that people thought there was some sound being created by the architecture itself, it sounded like it was coming from everywhere and nowhere, and not from my body. I realized that essentially you become a part of the architecture when you create a resonant frequency like this with your voice. Then at Oxford I had a moment of epiphany when I realized that I could invite a fantastic young choir, drunk after a concert, into a brutalist multi-story car park at 1am and create the most spine-chillingly beautiful architectural music with them, with barely any need for rehearsal – because it revealed an innate relationship of the body with the architecture.

Another moment was when I was kicked out of the Sydney Opera House – for complicated reasons whilst I was artist in residence there – and suddenly I had no architecture to work with; but I still had four incredible singers. So I asked them to treat their bodies as the architectural space and to find the resonant frequencies of each other's facial cavities. That was another moment of understanding for me that there are – despite all of our very specific cultural perspectives and the very precise and subtle way in which we read cultural signifiers and symbols and artifice – that there are certain things that are just reassuringly universal. It's like a shared palette or common tools. I think every time I come across one of those things that allows me to perceive things better... In some ways it comes back to what we were saying about the family: the personal vs the universal. If you learn something more about your mother, and then you learn something more about motherhood at the same time.

**AG:** There are two copperplate etchings in your current exhibition *Ghost Notes (Part I)* in Tokyo at The Club gallery, entitled *Score For Vessels (Ghost Notes I)* and *Score For Vessels (Ghost Notes II)*. What is the meaning behind the motifs that are etched into the plates? Is etching a technique that you will continue pursue?

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**OB:** I have been making copper plates for several years now, and it started with when I first made a print of a score that began with a copper plate etching for the biennial in Istanbul. When I saw the plates that we were making the print with, I found it so much more beautiful than the actual print. Since then, I have made a copper plate etching “score” for each of my exhibitions. For my show at [Thaddaeus] Ropac, it was a score that described the resonant frequency of the building and how to activate it. At The Club, it is a pointer towards the installation that will be coming in the summer, we hope. These etchings show the uniquely archetypal forms of an amphora and ewer, which I’ve taken from wonderful Victorian studies of archetypal, “perfect” vessels. They are all geometrically regular and perfect vessel shapes, and within it, I’ve drawn the harmonic series as waves. Every single stretched string in the world – whether it be on a piano or a violin or a steel rope on a suspension bridge – is always going to vibrate according to the same harmonic series. The same is true of the inside of the vessel. We were talking about what’s universal as opposed to culturally specific: the series of vessel works work with something common between every single culture and every civilization in history: every time we play or sing a note, we are using the harmonic series to make sound. The waves that you can see drawn inside the vessel are really a visual description of the sound that you would hear when that vessel is resonating at its natural frequency – something that you can hear when I activate these installations.

**AG:** Could you give us a hint of what we should expect for the sound installation that will be Part II of Ghost Notes at The Club?

**OB:** It will be an evolution of what I was working on at the Met, although very different aesthetically. Each collection and group of objects [that I work with] is unique, though they follow the same laws harmonically and musically. There will be a lot more interactivity between the public and the work, you won’t need Philip Glass to provide the music for you. It will be a much more immersive experience. Very site specific to Tokyo, as well.

**AG:** I recently watched your conversation with Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel as a part of the Riga Biennial in Latvia, and having also seen your show Household Gods here in Paris at Thaddaeus Ropac in person, I found it so interesting that, through the idea of amplifying objects from the female Latvian poet Aspazija, you were in a way acknowledging the voices of women who have been forgotten about in literature, art, and music. This anecdote is also clearly reminiscent of the story of your grandmother not being allowed to study classical music because of her gender. This project that you have started is so rich, that the objects and the space you place them in can alter the meaning the overall piece, making it destined for different audiences. Do you have any plans to recreate this project in the future in new spaces and with different objects?

**OB:** It’s kind of like a score as well, that’s why the piece in Riga was so different from the piece at the Met, and how the piece in Tokyo will be so completely different again. I offer a score, and the place and its historical, cultural context is like the musician that will automatically reinterpret that score. Working in Riga, Aspazija was such an extraordinary, exceptional figure in her time.

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Her objects are tied to her life story. My grandmother has her own humble unique place in history, which is tied to her being British in a middle class rural environment, which means that the objects in her life become a portrait of her economic and social and cultural situation in the world. And this uniqueness is the same for any collector or any collection, whether that be an institution or an individual. You mentioned how my grandmother as a woman was so challenged by the patriarchal society that prevented her from studying music, whereas if had she been educated in the present day she could've perhaps become a great musician. That is something that comes back again to this idea of what is universal compared to what is culturally and socially specific. If our social mores evolve it will mean that the cultural tools that we are working with will become more accessible to different parts of society, which means that there will be new unique expressions of musical language. It's a constant battle between what we all have innately within us, and what any particular culture at any given moment is allowing us to express. I worked on a piece at the FIAC in 2019 called Stray Voices with the Lebanese band Mashrou' Leila which was really inspired by the "Matilda effect," which is an expression in science that indicates that, historically, discoveries made by women are much more likely to be attributed to their male counterparts. In recent cultures and civilizations this has been an endemic problem. There is an interest for me in allowing socially progressive ideas to come to the fore, even if I don't actively and specifically push them, they are simply there. If one creates a score and allows a situation to fill in the notes, then these ideas will start to appear.

**AG: You apparently also had to alter this piece at the Riga Biennial because of Covid-19. Could you tell me about what the original piece was meant to be?**

**OB:** Originally, I would have gone out there with the objects of the female member's of my family with me, so from Household Gods, I would've taken my grandmother's, my mother's, and my sister's objects, and I would have harmonized them with Aspazija's objects. It would have become a cross cultural conversation between her world and this particular, humble, domestic world that my family and I grew up in. As it happened, that wasn't possible because of the pandemic, but we took the empty plinths from the installation and it became something else. That body of work [before] and those sets of ideas were about the audibility of these women, and the fact that they were not often given the voice that they should have been given. The absence of vessels and their silence has become an expression and an extension of that idea.

**AG: There was a live performance too, can you tell me how it related to the physical exhibition?**

**OB:** I couldn't be there for it sadly, but I was able to rehearse via Zoom with Latvian singers and work with their musical director to pass on my notes in detail to them. And Rebecca Lamarche Vadel is an extraordinarily talented curator with whom I've often worked and with whom I felt very comfortable entrusting the presentation of the work. She also directed a brilliant feature film made at the Biennale as a way of communicating it beyond its geographical limits during the pandemic.

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Singing is an integral part of Latvian culture, much more so than it is in the UK or France. There was even a “singing revolution” [there] which was really extraordinary. I worked with the music that [these Latvian singers] as individuals had inherited from their families. If you ask people what the earliest music they ever remember hearing in their life is, it almost always comes from a mother or a grandmother, sometimes a father, or a sibling. It is the kind of cultural content or musical DNA that we cannot shake off, and you cannot change those fragments of music that you carry around with you. I wove their melodies into a polyphonic composition where each singer became like a vessel, carrying within them that fragment of cultural coding. I adapted the keys of their melodies so that it could become a kind of polyphony where they were harmonizing with each other as well as with Aspazija’s vessels. They as singers, or as “vessels”, brought their specific musical inheritance and repertoire to the performance. And so the performance was completely unique to that space, those vessels, and those singers, and you could never reproduce it anywhere else. From what from people told me, and from seeing the film and hearing the recordings, it seems like it was a beautiful moment. And it was poignant to hear these diverse and personal pieces of music woven into harmony with each other, thanks to the vessels as their musical common denominator.

**AG: Has Covid-19 changed other areas of your practice?**

**OB:** I have had much more time in London than usual and I’m very fortunate to have as my studio a kind of penthouse warehouse in SoHo where I have been able to spend this period working quite intensely on new bodies of work. On the one hand, it’s been a very intimate and personal time working with my hands and making new pieces. On the other hand, I have been able to spend this time planning, envisaging and drawing up the most extraordinarily ambitious projects that will one day be able to be made when the world opens up again.

**AG: Would you like to share a little bit about those projects or are you keeping them under wraps for now?**

**OB:** Yes, sure! Mostly under wraps for now, but I can share that I’ll be showing some major works in the Hayward Gallery’s “British Art Show”, which is a major exhibition that tours different museums around the UK over a couple of years. This edition is curated by Irene Aristizábal and Hammad Nasar. They are going to take different pieces from my bodies of works for each leg of the exhibition’s journey, so they will be showing Oma’s Music with the pianola, elements from the Vessel Orchestra, and my Composition For Mouths from the Sydney Biennale as well. I also have a major new interactive sculptural sound installation for a beautiful Italian staircase opening at Great Ormond Street hospital soon, which it’s been a joy to work on.

**Alexandra Gilliams**