

1. Title

Hi. I'm John Priestley. Stephen was regrettably unable to make it tonight. I'll be presenting on his behalf and will do my best to answer any questions you may have.

2. I'm going to start with a brief excerpt from a documentary produced for Australian television last year.

<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3145981.htm>

[Play to 2:45.]

3. WTC Artist Residency

The residency was active from 1997 to 2001, and subsequently continued at other sites. Artists were given studio space in vacant offices.

127 artists participated during the years the program was located at the World Trade Center.

4. 1999 Summer Residency

Stephen was one of 16 artists during the Summer 1999 residency. Others include Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, who will be delivering a guest lecture here at VCU on October 12, through the Photography & Film department. Paul Pfeiffer was another notable artist.

5. WTC / 9-11 Factor

The artists primarily created work in response to the site. But it's important to recognize that the site had a different meaning at the time than it does now. It was an important visual reference for Manhattan residents and a place of business for international financiers, but not a site of tragedy or terror. If it was a national symbol, it was one of commerce and strength, though not necessarily of courage and hope. As such it provides a clear example of the way art is situated in emerging history, and how its meaning changes over time as we change.

After 9-11, documentation of the World Trade Center was much in demand. As word of Stephen's work spread through popular media and art circles, he came to be identified as the World Trade Center sound artist. His career since then has entailed a delicate balance between accepting the attention this external factor brings, while not letting it define him as an artist.

6. Artistic Development (1)

This residency was crucial to Stephen's development from a musician to a sound

artist. The work he described in his residency proposal was to incorporate ambient sound as an accompaniment to guitar-based music. He imagined doing something similar to the work of Maryanne Amacher, who was known to hang a microphone out the window of her studio and capture ocean sounds, which she would feed at will into the mix of her abstract synthesizer tones. He thought he would similarly record high-altitude wind, distant city sounds, etc., and use them to expand on the sonic palette of his guitar. It was not until he got to the site that he realized the windows were sealed.

7. Artistic Development (2)

This is a classic case of resistance in the materials prompting artistic innovation. Stephen had to adapt devices to bring the outside in through the glass. In this way, he used the building itself and its immediate environment as instruments instead of his guitar.

Stephen's prior work in media art had involved crafting sound to accompany other artists' images. At the World Trade Center, for the first time, he was inspired to treat the location as his own image and create site-specific sound in response to it.

8. Findings

Stephen discovered during open studio sessions that his sound had a visceral, destabilizing effect on his visitors. There's something about the hermetic closure and apparent stasis of skyscrapers that turns the extraordinary elevation into an abstraction. But on hearing the actual sound from outside magnified within the space, visitors who were not afraid of heights suddenly became profoundly so.

He also found that the less he added to the sound, the richer it seemed.

Both these discoveries were elemental in turning him toward a consideration of sound on its own terms rather than subjecting it to the more narrowly ordered principles of music. Sound was now a tool for exploring a space, at least as much as one for unfolding a text over time.

9. Sounds of the WTC

I'm going to finish with another documentary excerpt — this one a radio story from WNYC:

<http://www.studio360.org/2011/sep/02/the-sounds-of-the-world-trade-center/>