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Pablo José Ramírez

Raven Chacon: *A Worm's Eye View from
A Bird's Beak*

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An Instrument That Had No History Raven Chacon in conversation with Pablo José Ramírez



Tremble Staves (still), 2017–19. Photo: Roger Jones

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Raven Chacon's work represents a tectonic shift in art-making vis-à-vis sonic practices. Rooted in an ethos guided by Indigenous ways of knowing, his work resides at the intersection of sound art and music composition. In this dialogue, Chacon and curator Pablo José Ramírez discuss the artist's life in Navajo ancestral lands and his polyvalent relationship to sound. They delve into his understanding of the agency of sound; his approach to replication and tone in music composition; his connection to the performative dimension of the sonic; and ideas around silence and the possibility of an exteriority of Western audibility. Chacon examines his recent exhibition and monographic publication *A Worm's Eye View from A Bird's Beak* ¹ at the Swiss Institute, New York and at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum/Davvi Norga Dáiddamusea, Tromsø, where he is collaborating with Sámi artists.

PABLO JOSÉ RAMÍREZ

Sound and sonic art practices have had a new kind of institutional reception in the last few years. It's more common to go to an exhibition and engage with sound, and fortunately, more brilliant scholars, artists, and curators are writing about it. I also know that you have a background in music composition. For many years, your practice has moved between performance, music, installation, and sound. How do you situate yourself in this moment? Do you feel comfortable with a label such as "sound artist"?

RAVEN CHACON

"Sound artist" is definitely not a label I remember hearing even twenty years ago, when I was deciding that that's what I wanted to be. I've always thought of myself as a composer first. A lot of the work starts as some kind of score, even if it's just text. It's a prompt for myself to start thinking through an idea. There might be drawings or sketches, but when I'm thinking of a project, I'm trying to figure out how it can be music that will still carry the concept, or the narrative. I also don't want to forget that music doesn't have to be "about" anything, or mean anything. So I still very much call myself a musician when I improvise live with people. At the end of the day, for me it's all fundamentally composition. It's putting things together, whether that's sounds or prompts, instructions or ideas.

It also doesn't have to be limited to music. Music can be a difficult medium by which to relay certain concepts. From day one, I've always had an interest in moving image, performance, and movement. I also differentiate between sound and music. Music implies a timeline, whereas I think of sound as fixed, as the content of the music. It can be anything. A silent film can be music. Dance is some kind of music. The more I work with composition, the more I realize that some action lining up with another action or even just existing in its own timeline is also music. The capabilities of that interaction, the place where that's being enacted, the

people who are enacting it—the instruments, if you will—they all have significance.

PABLO

The art world tends to compartmentalize different practices within specific categories in order to trace historical genealogies, which most of the time, if not always, go back to the Western teleology of art history. Sound doesn't escape that, which is why it's problematic to discursively insist on "sound art" or "sound practices." A good example of this problem of such definitions is, for example, the critiques that have come from the field of deaf studies, questioning the very limits between audibility and other forms of perception.

When I think of your practice, I also think of you as an artist of agency, of vitality. It's about creating the conditions of possibility for that agency to exist among objects and collaborators. In your book, *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak* (2024), you say, "Often my music does not care about timbre or tone—or, I should clarify, the consistency of replicating a specific sound. What is important is from who or from what the tone originates." Maybe I'm inferring something unintended, but I think the problem with replication also speaks to the problem of identity. By this I mean identity as identical to "others"—as a form of identification. In my opinion, one of the main problems faced by indigeneity and Indigenous practices is that identity as a category doesn't capture what it needs to, namely the rich nuances of culture, because our positionality as beings always exceeds these categories. The way you speak about music is a beautiful way of thinking about dissonance and refusal. Based on that, what would you say has changed or mutated in your practice in recent years? What kind of things do you care about now that you didn't before?

RAVEN

The book allowed me to look back at how I started, what I was thinking about when I was twenty years old and going out into the desert to make noise. How I even came upon that path is an anomaly; nobody else doing it where I came from in central New Mexico, from the Navajo Nation. Looking back, I understand that it was all a refusal. I was into heavy metal and punk rock, but even those didn't satisfy my need for refusal. They were too fixed. Musical taste can become one's identity, shape communities. But I wanted to see what would happen if there was no community. What if I didn't even *like* the music that I wanted to make? Every musician wants to play their instrument well. Every musician wants people to like the music they're making. I was interested in refusing all of that.

I don't think it came from a place of wanting to reject my identity, though. I was fortunate to grow up in an area where there were a lot of Brown people, a lot of people who looked like me. Native, Chicano, are not necessarily the minorities in New Mexico. So I didn't have that identity crisis, but

I was afraid of where people would try to steer me. I wanted to learn every kind of music available. I played in a mariachi group in the early evening, and then at midnight I'd play in a heavy metal band. In the morning, I would make noise recordings, then go write classical music around lunchtime. I was learning as many different kinds of music as I could, but was never satisfied, which led to my interest in dissonance—dissonance I couldn't find in death metal, or even traditional music. My grandfather used to sing Navajo music all day long. So, surely that's in the music I make, but I didn't feel like I could ever fully be a practitioner of that music. I wasn't in that community enough. So, all of this became refusal, and it ended up coming out on the other end as the music that I make.

Over the years, all of that refusal has led to a method of navigating various artistic communities. How do I put all of this together? How might I work in a visual art situation, then go do a classical music commission, and interact with that world and that audience? Can those audiences overlap? *Should* they overlap? What is the work that will bring them together? The idea to build instruments came from thinking, well, what if I was to make an instrument that had no history? That would mean that I'm the only virtuoso of that instrument. A snare drum with a guitar pickup on top—there's no other player of that. And in recent years, I've had the privilege of working in mediums that one can only engage with if they're at an advanced level. For instance opera. And that's a medium that combines many elements.

PABLO

The performativity of opera or live music holds a magic that is irreplaceable.

RAVEN

Live music is in motion, it's fleeting. You have to be there in real time and experience it. Even your memory won't capture it; you think you'll remember what it sounded like, but you never will. That's a beautiful thing. And when you're there in the room, the sound waves are affecting you physically. That's another reason that I will always continue to be a performer and an improviser. Having fluidity and agency to see where my hands go on the instrument and what sounds will emerge, whether it's a familiar instrument or an instrument with no history of being played.

PABLO

Let's talk about sound and silence. Personally, I started to write and reflect on sound and silence because I was thinking about translation and how curators are engaging with and writing about Indigenous and Brown practices. Sadly, sometimes the language used is closer to Western anthropology than it is to emancipatory politics. Curatorial practice often resorts to a presumably "objective" interpretation and description rather than cultivating an intentional and vulnerable relationship with Indigenous

and Brown artistic practices. I started to think about strategies to engage with silence not as an absence of meaning, but as the absence of a discursive explanatory regime. Silence as a political residue that translation cannot completely capture.

I've learned a lot from your work, especially your commitment to the performative dimension of sound. Your practice moves between the audible and the silent through different sonic registers and materialities. *Singing Toward the Wind Now / Singing Toward the Sun Now* (2012) is a good example. Could you say more about the role of silence in your practice?

RAVEN

One of my very first works was a piece called *Field Recordings* (1999). The idea was very innocent: I would record three quiet places that I knew of, two of them on the Navajo Nation, the other in the Sandia Mountains, where I often hiked. Some of these places have tourists, whom I needed to figure out how to avoid. When I made the recordings, they were quiet, as expected, and I wanted to then magnify that quietness, so I kept turning it up, and when I couldn't turn it up anymore, I sought more ways to augment it, to get it to be extremely loud. It became a noise composition, a way of inverting silence to achieve something that I wanted to hear, which was harsh noise or very loud sound. Recall that at this same time, I was making instruments and going out to the desert to make noise—harsh, obnoxious, abrasive sounds. It was a way out of anthropological or documentary field recording. I didn't want to be a person who was gathering information in that way. I would rather find the colors inside of silent recordings, hear another kind of essence of a place.

The second work I made was called *Duet* (2000), and that was just a score. I was becoming familiar with John Cage's 4'33" (1952), and upon seeing how that work was scored out, I wondered, What if the rests were actually notated? What if there was music there, but it was all in the form of rests? And even more so, what if those rests had dynamics to them? What would that mean if there were to be no sound? *Duet* was about two people lining up in a tempo, acknowledging each other's presence in time, with an understanding beyond the senses we rely upon, starting together, then ending together—having an interaction even though there was no sound to be made, no instruments to be played.

My third piece was a lot like the first one, but written for guns and called *Report* (2001/2015). That was a different kind of refusal. I was trying to find an instrument where I couldn't control the melody, I couldn't write any pitch, I couldn't modulate the volume. At first I was thinking of a snare drum, but you could still push on the head and microtonally change the pitch. And you can obviously play a drum quietly or loudly. So the instrument I finally came up with was guns. I had been shooting on the weekends, going hunting with friends. This piece is completely binary. It's either on or off. You're either playing the sound or you're not. There's no

fade-in with a gunshot. There is this other thing that happens, though. After the sound of the gunshot, you hear its echo in the land. It's a way for the land to create a sound. The decay of the maximum peak becomes information about the place. That got me thinking about the privilege of deep listening—of going to a place, as a tourist perhaps, and trying to have a meditative experience where one is able to understand themselves better, or understand their place in the universe.

Years later, at Standing Rock, my wife Candice Hopkins and I made a score titled *Dispatch* (2020) that asked, What is deep listening when you're in a place of emergency, where there's police yelling at you through bullhorns? Or again, the work we did with Postcommodity and the LRADS: What if sounds are being aimed at you? What if people are praying or singing all night, or yelling? What if you can't sleep? What if you can't meditate? What if you can't think because you are under attack? Is there still a possibility of listening deeply in those situations?

There's a reference to the lack of silence in this noise, but also a refusal of silence. And a lot of meaning inside those possibilities of being in a situation where one can have silence. Of course, there is also the significance of thinking about being silenced.

I've made a few pieces for solo guitar that are really chord progressions, but very prolonged because there are these long silences in between, so it feels very disconnected. It becomes its own way of marking time and it's a disruptor to music—in the same way that noise can be that kind of contrarian.

PABLO

This relates to your engagement with how different forms of silence connect to expanding possibilities of the performative and the visual. For instance, Haino Keiji's silence is pretty much a minimal idea of absence, of emptiness, while I think the way you engage with silence goes in the opposite direction—filled with context and meaning that is provided by you, by people, by a community, or by a situation. I think that silence, in this way, opens up to forms of perception that are not necessarily audible, but certainly still present. This connects to what I mentioned earlier, about the relationship between deaf studies and sound studies and ideas of perception, vibration, and bodily experience. I'm thinking about the gunshot and the land it reverberates into.

RAVEN

Right. There's something filling the gaps, and that's where the land itself can resound inside of the composition. While watching the video, one wonders, Where is this taking place? Then you're probably also asking, What is the history of guns in this place? Were there battles here? Were there massacres? And who has survived? Who are the people there now shooting these guns in this composition, in this performance? All of that

information ends up after one has considered the initial sound; there's this reflection in the decay where you can hear the true composition.

I'm interested in the timeline inside of that frame, whether there's sound or actual silence or theoretical silence. It's the kind of zeroing out that can occur and that can contain a lot of meaning, even if it's nothing more than an interruption in the experience.

This connects to the power of music, especially in a live setting, where you are experiencing music that you will never experience again in the same way. And when those same performers or musicians consciously or unconsciously create silence, that's another kind of energy that's unlike anything else—we might call it an awkward silence. A mystery we don't know how to comprehend.

PABLO

Exactly—we might assume it's a kind of failure, a glitch in the communication. I once visited home of the Maya Tz'utujil artist Benvenuto Chavajay. He kindly invited me to have lunch with his family, and there was so much silence at the table, it made me nervous. As the guest, I felt that I had to talk to fill it. Finally, Benvenuto said to me, "Silence is fine. You don't have to say anything. It's about sharing the meal."

This is probably a good moment to connect to the present and to your work in Sámi territory in Norway. Your exhibition *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak* at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum / Davvi Norga Dáiddamusea in Tromsø just opened, together with the published monograph. You have a long-standing relationship with the community of Sámi artists in those lands. As part of the exhibition, you developed collaborative works like . . . *the sky ladder* (2024) and *For Four* (2024). Would you share more about this?

RAVEN

I received an invitation to do something in Sámi territory in Tromsø. And indeed, I have a few artist friends up there, so it was a great opportunity to see what kinds of dialogues can happen between my questions and a situation elsewhere. I was thinking about place-specific worldviews, of creation stories, of ancestry and myths. Those ideas always lead to conversations about time, because they assume there is a next, or a before, or an after.

Another topic I'm interested in pertains to the encroachments happening today on lands that Indigenous people steward or have been displaced from, and what kinds of collaborations can happen when we gather in those sites of conflict. An event like Standing Rock was profound because it was not organized; it was a global microcosm in a place that had such an interesting dynamic of people—our hosts, artists, activists, politicians,

actors, undercover cops. I was interested to see what encroachments the Sámi people are trying to resist.

The other part of this was thinking through prompts for compositions that I wanted to make. One prompt I had written was to be performed in New Mexico. The idea started with me wanting to place four singers in a valley, an old tradition from all around the world. This became a very site-specific song that reflected the 360-degree view of that place, from that center point. I thought of four singers, each facing a different cardinal direction, scanning the landscape and singing the actual contour of that horizon line as a melody. Then they would slowly turn in unison and sing in the next cardinal direction. This could potentially generate a canon, a round, a fugue, a delayed sound that would harmonize loosely. I wanted to do this where the atomic bomb was tested in White Sands, New Mexico, but one cannot access that area, as it's still used as a missile range. Looking at other craters and valleys in the state, I came up with the concept of putting the singers in a valley created by a different kind of sudden disruption. I chose the Valles Caldera, where a volcano exploded millions of years ago, as it's very close to Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the atomic bomb was developed. The piece is titled *For Four*.

I wanted to do this as well up in Sámi territory, also in a valley that was created by a sudden disruption, and I found a river valley that is only accessible because it was dammed up at the top. It combined two interests of mine—encroachments onto the land, and the continuation of local tradition, being that these four singers were going to *joik* the landscape. The tradition of *joiking* involves singing not solely of the contour of the land, but rather about all of the information regarding a place. If the singers are *joiking* a mountain, they might be *joiking* the shape of the mountain, but also what animals are there, its history, how the mountain is responding energetically. It's beautiful—this tradition of site-specific music. And for me, understanding *joiking* better through these four master *joikers* was equally profound as a collaborator.

PABLO

This relates to . . . *the sky ladder*, too.

RAVEN

Yes, . . . *the sky ladder* began with the studying the work of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, also known as Áillohaš. He was a Sámi musician and composer, had made field recordings and sculptures, and was a very influential performer among the Sámi people. I felt some alignment with him, being that he extended his work as a musician, performer, and composer into other mediums and other interests. I had the opportunity to stay in the home that he built, and there I became familiar with more of his work, as a lot of his sculptures are in that house. There is a series of untitled works composed of wood planks with small holes in them. I learned that they

were pieces of pine driftwood that he found in the fjord, and that the holes were made by worms living in the fjord. When I looked at them, I saw waves that looked like a landscape, and dots evoking notes on a page of music. I was thinking, maybe one could play these holes *as* music. And then the same idea of, What if I asked people about their memories and visions of a shared place? I was already in conversation with the sisters Marja and Inger Bal Nango about experiences at Standing Rock, and I told them about this idea I had for a family to make holes in pieces of wood to reflect their memories, their perspectives on an important place that they know on their land.

Ultimately the prompt for . . . *the sky ladder* was to ask the extended Bal Nango family to each draw their version of a landscape that is important to them, to see all the different variations on that land, and present those in a sequence that could appear as music in transition, or music that's morphing. A hand drill was then used to reinforce the contours of that horizon and its details. The series of planks is presented as a vertical representation of that change, of that knowledge not being fixed, but rather shifting as it changes across members and generations of the family. But there's other components as well. Video documentation of . . . *the sky ladder* was made in collaboration with Christine Cynn. She's a brilliant filmmaker, and she documented the family making the planks of wood while telling stories of the place.

Lastly, in the attic of the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum is a record player playing sounds from the drilling of the wood. This motion or shape of a screw, or of a circle or a spiral, whether going toward the center or emanating outward, appears all over the two exhibitions—the one at the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, and the other at the Swiss Institute in New York, which just closed—whether it's this motion of drilling or undrilling, or windmills turning, or a record player spinning, or people rotating as they're singing in the valley.

PABLO

Was . . . *the sky ladder* on view at the Swiss Institute?

RAVEN

. . . *the sky ladder* is on view at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum. The New Mexico version of *For Four* was on view at the Swiss Institute, and the *joiking* version made in the Sámi river valley is at Nordnorsk. Two versions of that same piece, or of the same composition. Hopefully, they'll get shown together someday. I'd love to see them both in the same space.

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Raven Chacon (b. 1977, Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, performer, and installation artist and a 2023 MacArthur Fellow. As a solo artist, Chacon has exhibited, performed, and/or had works performed at the Swiss Institute /

Contemporary Art New York; Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, Trondheim; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Renaissance Society, Chicago; the San Francisco Electronic Music Festival; REDCAT, Los Angeles; the Vancouver Art Gallery; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; the Borealis Festival, Bergen, Norway; SITE Santa Fe; Chaco Canyon, New Mexico; Ende Tymes Festival, Ridgewood, New York; and the Kennedy Center, New York. As a member of Postcommodity from 2009 to 2018, he co-created artworks presented at the 2022 Whitney Biennial, documenta 14, and the 57th Carnegie International, as well as the two-mile-long land art installation *Repellent Fence* across the US-Mexico border. As a recording artist, over the span of twenty-two years Chacon has appeared on more than eighty releases on various national and international labels. His 2020 Manifest Destiny opera *Sweet Land*, co-composed with Du Yun, received critical acclaim from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *New Yorker*, and was named the 2021 Opera of the Year by the Music Critics Association of North America. Since 2004, Chacon has mentored more than three hundred Native high school composers in writing new string quartets for the Native American Composer Apprenticeship Project (NACAP). Chacon is the recipient of the United States Artists fellowship in music, the Creative Capital award in visual arts, the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation artist fellowship, the American Academy's Berlin Prize for music composition, the Bemis Center's Ree Kaneko Award, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists Award, and the Pew Fellow in Residence. His solo artworks are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Smithsonian American Art Museum; the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles; the University of New Mexico Art Museum, and various private collections.

Pablo José Ramírez is a curator at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. From 2019 to 2023 he was the inaugural adjunct curator of First Nations and Indigenous art at Tate Modern, London, where he played a key role in shaping the acquisitions strategy for and advancement of Indigenous and non-Western practices. Ramírez was part of the curatorial council of the 58th Carnegie International with Sohrab Mohebbi. He co-curated the 19th Paiz Art Biennial: Transvisible (2015) with Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, and recently, he co-curated with Diana Nawi the critically acclaimed Hammer Museum biennial *Made in LA 2023: Acts of Living*. His work explores non-Western ontologies, Brown and Indigenous histories, and the politics of non-colonial aesthetics. He holds an MA in contemporary art theory from Goldsmiths, University of London. Among his recent exhibitions are *Beyond the Sea Sings: Diasporic Intimacies and Labour*, Times Art Center, Berlin (2021); *La Medida del Silencio: Lawrence Abu Hamdan*, NuMu, Guatemala City (2020); *The Shores of the World: On Commonality and Interlingual Politics*, Display, Prague (2018); and *Guatemala Después* (co-curator), Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, Parsons School of Design, New York (2015). Ramírez was the recipient of the 2019 Independent Curators International / CPPC Award for Central America and the Caribbean and is the cofounder of Infrasonica, a leading curatorial platform dedicated to research around non-Western sonic cultures. Ramírez has lectured internationally at the Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, the National Museum of Oslo, MUAC, Gasworks, ParaSite, Kunstintituut Melly, the University of Cape Town, Essex University, Cambridge University, the University of Chicago, Simon Fraser University, and the New School, among others. He has published extensively, including pieces for *Artforum*, *e-flux*, *Arts of the Working Class*, *Artishock*, and several catalogues and books.