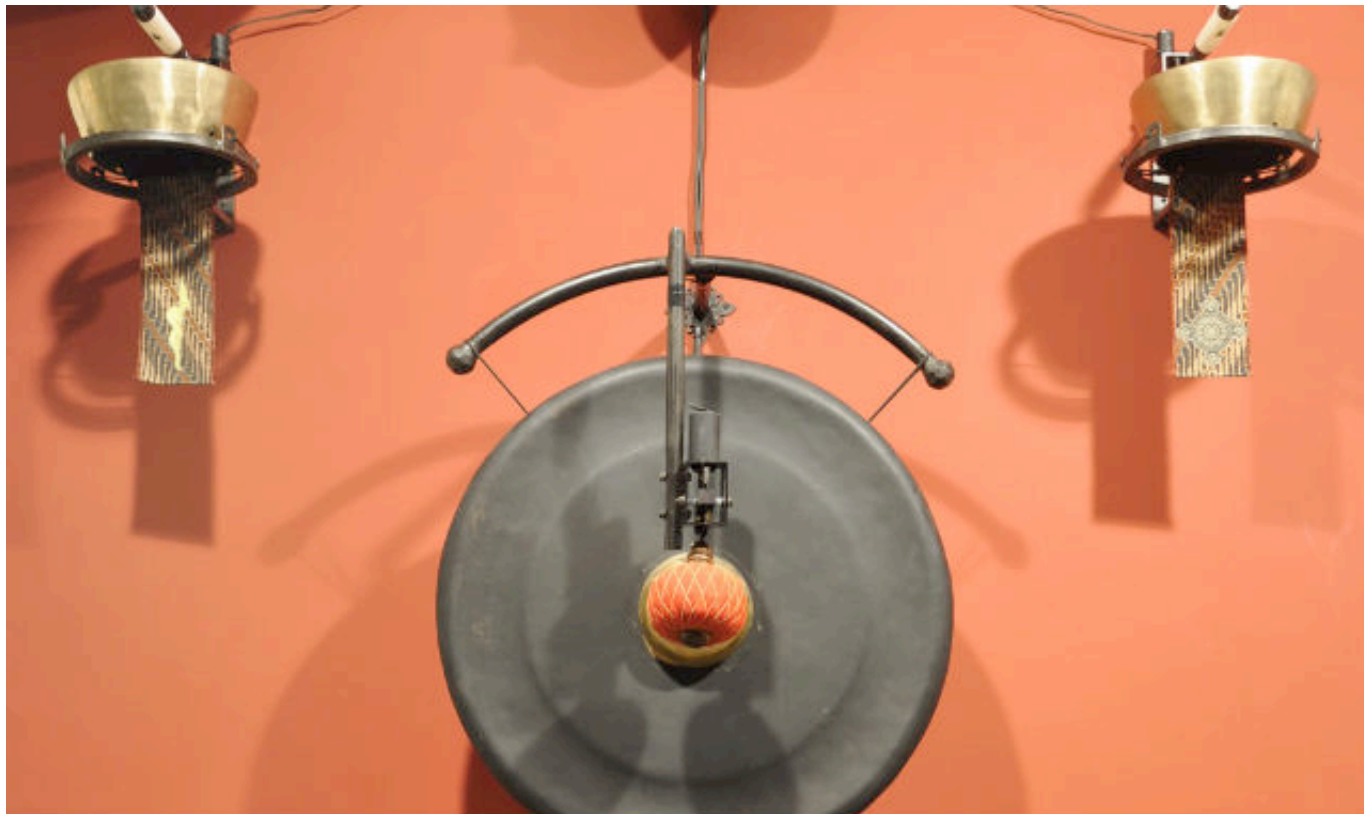


Taylor Kuffner's Robot Gamelan Orchestra

Language

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Courtesy the artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery

by Zoe Li

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HONG KONG – At [Sundaram Tagore Gallery](#) in Hong Kong, there is an installation of gamelan, Indonesian percussive instruments, producing a soothing meditative melody. But there are no musicians. The effect is of a ghostly orchestra playing oddly comforting music in the gallery's stark white space.

This is the work of artist **Taylor Kuffner**, a New Yorker who immersed himself in Indonesian music and cultural forms then experimented with robotizing gamelan. The result is the **Gamelatron Project**, an ongoing series of digitally programmed gamelan that “removes the human, detaches from the ego” to produce a pure percussive sound.

Kuffner spent 2003 to 2006 living and studying in Indonesia, enrolling at the **Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta** as well as learning from private tutors and village elders. He speaks Indonesian quite fluently and regularly visits the elders, the musicians, and the craftsmen to further his work with gamelan. The artist is deeply immersed in Indonesian culture and explains its nuances convincingly throughout our interview with him. Yet for all that, he is not Indonesian and he encounters much criticism of his work as cultural appropriation, removed from the gamelan's heavily ritualistic and community-building

significance.

BLOUIN ARTINFO chats with Kuffner about how he agrees with his critics but also thinks that they are missing the point.

How do you respond to your critics?

The biggest criticism I get stems from the idea of *gotong royong*, which roughly means “working together” or “communal work.” Gamelan is seen as one of the highest forms of *gotong royong* because there is no soloing. Everyone has memorized their parts and they must play as one. Every part is interlocked and doesn’t sound right when played alone. So it is blasphemous to have a New Yorker playing these instruments using robots. It’s pretentious and it’s wrong and I agree with them on that level. But the thing is, the gong predates the idea of *gotong royong*. These instruments weren’t invented in order to give humans an activity to do together. Gamelan was co-opted by *gotong royong*.

The origin myth of the gong says that the divine told a Javanese king to make the gong because the sound it would produce would be a manifestation of the divine. The sound wasn’t a representation of the divine; it was the divine.

When you alleviate the human from the equation, you can focus on this sound, this connection to something greater. When I watch a person perform I can't help but think about the amazing skills of that musician. Their incredible technique overshadows the sound; it somehow becomes secondary to the prowess of that musician. But when I take the person out of the equation, it erases the ego of the person who is playing it and we can focus on our encounter with the sound.

Believe it or not I have gotten more criticism from ethnomusicologists and gamelan aficionados who are from America, than from Indonesians themselves. These instruments are so wrapped up in this exoticism and cultural dogma, like, only if you're a Javanese Hindu can you possibly feel or understand this. But I think it's universally human to respond to the reverberance of sound. It's its own thing that gets co-opted and utilized by secular and non-secular traditions. Outside of Bali it's seen as a bit of a pompous royal tradition in some sense and Indonesians want to be looking forward and aren't so interested in this pre-colonial exoticism representing them. What I'm doing is detaching gamelan from a lot of the dogma.

Can you explain the idea of the physical experience of sound and how that relates to the Gamelatron Project?

My installations are an immersive experience and are part kinetic sculpture, part sound installation. I remember when I first heard gamelan my favorite thing was being in the middle of the engulfing sound and I want to yoke the power of this reverberance as I see the way that resonance affects people and their bodies and their mood and thinking patterns. I think that we've lost some of the beauty of encountering the reverberance of a physical instrument. It is a physical experience. I don't always like calling my work “sound art” as I think they're beautiful objects and the kinetics is a part of the experience.

How did you design your installation according to the Sundaram Tagore Gallery space?

The installation is meant to be one piece, but because the gallery is made of two spaces, one on top of the other, I have split the instruments into the ones with slightly higher pitch and the ones with slightly lower pitch, and each set is installed in the separate spaces. This is roughly following the idea of gender and the interrelationship of male and female, that when the instruments of two different pitches are played together it creates this wave of sound. Because the piece has been split up, we might lose some of the connection of the tones, but it is also an experiment with what we can do with the space.

Can you run speakers from one level to the other to promote the resonance?

I never use speakers. Everything is acoustic. Since we invented microphones and speakers we tend to

listen to far more recorded sound and after all these years we know on a tacit level the difference between a recording and the actual thing, but on an intellectual level we don't know anymore. I really try to avoid this.

Where do the compositions come from?

It's all original work from my traditional gamelan studies. I learned a lot of modules and structures and I borrow them at will. I will delete the music after each piece is uninstalled – it's the Tibetan sand painting of it all.

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