

What Does New York City Sound Like?

By Michelle Lhoq

One of the best parts of living in New York City is the snippets of conversations you catch on the street. “She lives in Brooklyn, like a *real* person,” was something I just overheard in Union Square a few minutes ago. “For every action, there is a social media overreaction,” someone just said in the Goldman Sachs elevator (at least, according to [@GSElevator](#) on Twitter).



But it’s not just the hilariously out-of-context sound bites that make walking down a New York sidewalk a special kind of experience; it’s also the polyphonic blend of sirens wailing, cars honking, and subways rumbling beneath your feet. And starting on May 1st, visitors to the [Garis & Hahn Gallery](#) in Manhattan’s Lower East Side will be able to let the sounds of the city wash over them—via an interactive audio installation called [Streetscape Symphony](#), set up by five collaborating artists: [Bettina Zerza](#) (ZERZA Architects), [Lauren Sinreich](#) (ArtHere), [Dave Rife](#) (ARUP), [Gabe Liberti](#) (The Criterion Collection), and [Kevin Siwoff](#) (Google).

The exhibition is part of the New Museum’s [Ideas City festival](#), a four-day-long conference that aims to “explore the future of cities around the globe” through art and culture. This year’s theme is “untapped capital”—and the [Streetscape Symphony](#) team interpreted that as the often-neglected aspect of sonic design in public spaces.

“We wanted to explore the way that New Yorkers create, listen to, and interact with their acoustic environments—which, because there are so many sounds competing with one another, we can often drown out and neglect to realize their significance,” the group explained over email.

The installation works in two ways: walking through the gallery, you’ll hear recordings taken from each of New York City’s [five boroughs](#) emanating from the gallery’s walls. Each borough is consigned to a different part of the gallery, and Xbox Kinect camera sensors track your

movement, sending blob positional data over Open Sound Control to a Max/MSP program, which alters the sound playback accordingly.

In other words, the 3D-modeled soundscapes change depending on where you're standing. Walk towards one speaker, and that borough's cacophony comes into focus. Move towards the center of the room, and all the sounds blend together into a universal din.

Secondly, binaural headphones are scattered around the gallery—letting you focus on listening to one borough at a time, while switching between them by using a custom touch screen interface on an iPad.

The recordings were made by the artists wandering through their chosen borough in eight-hour stretches, using binaural microphones and portable recorders to pick up the sounds of that area's parks, cafes, markets, junkyards, and subways along the way (along with iconic locations like the Staten Island Zoo, or a roller coaster at Coney Island in Brooklyn). When played back in the gallery, the soundscapes correspond with present time. So, walk in at 1pm, and what you'll hear will be very different from what you'll hear at 7pm.

Most interestingly, the artists wanted to dig out the specific sonic signatures of each section of the city. "How does Queens sound different from Staten Island? Brooklyn from the Bronx? The sounds of each borough are notably distinct, which can be seen as a direct result of the politics or the history that made the borough into what it is today," the group said. "We are striving to pull details out of 'noise,' but to also present the audience with an opportunity draw their own comparisons between boroughs."

Ultimately, *Streetscape Symphony* aims to force us to stop looking, and start listening to the sounds around us—the sounds of each other. But it also hopes to influence urban designers and architects to include sonic elements in their plans. Maybe one day, every building will have its own version of Grand Central's famous "whispering wall."

Check out the five minute compilation of the sounds found in each borough in the following order: Manhattan, Queens, Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island.