

CRITICS' PICKS

New York

Julianne Swartz

JOSEE BIENVENU GALLERY

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“Words come first from here and then from there. The situation is not linear. It is as though I am in a forest hunting for ideas,” John Cage said of his late experimentations with language. This explanation just as easily describes a viewer’s experience of Julianne Swartz’s own word-centric work *Terrain*, 2007–2008, a lyric sound installation comprising 104 tiny speakers strung from the gallery ceiling. Standing below this web of electronics and multicolored wires, the visitor discerns tender utterances spoken by both male and female voices — “I love you” stated in a whisper; a hum of pleasure; “Te quiero” (I love you) repeated staccato—phrases that quickly bound through wire channels around the room, reemerging through scattered speakers as a cacophony of echoes resembling breaking surf or leaves rustled by wind.

Each time a distinctive voice rises to the surface, it becomes enveloped again by a new flutter of sound, despite the listener’s attempts to track it. As with La Monte Young’s immersive sound environment *Dream House*, noises shift as soon as one’s attention is turned toward any single speaker; a major difference in Swartz’s work, however, is that because the sounds are derived from individual human utterances, they rouse flickers of verbal cognition, causing the observer to search for clarity in individual noises rather than surrender to a fluctuating drone. Swartz’s arrangement also brings to mind Janet Cardiff’s sound installation *Forty-Part Motet*, 2001, similarly composed of individual voices arising from multiple speakers, yet the vocalizations in *Terrain* contribute not to a synched choral composition, as in Cardiff’s piece, but to a morphing wave of chants with no start or denouement.

Through a cold tangle of electric cables and speakers, Swartz communicates the fabric of human warmth: a jumble of want, affection, and pleasure. Despite its love-related theme (which might otherwise come across as sentimental), *Terrain* evades preciousness by underscoring that these tender notions are transient, splintering into the ether as soon as they have been pinned down.

— Emily Weiner