



Festival of (New) Light — and Sound

By Daniel Friedman
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Everyone knows that Hanukkah is the Festival of Lights, so what were artist Julianne Swartz and The Jewish Museum thinking when deciding on a sound installation for the holiday? What they were thinking, it turns out, is that they can change what people know.

“The Hanukkah Project: The Sound of Light by Julianne Swartz,” which runs through March 15, 2009, is a two-part installation. The first part — only the introduction, really — is in the entrance lobby of the museum and introduces Swartz’s aesthetic. Three gently glowing plastic horns are housed in a small box, with their open ends sticking out. Visitors are invited to bend down and listen to the eclectic music quietly piped in. The second part, the main portion of the exhibit, is an object that allows you to re-experience and rethink the institution of museum audio guides, the general concept of cell phones and, most importantly, the museum’s permanent exhibition of art and artifacts from Jewish culture and history.

On the fourth floor, at the start of the permanent exhibition, free receivers are distributed. These share the general look of the fixed horns in the lobby, but they are wireless loudspeakers receiving and playing eight different sets of sounds located through the standing rooms of the permanent exhibit on the fourth and third floors. These receivers are custom built and defy easy description, but if you tried to replicate a foot-high cochlear-shaped stigmite that glowed in semi-translucent plastic, you might end up with something like them.

Generally, the visitor hears only static — what the installation notes call “the aural equivalent of darkness”— but as the receiver gets closer to one of the sound sites, it begins to pick up the sound that Swartz has left there. There are also texts at the sites; along with the sound, the text encourages the visitor to reinterpret surroundings that — for this reporter, at least — were comfortably familiar.

It’s usually a bad sign when you can sense a museum director’s specifications through the art. Here, it felt like a blatant attempt at getting people to visit the higher floors and not just the events and special exhibitions on the lower floors. But however blatant the intention,