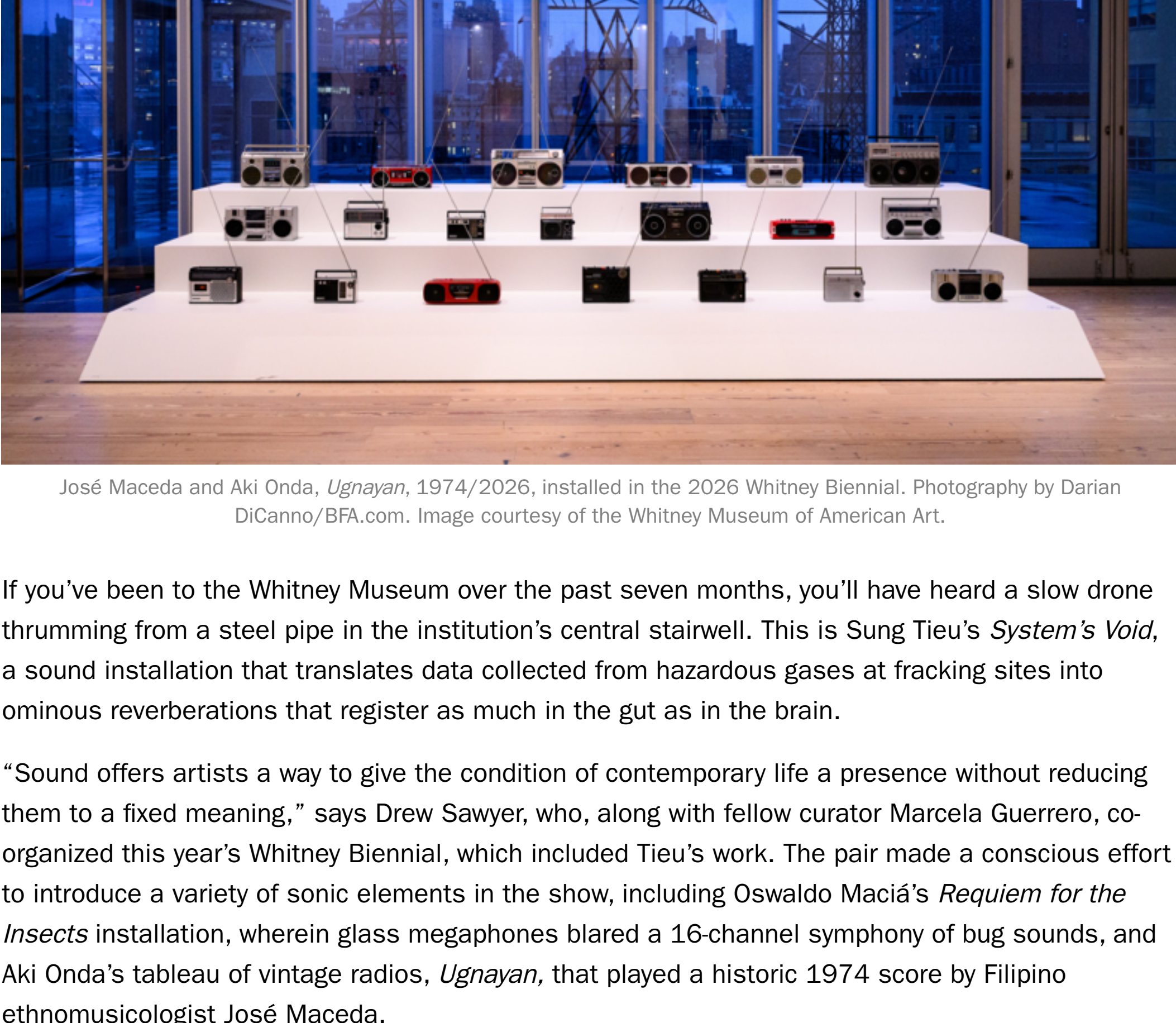


ART

It's Hard to Get People to Look at Art. Will They Listen to It Instead?

Artists are using sound in new ways to reach audiences raised on podcasts and streaming platforms.

By Taylor Dafoe
October 13, 2026



José Maceda and Aki Onda, *Ugnayan*, 1974/2026, installed in the 2026 Whitney Biennial. Photography by Darian DiCanno/BFA.com. Image courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

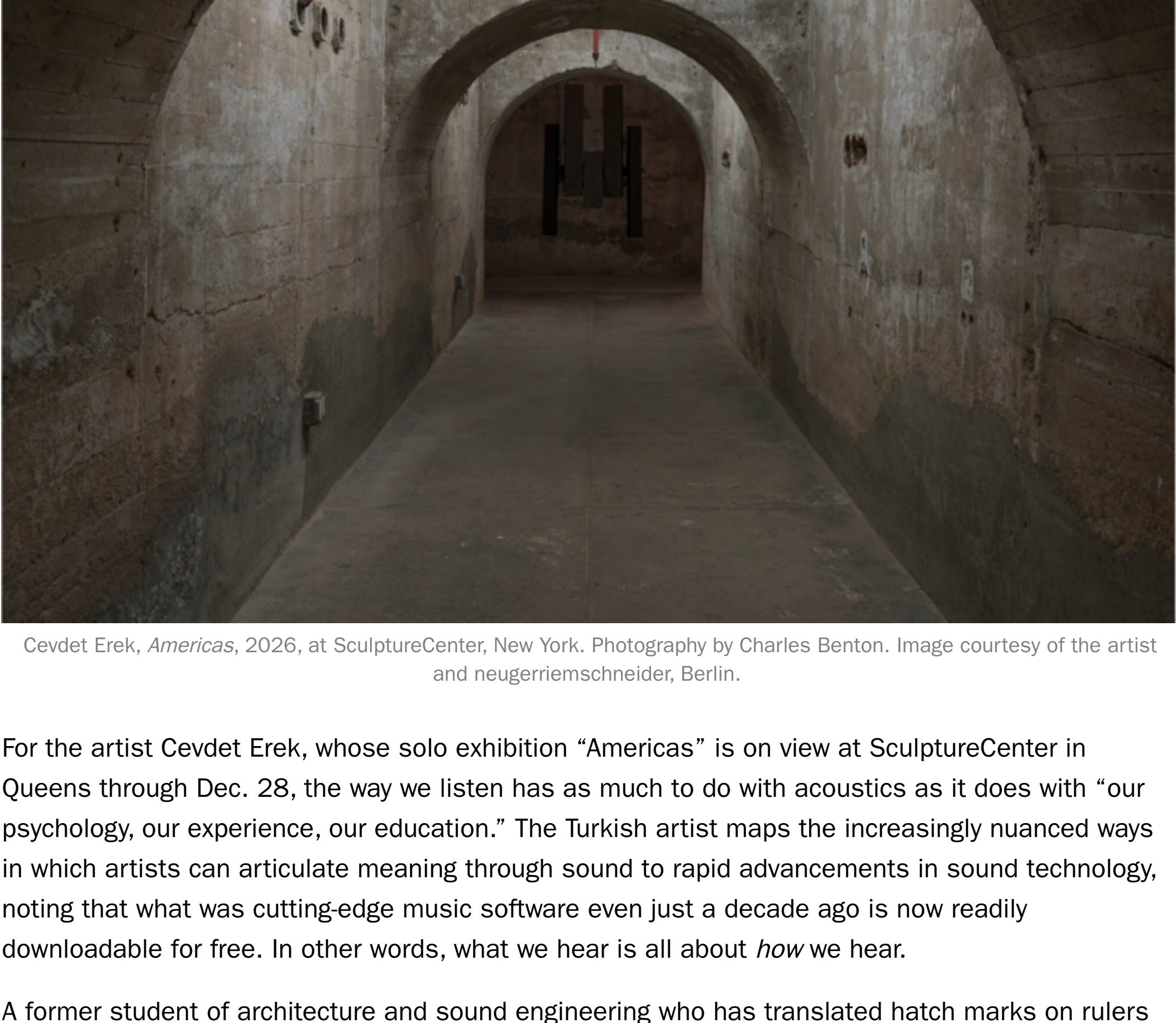
If you've been to the Whitney Museum over the past seven months, you'll have heard a slow drone thrumming from a steel pipe in the institution's central stairwell. This is Sung Tieu's *System's Void*, a sound installation that translates data collected from hazardous gases at fracking sites into ominous reverberations that register as much in the gut as in the brain.

"Sound offers artists a way to give the condition of contemporary life a presence without reducing them to a fixed meaning," says Drew Sawyer, who, along with fellow curator Marcela Guerrero, co-organized this year's Whitney Biennial, which included Tieu's work. The pair made a conscious effort to introduce a variety of sonic elements in the show, including Oswaldo Maciá's *Requiem for the Insects* installation, wherein glass megaphones blared a 16-channel symphony of bug sounds, and Aki Onda's tableau of vintage radios, *Ugnayan*, that played a historic 1974 score by Filipino ethnomusicologist José Maceda.



Tarek Atoui, *Hyundai Commission: Tarek Atoui: Hold*, 2026, installed at Tate Modern. Photography by Yili Liu. Image courtesy of the artist and Tate.

Other institutions agree. This month, electro-acoustic composer and sculptor Tarek Atoui will take over the Tate's Modern's Turbine Hall with a new sound installation, while the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art will open a show of fresh work by Pulitzer Prize winner Raven Chacon, known for drawing on indigenous histories in audio collages that confront the legacies of colonialism. The late composer Ryuichi Sakamoto is the subject of a new show at the Hamburger Bahnhof, while the Berlin-based artists Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst will further their ongoing exploration of AI when they debut an immersive audio environment at MoMA next year.

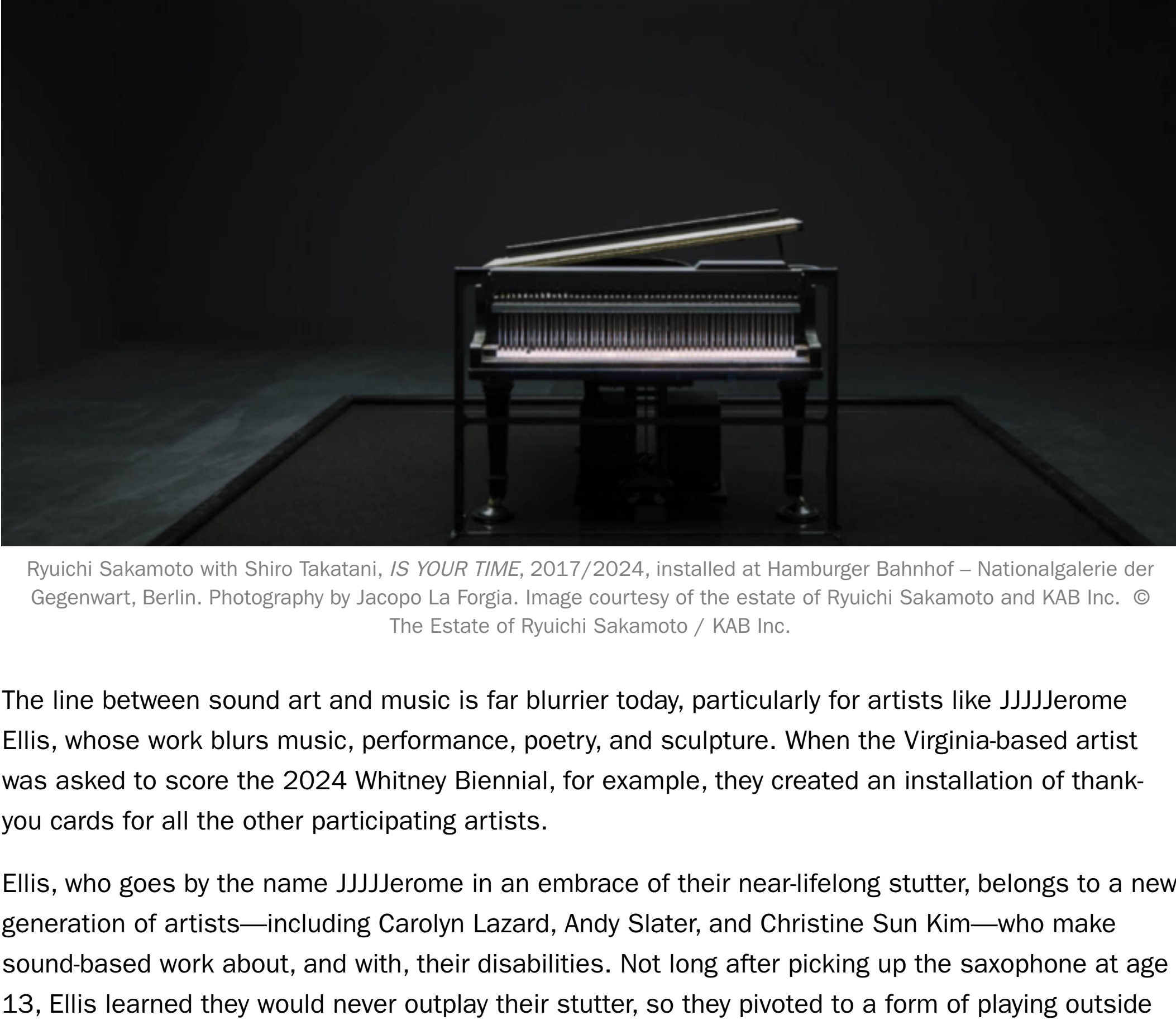


Cevdet Ere, *Americas*, 2026, at SculptureCenter, New York. Photography by Charles Benton. Image courtesy of the artist and neugierleimschneider, Berlin.

For the artist Cevdet Ere, whose solo exhibition "Americas" is on view at SculptureCenter in Queens through Dec. 28, the way we listen has as much to do with acoustics as it does with "our psychology, our experience, our education." The Turkish artist maps the increasingly nuanced ways in which artists can articulate meaning through sound to rapid advancements in sound technology, noting that what was cutting-edge music software even just a decade ago is now readily downloadable for free. In other words, what we hear is all about *how* we hear.

A former student of architecture and sound engineering who has translated hatch marks on rulers and the dates of coup d'états in 20th-century Turkey into musical scores, Ere has filled SculptureCenter's underground galleries with a blend of metal guitars (he's the drummer of the long-running Turkish prog rock band called Nekropsi) and urban clangs. In his new *Musique concrète* commission *Sound/Artwork*, 2026, the steel squeals of the nearby Queensboro Bridge compete with breathy beats recreated from Vito Acconci's performance in SculptureCenter's 1984 exhibition "Sound/Art."

That show, an early milestone in the emergence of the medium, posed sound art as a form of sculpture, even as most of the participants were, like Acconci, performance artists. Barbara London, the curator of another pioneering exhibition, 1979's "Sound Art" at MoMA, wrote that the medium's primary purpose is to "stimulate the observer's visual imagination." Her definition was blunt: "Sound Art pieces are more closely allied to art than to music, and are usually presented in the museum, gallery, or alternative space."



Ryuichi Sakamoto with Shiro Takatani, *IS YOUR TIME*, 2017/2024, installed at Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart, Berlin. Photography by Jacopo La Forgia. Image courtesy of the estate of Ryuichi Sakamoto and KAB Inc. © The Estate of Ryuichi Sakamoto / KAB Inc.

The line between sound art and music is far blurrier today, particularly for artists like JJJJerome Ellis, whose work blurs music, performance, poetry, and sculpture. When the Virginia-based artist was asked to score the 2024 Whitney Biennial, for example, they created an installation of thank-you cards for all the other participating artists.

Ellis, who goes by the name JJJJerome in an embrace of their near-lifelong stutter, belongs to a new generation of artists—including Carolyn Lazard, Andy Slater, and Christine Sun Kim—who make sound-based work about, and with, their disabilities. Not long after picking up the saxophone at age 13, Ellis learned they would never outplay their stutter, so they pivoted to a form of playing outside the bounds of beats and measures by "thinking about the ways that it can rupture or disrupt conversation" and the "predictability" of its rhythms. When the stutter comes on now, they say, "time starts to become elastic and change."

As someone who communicates differently, Ellis knows better than most how hard it is to get people's attention. But what he has found, through sound, is that when audiences are conditioned to hear, they listen—even without realizing it. "Sometimes, when I'm listening to certain forms of music, I feel like I'm in a vehicle," Ellis says. But in galleries and museums, where they control time, it "can create this kind of room out of sound—a space where we might be able to gather or meet each other."

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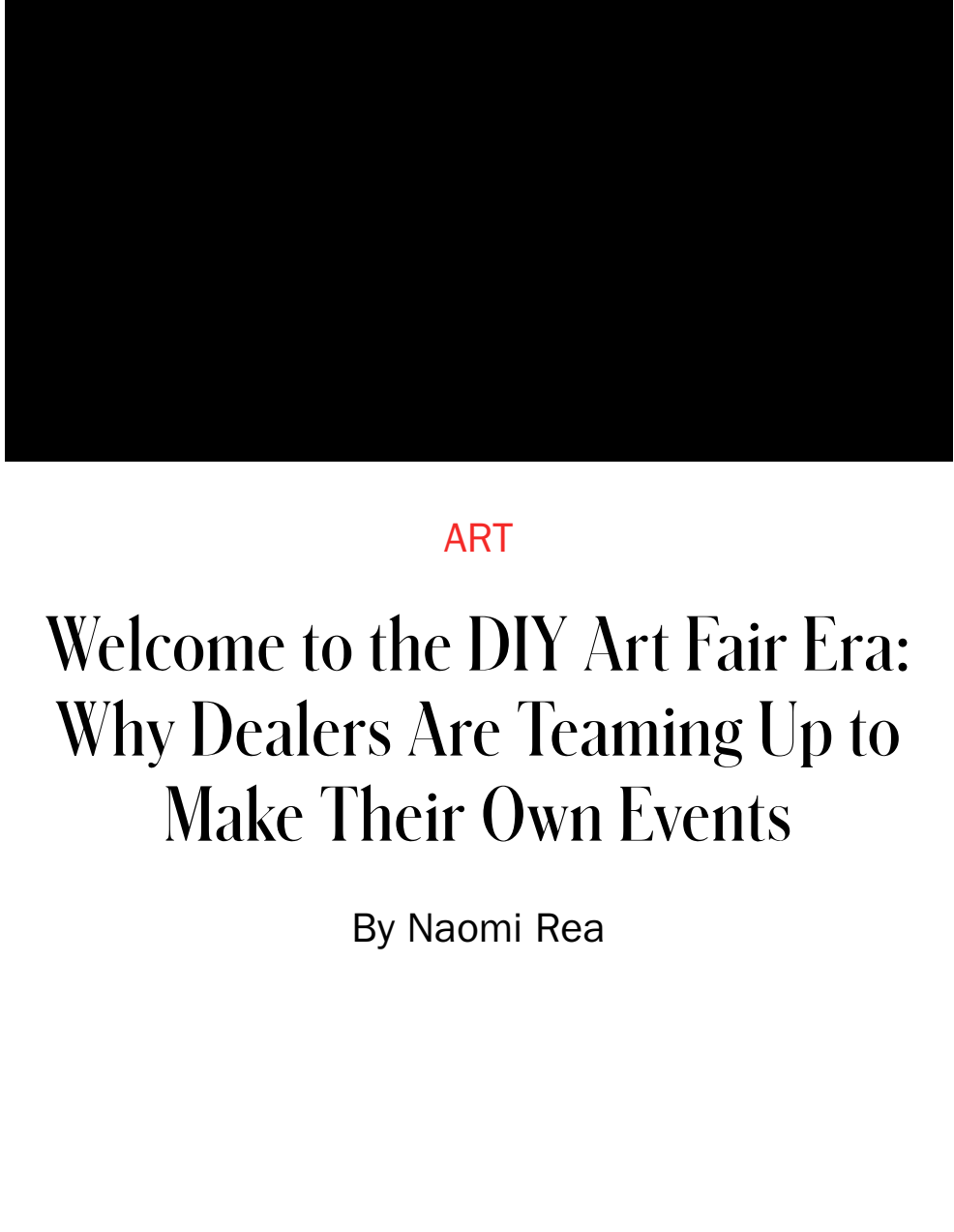
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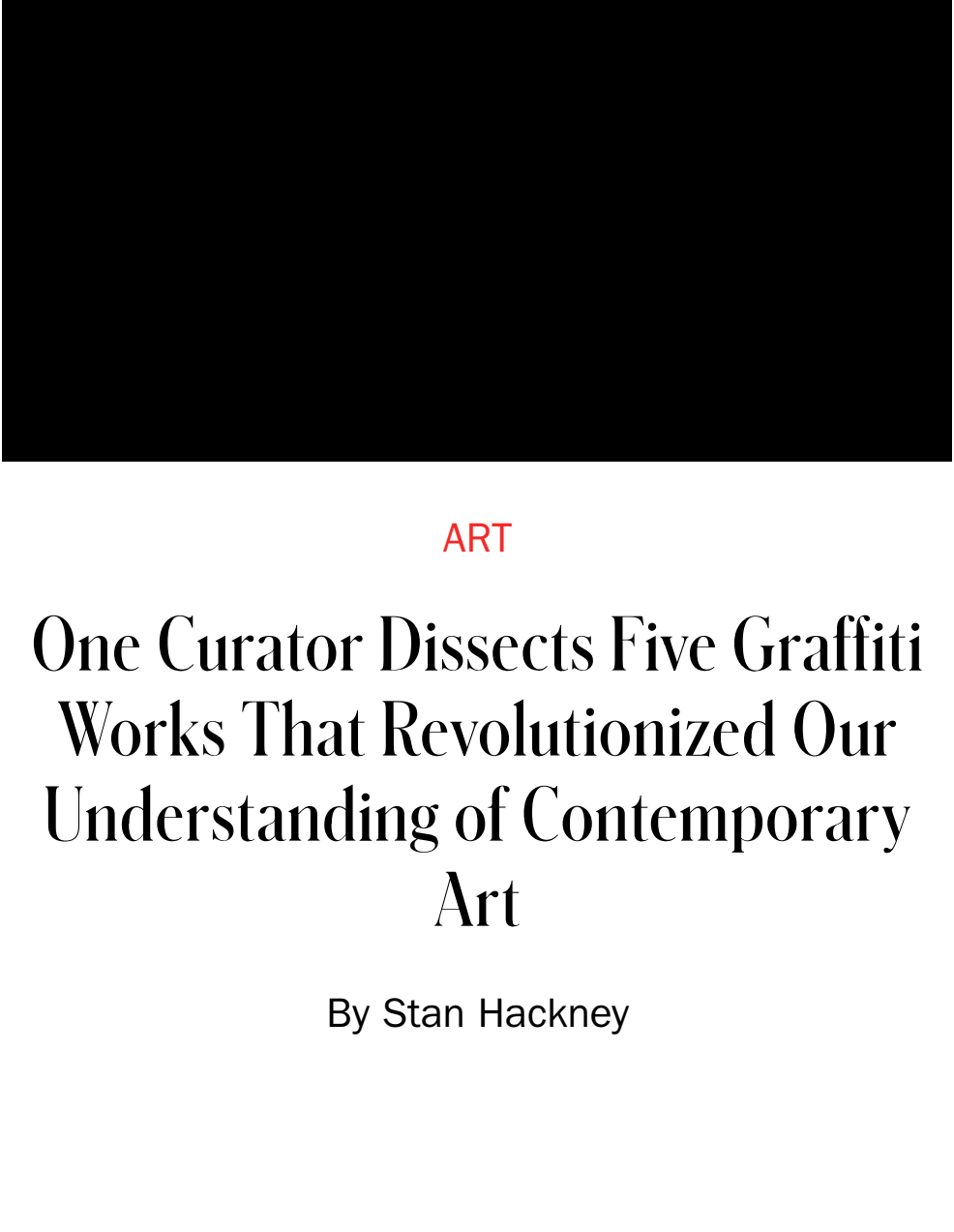
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