

Listening to Plants

Adrienne Adar's attention to botanical sentience seeks to decenter human perspectives on non-human entities.



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Adrienne Adar, "Sonic Succulents: Plant Sounds and Vibrations" (2019) (courtesy of the artist and Brooklyn Botanic Garden)

Tap your fingernail on the Ponytail Plant's thin bark and your headphones pick up a hollow noise like that of a door knock. Rustle the plant's palm leaves and a tinny reverberation coils in your ear. Flick a cactus needle of the nearby Golden Barrel Cactus and it sounds like a subdued guitar note. Elsewhere on the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (BBG) grounds, you can insert your head inside a megaphone-like yellow horn to hear what could be the sound of corn growing. The horn's interior microphone emits a low seashell rumble; its white noise calls to mind the way the SETI Institute monitors electromagnetic radiation for signs of alien transmissions.

These sounds are part of Adrienne Adar’s BBG installation, *Sonic Succulents: Plant Sounds and Vibrations*. Adar captures them by affixing handmade sensors to the plants and objects within their environment, and amplifies them for visitors through audio equipment. Working in this vein for several years, her approach is inspired by scientific research into plant sentience. Her projects are in keeping with the trend in ecological theory to decenter human perspectives on non-human entities. Media coverage of *Sonic Succulents* — including profiles in *The New York Times*, *Artnet*, and NPR — has communicated the exciting potential of her efforts in this direction.

But that coverage sidesteps discussion of the exhibition’s aesthetics, which don’t live up to the work’s promising conceit. Whereas other botanical sound artists, such as Mileece, translate plant sounds into poetic soundscapes, Adar works in a documentary register. This *vérité* approach does convey a novel acoustic sense of the physical interiors of succulents, many of which have thick outer walls and hollow interiors. However, visitors can only hear plant sounds through headphones when we touch the plants, which creates the sense that we are listening to a human interacting with plants rather than to the plants themselves.



Visitors interact with living sound artworks, photograph by Elizabeth Peters

The sounds produced by the plants are also anticlimactic. In the BBG’s visitor center, three boom microphones hang above the succulents and sporadically project an ambient drone that recalls the white noise emitted by the corn speakers but that doesn’t have the megaphones’ seashell whoosh. Both drone noises can be interpreted, in a glass-half-full way, as testaments to botanical presence, amplified sonic evidence of ordinarily undetectable plant life. But the alternative interpretation — that listeners are projecting meaningful presence, even agency, onto staticky noise produced, at least in part, by the auditory technology itself — seems just as likely. The “Can you hear corn?” sign posted near the corn megaphones acknowledges this doubt without quelling it; internet

searches on the question reveal that corn plants do indeed make a cracking sound, but that it only occurs during a specific growth stage and is easiest to detect through time-lapse audio recordings.

Like SETI's auditory probes for extraterrestrial life, Adar's botanical sound art experiments are well worth conducting. But the aesthetic results of *Sonic Succulents* are the opposite of their intended effect; they raise doubts about plant sentience rather than affirming it. It's not that Adar is searching for something that may not exist, but that its existence may exceed our ability to experience it. Auditory technology would seem a logical way to enhance our capacity to experience plant sounds, but the exhibition's staticky amplifications, as well as its required element of human touch, dominate the experience. What you can hear most clearly in *Sonic Succulents* is the sound of our species knocking on the ontological door of another organism. Scientific research gives us good reason to believe there's someone or something at home, but its doors may remain closed to us.

Sonic Succulents: Plant Sounds and Vibrations, Adrienne Adar, continues at Brooklyn Botanic Garden until October 27.