

ARTLOG

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Sonic Warfare

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AUDiNT, *Dead Record Office* (installation view), 2011. Courtesy of Art in General.

The ideal 21st century weapon is invisible, seemingly noninvasive. When drones, not soldiers, are fighting in Libya, the president can all the more easily eschew congressional approval to conduct a war. The weapon more invisible than a hovering drone: sound. Sound is employed in torture, on the battlefield, and to break up protests. At the outset of his book *Sonic Warfare*, Steve Goodman relates how the Israeli air force uses sonic booms as a weapon over the Gaza Strip, producing walls of sound that trigger nose bleeds, broken windows, anxiety attacks, and sleeplessness.

Goodman is a senior lecturer in Sonic Culture at the University of East London, but he is better known as dubstep musician Kode9 and the founder of the Hyperdub record label, where he also releases the acclaimed dance music of Burial and The Bug. At New York's [Art in General](#), he joins Toby Heys, an electronic media artist, and John Cohrs, a recording engineer and artist, for their latest exhibition as [AUDiNT](#), a project investigating the history of sonic warfare and the politics of sound. Previous iterations have appeared in Berlin at the Academie Der Kunst and at Site Gallery in Sheffield, UK.

AUDiNT focuses on three episodes from sound's long history of use as a weapon, beginning with the US Ghost Army in World War II, which used sonic deception techniques in its efforts to confuse the enemy and impersonate other military units. The next episode takes place during the Vietnam War, when the US Urban Funk campaign blasted deafening sounds from helicopters, dispelling crowds and disturbing the enemy. A related program, *Wandering Soul*, filled the night with recordings intended to simulate the Vietcong's dead ancestors wailing in purgatory. The third episode is an imaginary one drawn from contemporary sound technology, a military project that insinuates itself into the thoughts of individuals with precisely directed sound waves.



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The Ghost Army, *Wandering Soul*, mind control: AUDiNT's occult-sounding examples emphasize the visceral power of sound. In fact, infrasound frequencies, those too low to be audible, are sometimes responsible for hauntings and ghost sightings, resonating with the eye to produce hallucinations and tingling, even raising hairs on the back of the neck. It is appropriate then that the centerpiece of the installation at Art in General is the *Dead Record Office*, more of a haunted shrine than an office, where recordings of Vietnamese ghosts wail and the walls are

papered with album covers referring to the history of sonic disruption and warfare. Against the back wall, a green-flickering monitor purports to download music torrents with secret research encoded in the ultrasound part of the spectrum. Sitting in the dark Dead Record Office waiting to meet Heys, I start to wonder if I can feel the hallucinatory effects of the infrasound frequencies, or if it's just the unsettling effect of the eery wailing.

When I sit down with Heys, he relates the use of sound as a weapon to a wider history of military appropriation from radical culture, including military schools' use of cultural theorists [Deleuze and Guattari as a sourcebook for urban warfare](#). He is quick to elaborate that the point of the installation is not activist. They are not, "Billy Brag singing protest songs." Goodman reiterates that they consider this a "tactical issue, not an ideological issue." The audible parts of the sound spectrum are highly regulated by noise pollution laws, but sounds too high or low to be audible are a free-for-all, where anyone, not just the military, can take advantage. AUDiNT's installation revels in this sonic free-for-all and points towards alternative uses of the sound spectrum. One of Goodman's examples is The Mosquito. High-pitched tones become inaudible as we age, and an electronic device called The Mosquito emits these frequencies to drive loitering youth away from businesses like supermarkets. Teenagers then realized that they too could use this part of the spectrum and installed it as a ringtone inaudible to adults.

AUDiNT's Ghostcoder is another example of Goodman's emphasis on "demonopolizing" sonic frequencies. The software, which can be downloaded from [Audint's website](#), encodes information in the ultrasonic frequencies of music files. The files can then be returned to file sharing networks, laden with hidden data for others to decode. The Ghostcoder is a simple example of a tool that uses ultrasound, but it makes a larger point about how much of the sonic spectrum remains available to us, and it suggests that artists and musicians have an important role in opening up non-military uses of the sound spectrum.