

Art in America

March 1992

Carol Szymanski at Amy Lipton

Szymanski is a sculptor obsessed with the shape of sound. Her early videos focused on speech patterns, and one of her first shows consisted of wood sculptures charting the area between throat and mouth as it made the five vowel sounds. In this show she presented horns and drums that are not only exhibitable art works but also musical instruments. The silver-plated brass trumpets look like delicate, overbred, mutant creatures—a weirdly aberrant kind of Body art. Exhibited as wall reliefs on plinths, often with some kind of specially made additional support, these instruments can, in fact, be picked up and played. Their forms derive from the symbols of the consonants used in the Universal Phonetic Alphabet. In particular, Szymanski has chosen those sounds known as fricatives, which she explains as being "produced by the friction of the breath through a narrow opening." Horn "between f & v," for example, takes a form which is roughly that of a circle crossed with an l-shape; it stands on its wall plinth and features a flat, half-circle finial. Putting these instruments to my lips, I couldn't make a peep, but I was encouraged to learn that since none of them has valves, they require a great deal of mouth skill from the musician.

Szymanski's drums, on the other hand, can be banged on by just about anyone. These large, mostly freestanding sculptures illustrate the vowel symbols used in the same international alphabet. One of my favorites, *Drum "u,"* is a big, primal-looking piece of brown and white calfskin stretched in a shape that suggests an ancient fertility figure. Exhibited leaning against the wall, it makes a hard, flat sound to the touch. *Drum "e,"* on the other hand, stands in the middle of the floor and rocks slightly when touched. It is composed mostly of arcing copper forms

and has only a small drum surface on top of a central standing element. Its e-shape is disguised at first, because the letter is depicted as lying on its side. Altogether, the effect of these drum sculptures, with their hard metal forms and shagreenlike skin surfaces, which often sport a bit of fur trim, is strangely akin to that of Belgian or French Art Deco furniture, which often has distinctly tribal touches.

Seeing these instruments in performance was something else again. In *Antiphony*, a musical piece written especially for them by Ben Neill (a former student of La Monte Young) and played by four trumpeters and two percussionists, the pace seemed alternately jazzy and militaristic. I thought of an off-kilter "Taps" as the musicians walked in from the far end of the gallery, playing slow, elegiac tunes on their horns before plugging them into a digital sound processor. The jungle drums beat frenetically under cascading trumpet trills, with lots of feedback from the now-electronic horns, until the final section became hot, manic and vaguely Latin in feeling. Due to its popularity, the concert I attended had to be moved from Lipton's to the Thread Waxing Space; what I had feared might be too abstruse a performance ended up sounding (and looking) *echt-bohemian* and eminently accessible. —Brooks Adams



Carol Szymanski: *Drum "O"*, 1991,
39 by 35 by 15½ inches; at Amy Lipton.