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STRIKE

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Mona Bekhit

In 2025, with the desire to create experimental ceramic noise as a new departure in my work, I built a body of sound making objects out of clay, focusing on the range and qualities of sounds that I could create. I considered the materiality and active agency of unfired and fired clay, tactility, movement and repetition to create visual rhythm and layered sonic form. This practice-based project for the final year of my Bachelor of Visual Arts degree culminated in an installation, *Strike*, exhibited at *Site*, the graduation exhibition at Dunedin School of Art (DSA). I selected pieces to exhibit from a wide range that I created throughout the year, choosing forms that were more divergent instrument structures or that produced sounds that I admired most. The pieces of the installation rested on surfaces or were suspended, accompanied by a recorded soundscape work created from sound samples of the instruments. In this article, I will reflect on the ideas and techniques behind the work, including juxtaposition, montage and relationships between vision, touch, sound and memory, as well as discussing artists working in related fields of practice, including Jan Švankmajer, Maika Garnica, Petr Válek and Sergei Eisenstein.

In developing the project, I decided to move away from traditional forms and uses of ceramic instruments, such as aerophones (whistles, flutes and ocarinas), which have been historically used for rituals, education and communication, instead, following an experimental disposition. I enjoy the delicate nature of working with clay, especially when pushing its limits to create small, balancing forms and large, heavy pieces. Leaning into the tactile nature of clay that transitions from soft to hard when dried and fired, my pieces took shape by drawing inspiration from commuting walks to school through the Botanical Gardens and urban streets, where I inspected pristine, soft, organic forms, such as flora and garden layouts, and collected discarded industrial tools, such as nails, screws and needles. These are contrasting source inspirations; I played with this juxtaposition in my work, with its attributes of hard and soft, large and small, heavy and light. Polarity is also present in the forms through their contrasting colours and mirrored directions of the spirals; I was interested in creating dramatic feelings of unexpected tension. The texture of large-sized marble runs, embracing the soft, malleable, tactile nature of clay, also contrast with miniature needles that have a sharp, manufactured look, reflective of hardware. The sounds that these objects make range from a long and subtle drone to harsher, metallic, quick, percussive noises. My background in dance, film theory and music studies also consistently informs my work, through rhythmic physical processes of making and interests in ideas such as kinetic movement and montage, which help to further relay the dialogue of my work to the audience.

The site that I chose for my work was the mezzanine of the DSA's sculpture building; viewers could hear the work before they saw it when coming up the stairs. The natural cork and wood already present within the space paralleled the unglazed brick and stoneware clay used in my work. The spaciousness and length of the space and layout—the feeling of walking through several different









spaces—reflected the nature of my habitual perambulations, offering viewers an opportunity for curiosity, akin to the experience of walking around and exploring spaces like the Gardens. Two large marble runs stood symmetrically at the entrance to greet viewers, who could choose a passage towards the right, which would lead them to a table of curiosities, or left, towards a bed of enlarged repeated motifs below a canopy of what I call 'defensive garnishes'— hanging clusters of prickly needle forms made out of dark red brick clay.

The ceramic objects were not intended to be handled by the viewer, as I felt this removal of verification would open up for more room for imagination; they could speculate about what the objects are for, what they might sound like, the moving parts, and perhaps pick out sounds from the soundscape and match them to objects. Generally, audiences for my work feel inclined to touch the objects and have found joy in playing with them. In treating my Honours project as a research inquiry driven by and extending my practice, I therefore chose to work, counterintuitively, against the prevailing expectation, presenting the smaller works, for example, on a high, long, clean, wooden table. The effect was of a display case found in museums, in which artifacts of value are presented and protected.

The installation operated on three scales: the small tabletop-sized objects; medium-sized pieces resting on the ground; and large works that were almost a metre tall. This created an immersive feeling, inviting people to explore, walk around, inspect closer—at upper body height, peering over or making an effort to crouch or bend, and looking upwards at pieces like a canopy. I wanted to create a parallel with the range of sizes of forms found in the everyday environment. Moreover, I enjoy the juxtapositions and the challenges of creating works in these sizes with the material of clay, which imposes certain limitations.

I confront the tradition of ceramics by considering the active agency of clay, and resisting how it prefers to move: its aversion to staying delicately slender; piercing the minute mass of the needles; the demanding burdens of balance or clay's capacity to withstand its own weight and gravity until it has been vitrified through a kiln. These kinds of material constraints were also apparent while moulding the gradient of the ramps of the marble runs, keeping the drying times of the clay uniform and preserving thin, delicate parts while building, drying and firing, such that they would not snap or stick together when in a vulnerable state. The large works were, unlike usual day-to-day ceramics, very heavy and required multiple people to lift and move them from the studio space to the kiln, then upstairs for exhibiting. The mixture of mediums in my nontraditional objects, as well as the refusal to make explicit the element of touch, encourage several different senses or modes of experience—hearing and imagining as well as seeing. The resulting installation communicated the sensation of movement without touch. While there is an immersive dimension to the encounter with the work, notably through the addition of sound, it also withholds a fully tangible or corporeal encounter.

My work builds on possibilities for tactility and gesture in clay and filmmaking explored by Jan Švankmajer (b. 1934), a Czech surrealist artist, writer and filmmaker working across many mediums. Švankmajer began making films in the 1960s and subsequently started experimenting with tactile art in the mid-1970s, when he was censored and banned from filmmaking by communist authorities. Švankmajer discusses tactility in his book *Touching and Imagining: An Introduction to Tactile Art*,[1] specifically 'gestural sculpture,' referring to intuitive impressions on clay directly from the fingers, as well as 'tactile memory,' the connection between touch, vision and the mind. These ideas suggest that memories of specific physical feelings or sounds that we have experienced can be evoked through specific sight triggers, and this is an attractive proposition for me because I make quite intuitively, particularly in terms of textural decisions. Given that I did not want the audience to physically interact with the works, it was important that they were able to respond imaginatively, hearing the sounds and creating connections in their own mind. In Švankmajer's films, notably *Alice* (1988), materials and sounds create deep feelings of tactility.[2] Likewise, my soundscape has a cluttered, messy sound, and I wanted to create noises that would evoke incongruous feelings of tinkering and of haptic movement. I achieved these fragmentary sounds through the use of glass and thread, the range of textures and sizes and the steepness of the ramps, while also creating layered, polyphonic sounds.

Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein, in his 1925 silent film *Strike*, used techniques of visual collage and repetition to explore themes of revolution and systematic class oppression.[3] Scenes of the working classes, production lines and organised labour take place in front of the general backdrop of industrialisation, which I found engaging in relation to the process of recording the acoustic sounds of my instruments to the sampler machine. In focusing on production processes, collage and repetition as meaningful aspects of the making of my work—repetitive actions and motifs—I contemplated how I could streamline production (there would be no way, apart from a mass of workers or machinery perhaps). The kinetic nature of my work draws parallels with imagery of circuiting factory movements in Eisenstein's film. In the spiral marble runs, the hitting of percussive instruments and the sound collage, I was thinking about the kind of sound formations that could be happening in environments of mass, quick production and action, seen and portrayed in the film through montage.

In his book *City Symphonies: Sound and the Composition of Urban Modernity, 1913-1931*, Daniel Schwartz discusses an inherent visual/mind relationship with noise, arguing that silent films, in

their busy, juxtaposing visual rhythm, perceptibly represent fluctuations and the pulsing cadence of unstable urban experience.[4] This abundance of visual information constitutes a display of "inaudible sound—the visual amplification of noise; the treatment of motion as sound; and the analysis and reconciliation of audiovisual rhythms."[5] For example, Eisenstein's *Strike* evokes monotonous, turbulent feelings and sounds of the urban experience through the visual dynamics of montage, rhythm, clashing and conflict. My work is similarly geared towards a rapprochement of the rhythms of sight and inferred sounds, if one could imagine the repetitious rolling of a marble down the eight ramps of my marble runs, or the plinking of the multiples of parts on my percussive apparatus. Although the installation was accompanied by sound, the viewer did not gain the experience of each individual instrument sound, so the essence of this "fluid exchange between the senses" was important.[6]

Contemporary artists Maika Garnica and Petr Válek also approach sound through different forms. Garnica, creates ceramic instruments, taking inspiration from her Belgian and Bolivian heritage and its history, creating wind and stringed instruments and using them in specific atmospheric environments.[7] Petr Válek, from the Czech Republic, creates percussive noises in unconventional ways, choosing not to follow traditional or popular music practices.[8] He builds mechanical, kinetic works using found objects, and also uses body movement to generate noises that may not be seen as musical; sounds that crash and fall. I find that this experimental approach delightfully fosters new modes of listening.

Using a sampler machine, I took samples of every instrument and created a 30-minute-long improvised composition made up of multiple shorter pieces. This was looped in the space during the exhibition. I was enamoured by the multifarious process of collecting samples of each instrument—the importance of sensitivity to qualities of sound and subtlety in variables of manoeuvring them, such as how loud or soft, fast or slow, or shifting patterns. The process of composing a soundtrack for my installation was an intuitive, gestural application of noises, culminating in an opus that sounded scattered, erratic, trailing, straggling, sprawling, meandering, disoriented, deviating, rattling, spinning, clattering, chattering, thrumming, dizzying, monotonous, dissonant, incongruous, luminous, playful, quaint, undulating, oscillating, subdued, sedating, stagnant, toppling, tumbling, fleeting, itching, liminal, smattering, aggressive and stimulating.

This practice-based project created a pathway for me to dive into new approaches to expression with clay. I took inspiration from everyday objects like marble runs and nails, translating them into sounds, working across different and difficult scales and expanding the senses involved in my ceramic work, from touch and sight, to sound. This exploration resulted in insights about the active material agency of clay and its sensitive preference to function in forms I had not built before; in ideas about physical touch and textures, displayed through juxtaposition, repetition and the handling of materials to present feelings of movement through vision; and in observations of how audiences experienced, received and reacted in the space to my work with an inquisitive and speculative nature.











Mona Bekhit, born in Ōtautahi, Christchurch and raised in Ōtepoti, Dunedin, is currently completing a BVA (Honours) at the Dunedin School of Art. She gained a Bachelor in Film and Music studies from University of Otago, received a Diploma in Ceramics in 2024 and a Bachelor of Visual Arts in Sculpture in 2025, which culminated in an installation exhibited in the DSA *Site* exhibition, integrating ceramics and sound. Influenced by her background in film studies, music and dance, Mona's practice explores materiality, tactility, repetition and movement. Her work is held in the collection of The Arts House Trust at Pah Homestead, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

1 Jan Švankmajer, *Touching and Imagining: An Introduction to Tactile Art* (I.B. Tauris, 2014).

2 *Alice*, dir. Jan Švankmajer (Condor Films,1988).

3 *Strike*, dir. Sergei Eisenstein (Goskino,1925).

4 Daniel P. Schwartz, *City Symphonies: Sound and the Composition of Urban Modernity, 1913-1931* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024).

5 Ibid, 126.

6 Ibid, 21.

7 Maika Garnica, "Vibration," accessed 28 August 2026, https://www.maikagarnica.com/vibration.

8 Petr Válek, "Petr Válek," accessed 28 August 2026, https://vasulkakitchen.org/en/event/petr-valek.