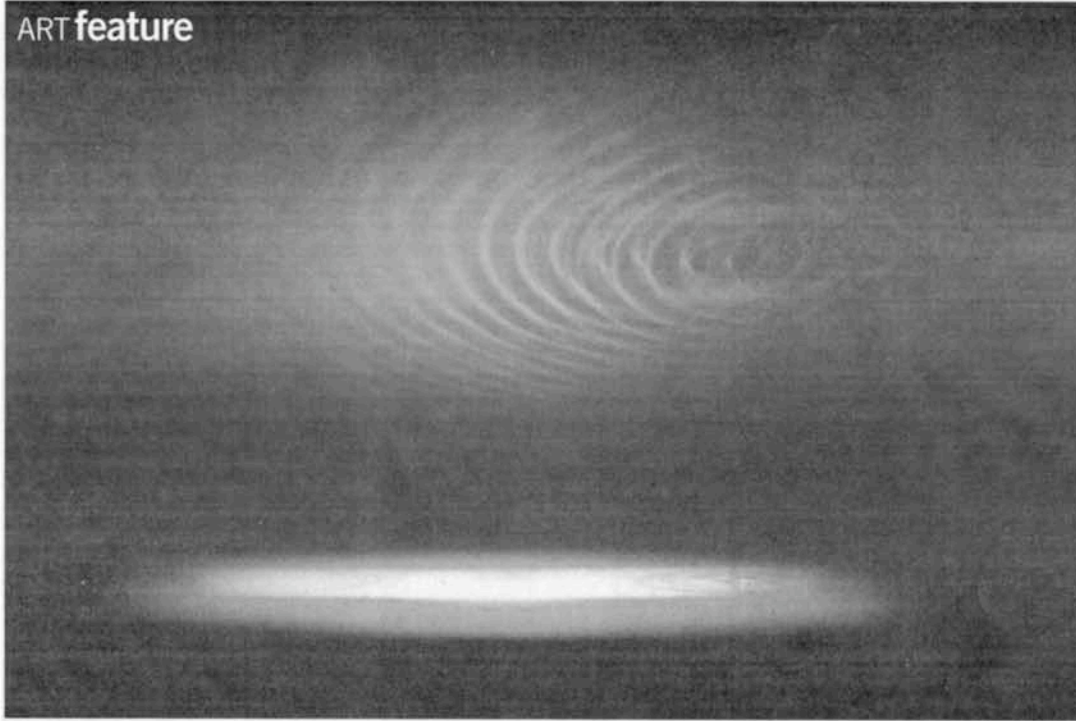


# PITTSBURGH CITY PAPER

ART feature



## Making Waves

A NEW INSTALLATION BLENDS THE TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE

Writer: SHARMILA VENKATASUBBAN  
SHAR@STEELCITYMEDIA.COM

Plumbing for Beginner's  
"Ondulation"

PHOTO: DIANA SHEARWOOD

The artist collective Plumbing for Beginners is so named because its members are interested in a societal allergy to mess, to the gritty parts of physical reality that they find when they plumb the depths of life's drainpipes.

Yet Plumbing's three-part installation, "Ondulation," conjures the opposite of grit.

In fact, this water, sound and light piece — created by Helsinki native Mikko Hynninen and the Montreal-based duo Thomas McIntosh and Emmanuel Madan — draws together the physical phenomena of each element only to reveal an invisible, ethereal space that connects them, a place where the tangible and intangible meet and shape each other.

Housed on the second floor of the Wood Street Galleries (where it is part of the exhibition *hi-tech, low-tech*), "Ondulation" consists of a room-sized square pool of white liquid that sits before a white wall. The minimalist space is dark except for the reflections of the still water. But wait a few seconds: Lasers embedded in the walls and standard theater lighting start to glow, and a low-pitched tone begins to reverberate from loudspeakers placed beneath the surface of the water. The sound breaks the surface and the

water ripples into concentric circles that spread across the pool. The lights projected onto the water bounce from its troubled surface and reflect onto the wall above as complex patterns of sine waves.

The waves undulate to the rhythm of the water's movement, and the sound vibrates to the rhythm of the image on the wall. The water's ripples change shape and

moves the sound resonates and the light wavers, the three becoming so interconnected that none can be parsed out. In fact, if you sit quietly and watch the cycle take place several times, you'll find that the motion leads back to a moment in which nothing exists at all, but for the dead calm of the work's once-dormant materials.

At times, the lights look like the back-

**Sound troubles the water's surface, and the water bends light. And we too are drawn into the interaction.**

direction depending on which loudspeakers are emitting sounds at any given time, and on which tone and frequency they are using. Meanwhile, the lights change colors, at times filling the room with a haze of reflections, and at other times focusing on a single point on the wall.

Soon the three parts appear to be dancing to one another's cues, with no beginning and no end. Though we can watch what's happening, we cannot trace the process back to its source: As the water

drop of an electronic music show. But the image projects the shape of a winding, pulsating helix which seems to represent the invisible connective tissue between the walls and space of the room. It also depicts the conjoined and ethereal elements Plumbing manipulates: Sound seems to take on the illusion of physical volume here, like a gas whose atoms bound off one another within the confines of the gallery.

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Yet each vibration is a transient moment, capable of transmitting a solitary particle of information that becomes briefly visible as a ripple in the silent water.

Likewise, though the digital images may appear to be steady lines of light, they too are erratic complexes, shapes that become processes of change rather than a product of the water's movements. Over time, the tumult on the screen seems to dictate the tumult within the pool, rather than the other way around.

It's no surprise that Plumbing for Beginners is so concerned with how things refer to each other. After all, two-thirds of the collective, McIntosh and Madan, also make art as another collective called [The User], which has been primarily concerned with how technologies of the past speak to creative productions of the present, and vice versa. For example, in the past the duo has produced symphonic music from the interplay of dot-matrix printers, and has used the highly non-individualistic space of the office cubicle to comment on the problematic existence of the individual within the labor force.

Here, they take the manifestations of our very physical existence to show how we

are connected to other, non-tangible processes. In "Ondulation," the tangible and intangible become blurred very quickly: Sound troubles the water's surface, and the water bends light. As these elements interact with one another in this darkened gallery, we sit on a bench and watch. And yet we too are drawn into the interaction: The pulse of the music fills our heads, and the light reflects inside our eyeballs. If you pay attention, you can even feel the water spray lightly on your faces. In other words, we distill and embody these elements as surely as the water does.

And that seems to be the point: The physical objects that exist around us also exist as a part of us. If Plumbing for Beginners can bring together light, sound and water to create waves that build from each other, then we become part of that mix. Ultimately, "Ondulation" suggests, that's why it's important to understand the ways in which we interact with the material realm — because its elements constitute our spiritual elements as well. ☞

*hi-tech, low-tech* runs through May 15 at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown. 412-371-5605.

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