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## Visual Artists, Choosing to Play by Ear 'Music,' at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami

*The Sunday performance of Xaviera Simmons's multimedia "Number 17," at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, with Ms. Simmons at center. It is also exhibiting photographs from her "Untitled" series with LP covers.*

RIDGEFIELD, Conn. — THE first thing you see when you walk into the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum is a 13-foot-wide poster of six men, mostly middle-aged and overweight, in coveralls and baseball caps. They are fans of the country singer Merle Haggard and were photographed by the British artist James Mollison at a concert in Huntsville, Ala., in 2006 as part of “The Disciples,” his series showing fans of 59 pop groups.

Directly across the spacious entrance hall is a portrait of a woman under a lightly clouded blue sky holding a copy of Grace Jones’s “Warm Leatherette” LP in front of her face. That 2009 photo, named for Ms. Jones’s 1980 album, is part of Xaviera Simmons’s “Untitled” series, in which album covers are seen in unusual settings.

“When you come to an art museum, you don’t usually see good old boys, and to have it right across from Grace Jones worked for us,” said Richard Klein, the Aldrich exhibitions director. “We’re setting up something unexpected.”

This striking juxtaposition is the heart of “Music,” a quirky exploration of the relationship between music and art that opened at the Aldrich on Sunday and runs through March 9. It features works by four artists, and the music collection of a fifth, in separate galleries — though the initial contrast was deliberate.

The Aldrich presents two shows every year around a unifying theme. For this show, opinions were split about whether the subject should be music or film. “Music won out,” said Mr. Klein, who assembled this show with two other curators, Amy Smith-Stewart and Kelly Taxter.

“It’s just a fact that everyone has a relationship with music,” he said. “Music interjects itself into our lives, constantly and on different levels. It was a subject we knew we could tackle in ways that go off in different directions.”

The show includes pieces by Simon Blackmore and Martin Creed that mix sound and sculpture. A fifth gallery is devoted to a partial re-creation of Sol LeWitt’s music room at his home in Chester, Conn. Though the gallery does not have the music room’s sound equipment or its coziness, it replicates the Egyptian earth hue on the walls and the white shelves that held the nearly 4,000 audiocassettes LeWitt collected over the last 30 years of his life. Most of the music is from what had been a large LP collection, which LeWitt gave away after he was finished taping records.

LeWitt, who died in 2007, spoke in interviews about his love of Bach, Mozart and Debussy, and he listened to them and others when he worked. The sheer abundance of the music he collected — the tapes carry roughly 5,800 hours of it, which Mr. Klein estimates is some 16,000 pieces — says a lot about his passion for sound.

So does his method. For some of his Conceptual works, LeWitt wrote instructions that were executed by his assistants, much as a composer writes a score that musicians play. But he did not delegate his collecting. He taped the music himself, labeled and numbered each cassette, and prepared a detailed catalog. The labels and catalog are in LeWitt’s handwriting.

An undercurrent of the “Music” exhibition that begins in the LeWitt room is a fascination with the composer John Cage and his love of randomness. A copy, in pencil, of Cage’s score and diagrams for “Changes and Disappearances 18” (1979-82) that LeWitt owned hangs near his tapes. But LeWitt had mixed feelings about Cage.

“The thinking of John Cage derived from Duchamp and Dada,” LeWitt told Saul Ostrow in a 2003 interview for *Bomb* magazine. “I was not interested in that. My thinking derived from Muybridge and the idea of seriality, from music.” He was referring to the 19th-century English photographer Eadweard Muybridge, who developed a way to shoot a series of stills rapidly, showing, for example, a horse running, in which every frame was slightly different from the one before it.

For LeWitt, this was a visual equivalent of musical variations in which a single theme is varied over time — or, for that matter, musical Minimalism, in which a figure evolves slowly. Philip Glass was also fascinated with Muybridge, who was the subject of Mr. Glass’s 1983 chamber opera, “The Photographer.”

LeWitt was closer in spirit to Mr. Glass and to Steve Reich than to Cage. He was friendly with both, and he had their handwritten scores in his collection, too. Several, including a pencil sketch of part of Mr. Reich's seminal "Drumming" (1970) and a handwritten description of Mr. Glass's "1+1 for One Player and Amplified Table Top" (1968), on lined legal paper, hang near the Cage.

Cage's ghost hovers over two of the three sound works in Mr. Blackmore's part of the exhibition. "Audio Monitors" (2007-13) are two boxes that look like speakers on tripods, with a digital readout that counts the seconds, up to "4'33," a reference to Cage's famously silent work. Cage wanted listeners to focus on the ambient sound and hear the music within it. In Mr. Blackmore's work, any noise made sends the clock back to zero.

Cage might have been amused by the way happenstance controls the work. It also controls "Weather Guitar" (2005). A classical guitar is wired to an arm that projects out of a gallery window and holds a weather vane, an anemometer (which measures wind speed) and a light sensor. The weather devices send signals to electronic gizmos affixed to the guitar's neck, which pluck the strings in different ways and at different speeds, according to changes in the sunlight and wind velocity.

Mr. Blackmore's main concern, though, is translation. "Weather Guitar" translates measurements of sunlight and wind into a guitar performance. And in another work, "Sticks" (2013), he transformed ASCII, the binary computer code, into rhythmic notation, kind of like Morse code. Using two sticks taken from a tree in his yard as mallets, he beats out messages, which a computer program translates into text. It is, in a sense, a conflation of modern text messaging and tribal message drumming.

Mr. Creed, like Mr. Blackmore and Mr. Mollison, is British, and he has a sideline career as a musician, with several CDs to his credit. One of his musical pieces, "Work No. 371 — Elevator ooh/aah up/down" (2004) — ascending and descending choral flourishes — can be heard in the Aldrich elevator. Other installations explore ideas about rhythm.

Mr. Creed has put his inner Cage on display, too. In "Work No. 1190, Half the air in a given space" (2011), a gallery is filled nine and a half feet high with durable gold balloons, each 16 inches in diameter. As viewers walk through the space, the squeaks and other noises the balloons make as they brush against people's clothing become part of the piece. And in "Work No. 1652" (2013), a motor affixed to the back of an upright piano raises and slams the lid at random intervals, causing the strings to resonate.

Cage's influence also animated Ms. Simmons's "Number 17," a three-screen, multimedia video installation, which she filmed during a live performance on Sunday. In it, Ms. Simmons created artworks by, among other methods, throwing paint and plaster against the gallery's canvas-covered walls in the manner of a Jackson Pollock action painting, while a soprano sang vocal exercises until she was hoarse, and a "system controller" held up cards featuring color, numbers and other cues.

"It's an endurance piece," Ms. Smith-Stewart said, "and how it unfolds will be determined partly by the energy of the room."

And then there's Mr. Mollison's "Disciples."

"He spent four years on this project, starting with fans at a Marilyn Manson concert in 2005," Mr. Klein said. "It's like looking at it as an anthropologist, seeing all these fan bases as tribal groups, linked by signs and signifiers of various sorts."

Besides the denim-clad fans of Mr. Haggard, the Aldrich is showing six more portraits from the series, including spiky-haired fans of the Casualties, sporting ammunition-style belts; fans of the Rolling Stones, each wearing something bearing the band's tongue logo; and fans of Björk, in all their frilly mismatchedness.

“It won't answer any big questions about what music is, or what sound is,” Mr. Klein said. “But I'm hoping it will get people thinking about what music can be.”