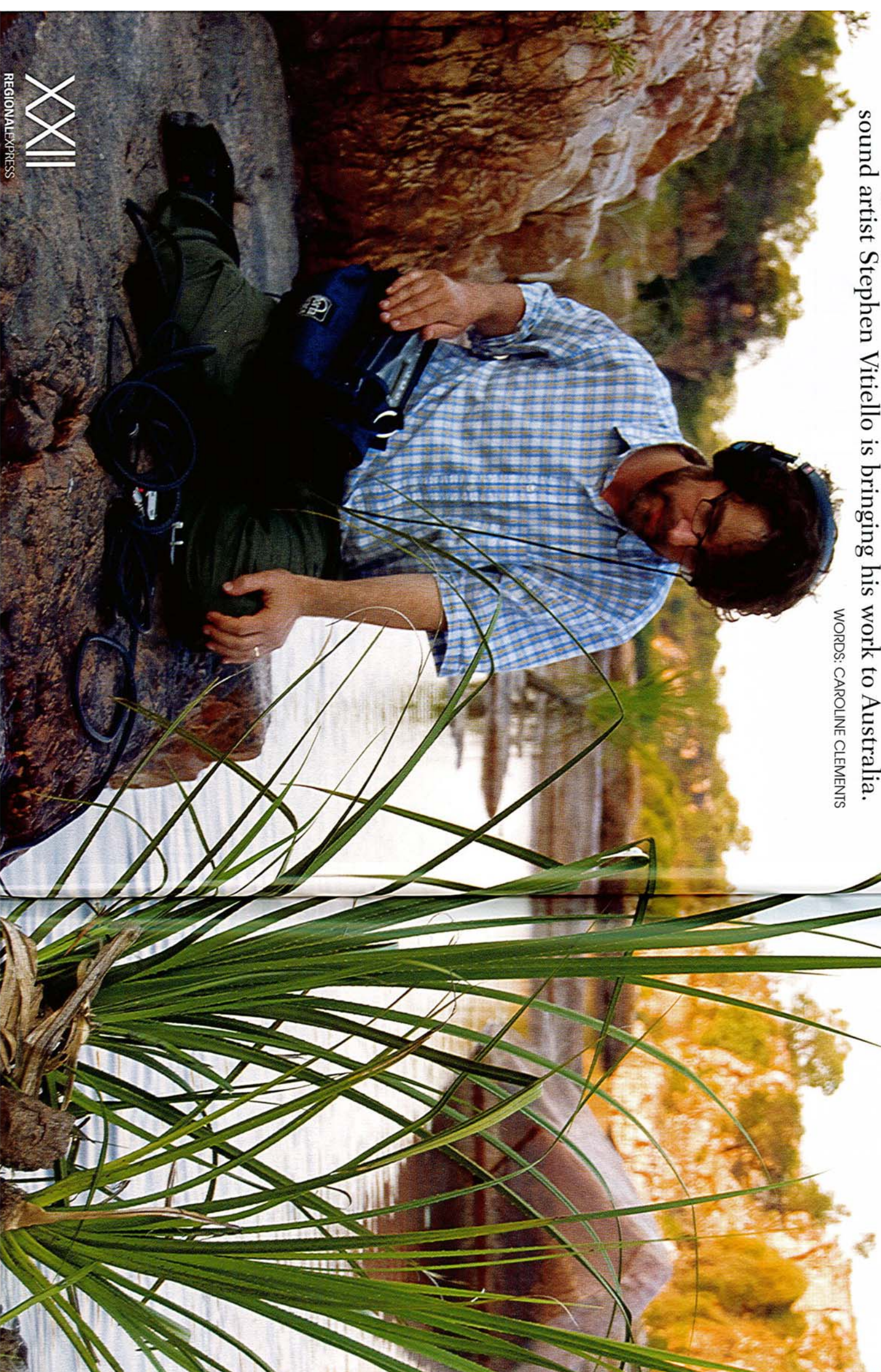


Soundscoopers

Utilising his senses and the music in the noises around him, sound artist Stephen Vitello is bringing his work to Australia.

WORDS: CAROLINE CLEMENTS



Walking along the High Line in New York is such a great experience. There is so much to look at and listen to. The High Line is a park nearly 2.5 kilometres in length, built on a section of what was formerly an elevated

freight railroad on the west side of lower Manhattan, above the Meatpacking District. The park was opened in June 2009 and, a year later, sound artist Stephen Vitello has become the second person commissioned to create an art piece on it.

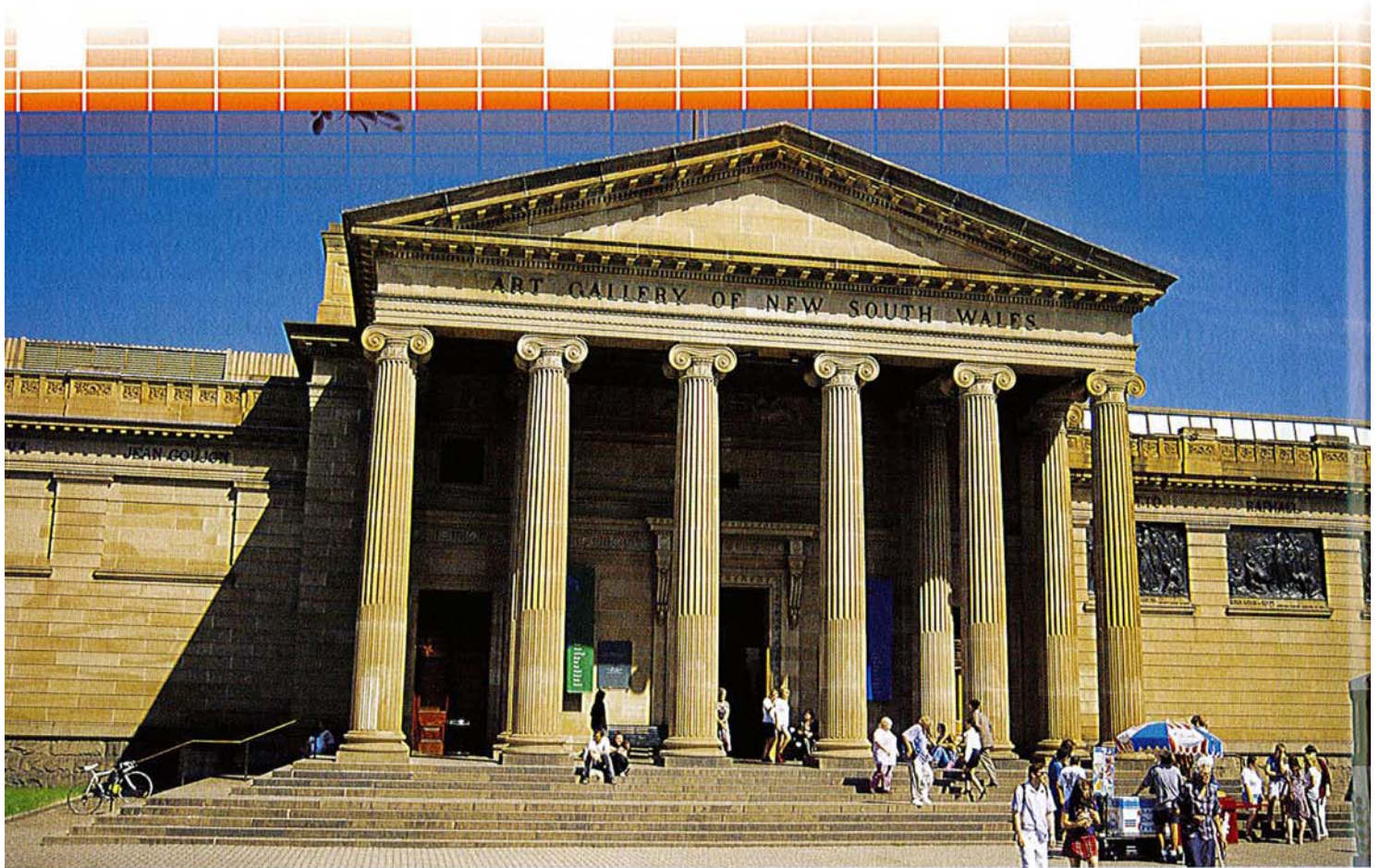
The piece is called 'A Bell for Every Minute' and is an installation consisting of recordings of 59 bell sounds. "They're everything from a Catholic church bell to a Jewish synagogue bell to a Buddhist temple bell, but then also a bell that was part of Coney Island Dreamland," Vitello reveals, referring to the fire that destroyed Coney Island Dreamland in 1911. "Just a few months ago, this bell was actually found by someone who was diving, so I recorded it. Then my friend's cat had a little bell on its collar, so we recorded that, too."

There are five large speakers hanging along the raised city garden, and every minute during the hour a different bell will be heard. "So a minute after the hour, it could be the Keith Bell at the UN, then two minutes after the hour it could be the Bell on Boots the cat and then, three minutes after, it might be the Bell of Hope for victims of 9/11 and, at the beginning of the hour, all 59 will ring together," Vitello explains. The installation will be in place for almost a year.

Vitello was in Australia when I spoke to him but was on his way home to Richmond, Virginia (USA) for several months before he returns in August to open two exhibitions in Sydney. John Kaldor Public Arts Projects has commissioned a piece using some recordings Vitello made in Kununurra in the Western Australian outback in July 2009. He went out into the wilderness for eight days to capture the sounds of wildlife – particularly birds, but also water and wind.

Subsequently, Vitello was asked to do an installation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the same time (August 2010) but realised he would need to record some more sounds. So he returned to Kununurra earlier this year. "We went out on a boat to some of the most beautiful places imaginable – like little watering holes on these remote islands where the winds were very dramatic."

Given the nature of this artistic practice, the space in which a sound exhibition is installed is crucial to the audience's experience. "I looked at all these spaces in the city to post my public art piece," Vitello recalls. "There [were] options like the Sydney Opera House, who had offered me corridors and hallways, and other notable places like that, but I ended up sort of fixating on these brickworks, these old kilns on the western edge of the city," he says of the Sydney Park Brickworks, where the exhibition will be held. "Of all the places I looked at for the exhibition, it had some mystery to it: it held the sounds really nicely and had some interesting acoustics. I didn't know this at the time but apparently, it had ▶



this punk-rock history in the '80s and bands would break in and play there. The place seems quite small to me for bands, but it's kind of exciting that there was a music history to these buildings." Vitiello will also be in Sydney for the launch of a smaller installation at the Art Gallery of NSW, which he will open with a performance on the gallery steps alongside electronic musician from Brisbane, Laurence English.

Originally from New York, Vitiello moved to Virginia in 2004 to take up a position at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). He teaches at the school of the arts, where he is an associate professor of kinetic imaging. "I grew up in New York but it was just becoming too hard to survive there post 9/11: a lot of my projects lost funding or had half-funding." Despite this, Vitiello still has a strong bond with the city. In 1999, he took up a WorldViews residency at the World Trade Centre. "I was part of the first wave of media artists who were invited to apply for the residency," he recalls. "I put microphones on the window and listened to the sounds of the street from above so that whatever I was doing, I would always have the sound of the city funnelling through my mixing board." The best-known of these recordings are of the buildings swaying, creaking and cracking after hurricane Floyd. At the end of the residency, the Whitney Museum (NY) acquired this work to be part of the 2002 Biennial; subsequently, the museum purchased the work for its permanent collection.

Regarded as a sound artist first and foremost, Vitiello is also known as an electronic musician and media artist. "I

“ I exist in the art world as someone who makes installations and photographs and sculptures, but sound is always my primary concern. ”

exist in the art world as someone who makes installations and photographs and sculptures, but sound is always my primary concern. My ears are definitely stronger than my eyes," he says.

Actually, Vitiello studied literature and film and went on to do an internship in the video department at MoMA, which opened up a world of sound for video art. He also played in some punk-rock bands in the '70s. "I was in a band with photographers and other artists; everyone was always one step removed from something else," he recalls. "But somehow playing in bands didn't ever really click for me the way doing the art projects did – very quickly."

The thing about sound art, and Vitiello's work in particular, is that it's easy to digest. You don't have to be well versed in the mechanics of sound art or electronic music to enjoy it, and it appeals to a wide audience, from children to adults.

"It doesn't have to be about the language of experimental audio," Vitiello notes. "It can be about the birds or the sounds of bells in an immersive environment and, as an experience, I feel very proud of capturing that." ■

Previous page:

Stephen Vitiello recording the sounds of the wilderness in Kununurra to use in his art.

Above: Vitiello will soon perform on the steps of the Art Gallery of NSW.

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THE NATION 3

Sound artist recreates 'loud silence' of bush

ASHLEIGH WILSON

HIS studio was the vast, open spaces of the Kimberley.

Stephen Vitello, a punk guitarist turned sound artist based in Virginia, was spending a week under the stars near Kununurra, recording the sounds of the bush. As he moved from place to place, a lone crow — he was sure it was the same one — would follow.

"I was going out of my way to be really, really, creeping quiet — under this tree or next to that bush — and there that crow would be

again," Vitello said. "I always felt like he or she was mocking me. It became a kind of interesting sparring partner."

His project, centred on the remote northwest of Australia, involved capturing the sounds of the Australian outback to be replayed thousands of kilometres away.

The artist spent two weeks making more than 50 hours of recordings. They were later condensed and separated into three themes — wind, water and wildlife — before being unveiled in Sydney yesterday as *The Sound of Red Earth*.

"It's a loud silence," Vitello said. "People say you go there and it's so quiet, but it's quiet because there are no planes, no people playing in the distance. The birds, in particular, are quite loud."

The looped compositions have been installed in three old brickmaking kilns in Sydney Park, an inner-city playground often crowded with families and dogs.

In each, the sounds are played from small speakers lined up against the wall. Sand, rock and red dirt cover the floor inside the kilns, evoking the landscape of the north.

Vitello made the recordings camping around Kununurra and from a boat off the coast near Wynham. And even though he had once travelled to the Amazon to make a similar project, he often felt nervous about the natural hazards of the Australian bush.

"There was a kind of serene beauty that always had a hint of danger beneath the surface," he said.

Vitello was invited to Australia to make the work by John Kaldor, a collector who has sponsored several major public artworks since the early 1960s.



TRACER LEA

Stephen Vitello is in Sydney with *The Sound of Red Earth*