

ROH

STRING THEORY

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I.

"And I know none of this'll matter in the long run / But I know a sound is still a sound around no one..."

(Fiona Apple – I Want You to Love Me)

Lover's Phone: so it was called. The invention of the tin can telephone by Robert Hooke in the 17th century began with his experiment in acoustics. But the adorable moniker's origin is less traceable in spite of its popularity, though one could easily understand why tin can telephone was dubbed as such. On one level it was a stepping stone in the field of sound physics; on another, a conduit of impractical romance. Referring less to the mechanics of strings and cans, the term "Lover's Phone" instead encompasses the universal impulse to whisper in the beloved's ear and to take turns hearing it back. The exchange is mediated yet it feels immediate, a private game afforded by ordinary objects. (No wonder then, tin can telephones made up generations' worth of childhood memories and lesson plans.)

For this simple construction Bandung-based artist-musician Mira Rizki Kurnia draws the architectural pastiche for *Denting dalam Bising* (2017) and a recent counterpart *Bengap di Balik Senyap* (2025). Using strings and various metallic materials of different calibers—domestic items such as pans and cans, to more industrial equipment such as a cash safe, ammunition box, oil drum—to conduct sound waves, she probes the social potential of sound transmission, its clarity and its distortion, in open environments where cacophonous sources (whether natural or manmade) interpose our auditory perception with a swarm of meanings. A sound is never just a sound around someone.

With *Bengap di Balik Senyap* in particular, Mira Rizki complicates the stakes of a mere Lover's Phone with a lot more turns in the strings, more receptors. Mounted on trees to catch the wind, creeping on the wall or standing in the yard where people usually congregate, next to the road to capture street business. When a listener interacts with the installation's task, the brain is computing two stimuli from each ear at once. Accumulated sound waves are vibrating through solid conductors on one side of the head, versus traveling by air on another side. Every sound carries its own distinguishing mark—depending on how loud or faint (amplitude), quick or slow (velocity), and so on.

The essence of this extended childlike play is to notice sound at its most straightforward i.e. mechanical disturbance traversing elastic mediums. The experience of this soundscape is open-ended, as arbitrary as it can be (your friend whispering or screaming into the can?), though always requiring the listener's receptivity to further interpret or ascribe meanings. A conscious undertaking would look like paying

attention toward the internal process and the external environment. The synthesis of meaning from sound transmission, after all, corresponds to one's aural memory and *a priori* knowledge.

The synthesis of meaning may also be provoked by lexical inputs in this case, for Mira Rizki's affinity for rhymes—and alliterations, spoonerism, other wordplays—infuses nearly all her works or at least their memorable titles. The word *bengap* for instance bears many definitions: the dizzying sensation of a splash of water stuck inside the ear; distorted noise or appearance; inarticulate or slurred speech; indecisive. All of which seems disparate yet symbolizes an integral part of her sound-art inquiry: the feedback loop of listening and speaking, what the participatory act possibly makes ways for. In her practice she has speculated about the comparative sound of historical riots, modified news broadcasts according to phonetic arrangements, or gathered the chatter of gated communities during the pandemic. Cutting through the noise, rather literally. What will you get, the wheat or the chaff? In *senyap* [silence], you won't know if you don't play.

II.

While the strings of Mira Rizki's installation conduct meanings in time—as sound waves travel to and fro—in another room the strings of Tith Kanitha's sculpture transport memories in space, so to speak. Thin steel wires, again an ordinary object found in domestic and industrial settings, are hand-woven for numerous hours, spooled, unspooled, spiraling like grape tendrils. The slow and gradual method follows no pre-sketch because Kanitha lets the material reveal its final form as her thought and feeling roam free in the process. The twofold exercise results in

whimsical works; faux-organic shapes resembling hanging roots, snakeskin, swan neck. Evidence of her art-making spirit that is instinctual and anchored in the children's fresh view of the world. The ending lines of Louise Glück's *Nostos* ring a bell: "We looked at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory."

Often, in interviews, the Cambodia-born artist avoids overexplaining her work except for the fact that it was in accordance with how she remembers her childhood. (Put otherwise, what was left of the Cambodian civil war about a decade before she was born.) The economic and political situation has since differed, though for one the concern for artists to represent the nation's darker history or its remnant remains. Where the government board may preserve a controlled narrative about the nation's identities and cultures, Tith Kanitha among other artists complicate the code—formally by employing amorphous figures which are open to wide interpretation—and instead seeds her self-determination elsewhere.

III.

Speaking of a certain kind of artistic freedom culled from the potency of strings and processual labor, naturally Kazuko Miyamoto calls to mind. Her cotton string constructions are stretched into evanescent symmetrical zigzags enveloping the white cube, a three-dimensional drawing that considers the dynamics of spatial perception, minimalism, and more importantly the patient hands (hers, her assistants') behind its intricacies. Miyamoto's involvement with activism and feminist networks in the '70s and '80s adds a substantial facet to the series, i.e. illuminating the forgotten labor of women. Famously affiliated with Sol Lewitt due to their working history and

near-comparable style, Miyamoto's more interesting association, if not eclipsed, is however with the late Ana Mendieta. Perhaps, much in the way Miyamoto met LeWitt by chance during a fire drill, an invisible string seemed to have connected them too: less than a year after Mendieta's relocation to New York, a few years before Miyamoto began mothering. With Zarina, they organized a show for fellow non-western artists at the first women's co-op gallery in the United States. Pretty tectonic moment in history. It looked like the strings, physical and allegorical, kept looming forth.

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