

BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Blanton Museum of Art to Become First Major Museum with Dedicated Outdoor Space for Sound Art, Following \$5 Million Gift from Ernest and Sarah Butler

Bill Fontana to Create Inaugural Commission for Butler Sound Gallery



AUSTIN, TX — June 29, 2021 — The Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin will become the first major museum to create a long-term space dedicated to sound art, following a \$5 million gift from Ernest and Sarah Butler.

The future site of the Butler Sound Gallery will be a park-like area on the museum campus and will be an integral feature of the Blanton's large-scale grounds revitalization led by acclaimed international design firm Snøhetta. The new grounds initiative, which includes a mural commission by Cuban-American artist Carmen Herrera and the new Moody Patio that incorporates multiple performance spaces, is under construction and expected to be completed in late 2022.

The Butler Sound Gallery will be situated just east of *Austin*, the iconic artwork by Ellsworth Kelly, and north of the Michener Building, which houses the Blanton's collection and exhibition program. The outdoor gallery will open with a site-specific installation by sound art pioneer Bill Fontana that incorporates recordings of Texas wildlife and geological structures taken over the course of four seasons.

“Our new outdoor Butler Sound Gallery, which is an important part of the new grounds initiative on which we broke ground in March 2021, will change the way people encounter and experience the museum,” said Simone Wicha, Director of the Blanton Museum of Art. “For me, it felt especially important to launch this project with an artist whose work will not only surprise us and help us see more clearly through sound, but also will create a time capsule that captures the beauty and wonder of our rapidly changing world. Longtime supporters Sarah and Ernest Butler immediately saw the importance of this project, and their generous \$5 million gift was pivotal in creating this latest initiative.”

The gift includes an endowment for future site-specific sound art installations for the gallery, ensuring that visitors will experience a dynamic program for many years to come. The Fontana work is expected to remain installed for two years. Following this initial artist project, the museum’s curatorial team will continue to engage artists to develop projects for this vibrant public space.

“As longtime museum members and members of the Blanton National Leadership Board, we have witnessed what a vital cultural resource the Blanton has become – and will continue to be – for our community,” said Ernest and Sarah Butler. “We are proud to underwrite this innovative outdoor sound gallery at the museum and have it named in our honor. It is exciting to imagine the beautiful, unexpected, and powerful experiences that students and visitors will have with sound art as they explore the museum’s new grounds.”

While the Butler Sound Gallery marks a noteworthy step in institutional support for sound art, the Blanton has long championed sound-based experiential programming in a city with a rich musical legacy—and the museum continues to be a significant performance venue for musicians as well as an exhibition space for sound artists. The critically acclaimed *SoundSpace* concert series, launched in 2010 and curated by award-winning artist and musician Steve Parker, has explored themes ranging from the refugee experience to medical and biological sounds. In collaboration with The University of Texas’ Butler School of Music, the Blanton has hosted the Midday Music Series since 2013, in which faculty and student musicians perform lunchtime sets and explore the connections between the visual arts and music of all genres, from opera to improvisational jazz. In 2017, the Blanton launched its Contemporary Project series with a significant sound art installation, *Part File Score* (2014), by Susan Philipsz. In addition, the 2017 exhibition *Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser* featured an outdoor sound installation titled *Please, Please, Pleased to Meet’cha* (2006), where visitors strolling among trees could hear human approximations of bird calls as interpreted by United Nations translators.

Bill Fontana to Transform Blanton Grounds with *Landscape Soundings*

The Butler Sound Gallery’s inaugural work, *Landscape Soundings* (working title), will be a site-specific commission by Bill Fontana using an immersive multi-channel Meyer sound system. It will transport the ecological zones of the Texas Hill Country to the heart of Austin, creating an inviting outdoor space and furthering the museum’s goal of bringing art beyond its building walls and into communal areas.

“Our curatorial team is thrilled by the opportunity to program a ‘gallery without walls’ as part of the innovative design of the new grounds,” said Carter E. Foster, Blanton Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs. “Visitors will be surprised and delighted to venture not only beyond our walls to encounter art but also beyond the visual. What makes sound art so powerful is the way it can create a multisensory experience. It’s exciting to integrate this burgeoning genre into our collection, especially in a city like Austin, which is full of audiences attuned to listening.”

“We’re especially thrilled that artist Bill Fontana, who has shaped the field of sound art, will open the Butler Sound Gallery with a new, immersive work,” added Veronica Roberts, Blanton Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. “Fontana’s installation will offer an acoustic portrait of Austin and the Texas Hill Country and relocate hidden sounds of our geologically unique landscape to an inviting civic space.”

Fontana plans to travel across Central Texas during each of the four seasons to capture the natural sounds of this distinctive region. Some of the artist's initial field research has included recording expeditions to Bracken Cave in San Antonio, home to the largest bat colony in the world, and to Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, which is 40 miles northwest of Austin and home to two highly endangered migratory songbirds: the golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo. Fontana is interested in recording birds, bats, and other regional wildlife as well as exploring sounds associated with the special geological features of the region, including limestone caverns and aquifers.

Fontana's process will be similar to that of his 2019 work *Sequoia River Echoes*, where the artist mounted high-resolution vibration sensors (accelerometers) to tree trunks at Sequoia National Park, recording the rhythm of the Kaweah River as it traveled through the ground and reverberated within the millennia-old sequoia trees. Other site-specific commissions by Fontana include a permanent sound sculpture at the entrance of MAXXI in Rome, inspired by the sound of water flowing through Roman aqueducts.

Fontana refers to his immersive installations as "sound sculptures." He states: "At the heart of this sound sculpture is my dedication to listening and belief that the act of listening is a way of making music."

About Bill Fontana

Bill Fontana (b. 1947) is an American composer and artist who has developed an international reputation for his pioneering experiments with sound. Fontana trained at the Cleveland Institute of Music and at the New School for Social Research in New York, where he studied under John Cage. Since the early 1970s Fontana has used sound as a sculptural medium to activate conscious listening, using natural and urban environments as sources of musical information. He has realized sound sculptures in public spaces and museums around the world, including Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Paris, London, Barcelona, Rome, Venice, Berlin, Vienna, Sydney, Tokyo, Istanbul, and Abu Dhabi.

His career, spanning fifty years, includes highlights such as reimagining London's Millennium Bridge as a giant string instrument and transmitting the natural sounds of the Normandy coast to the Arc de Triomphe, marking the 50th anniversary of the D-Day Landings. He participated in the 48th Venice Biennale and was awarded an artist's residency at CERN, the site of the Large Hadron Collider. He is based in San Francisco, California.

About the Butlers

Dr. Ernest Butler, a retired otolaryngologist and founder of the Austin Ear Nose and Throat Clinic, and Sarah Butler, a retired educator, joined the Blanton as members almost 40 years ago and have served on the Blanton's National Leadership Board for more than 15 years. The Butlers were among the visionary donors who supported the realization of Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*, and the Sarah and Ernest Butler Gallery on the first floor of the Blanton's Michener Gallery Building is named in recognition of the couple's generous support for the campaign that built the museum's current facility. In addition to their role at the Blanton, the Butlers are longtime supporters of The University of Texas at Austin. Elsewhere on campus, the Butlers have established endowments towards the musical arts, including the Sarah and Ernest Butler School of Music and the Sarah and Ernest Butler Opera Center. The Butlers have supported many of the city's largest arts programs and venues, including Ballet Austin's Butler Dance Education Center and the Butler Center for Dance & Fitness, the Long Center for the Performing Arts, the Austin Opera, and the Austin Symphony Orchestra. They have received the Texas Medal of the Arts, among other awards, for their unwavering passion and dedication, without which Austin's arts landscape would not be the same. They are dedicated fans of nature and, in fact, avid birders.

About the Blanton Museum of Art

Founded in 1963, the Blanton Museum of Art holds the largest public collection in Central Texas with around 19,000 objects. Recognized as the home of Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*, its major collecting areas are modern and contemporary American and Latin American art, Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings, and prints and drawings. The Blanton offers thought-provoking, visually arresting, and personally moving encounters with art.

About the New Grounds Initiative

The [new grounds initiative](#) will unify and revitalize the Blanton campus, which is approximately 200,000 square feet and contains two buildings and Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*, through architectural and landscape improvements. The project is led by acclaimed international design firm Snøhetta and will feature the first major public mural commission by noted Cuban-American artist Carmen Herrera.

Lead funding for the new grounds initiative is generously provided by The Moody Foundation. Major funding is also provided by Sarah and Ernest Butler, the Still Water Foundation, and the Estate of Ann Bower. Further support is thanks to the Kahng Foundation, Jack and Katie Blaha, the Lowe Foundation, and other donors.

Image Credit: Blanton Museum of Art New Grounds Initiative Plan (detail), courtesy Snøhetta and Blanton Museum of Art