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YOUR SATURDAY



MICHAEL UPCHURCH

**Hugo Solis in front of the cargo container that houses his sound installation, "Axial," inspired by the Axial volcano 250 miles off the coast of Oregon.**

# An aural immersion in seafloor sounds

BY MICHAEL UPCHURCH
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In a dark, cold cargo container parked next to the Center for Urban Horticulture, underwater soundscapes are building up to an unearthly percussive racket.

The multilayered sound is inspired by the Axial volcano 250 miles off the coast of Oregon. One layer — a low rumble with a heartbeatlike thrum to it — is a recording of a hydrothermal vent bubbling up superheated gases. Another — a wavering bell tone — is the signal transmitted by a microphone as it's lowered into the ocean's depths.

As for the racket, that's Mexican sound artist Hugo Solis' idea of what an eruption of the volcano might be like at 4,500 feet below the sea's surface.

"Axial," open to the public through Saturday from 4:18 p.m. to 11 p.m., got its start when Solis was a Ph.D. student at the University of Washington's Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media (DXARTS). Solis, 35, trained as a pianist in Mexico but was drawn to electronic music and improvisation after he won scholarships to New York University and the Media Lab at MIT. Later studies in Barcelona developed his skills with computer analysis of music signals. But his immersion in the technical side of sound, he says, left him feeling "a little nostalgic" for something with a stronger art component.

**PREVIEW**

**Hugo Solis: 'Axial'**

4:18 p.m.-11 p.m. Saturday, near the Center for Urban Horticulture, 3501 N.E. 41st St., Seattle; free (directions: *http://hugosolis.net*). Artist talk at 7 p.m. Friday. For more information on Regional Scale Nodes project, go to *www.ooi.washington.edu*.

His four years with the UW's DXARTS program gave him what he needed. The earliest inspiration for "Axial" came when Solis, still a high-school student in Mexico City, was invited to join an exploration of hydrothermal vents in the Sea of Cortez. His two weeks on submarines left him feeling "involved" with the ocean "in some emotional way," and for "Axial" he wanted to do something sea-related.

Initially his idea was to create "some kind of sound performance" at sea. "I was going to rent a ship," he recalled in an interview on Thursday. "I was just going and saying, 'Hey, could you lend me your ship, please?' "

The answer was: "Of course not."

Solis was then put in touch with UW oceanographer John Delaney, leader of the National Science Foundation's Regional Scale Nodes program, which is establishing a cabled network of instruments capable of continuously monitoring every kind of ocean "behavior," including seismic activity. Upon hearing Solis' Sea of Cortez stories, Delaney invited him on the UW's 2010 research cruise.

Solis was the only arts-oriented researcher on board and when his turn came to record a hydrothermal vent, the engineer helping him was baffled by his microphone-positioning requests.

"Could you make circles?"

"You want me to make *circles*?"

"Yes, please make circles."

Solis also had access to the team's more scientifically guided recordings. The final product, "Axial," blends those recordings with a "sonification" of the data the scientists on board were delivering, such as measurements of salinity and temperature. A third component is Solis' "volcanic" composition: computer-triggered hammers banging out a mounting roar against the resonant sides of the cargo container.

It's an all-immersive experience, replicating not just seafloor sounds but the lower ocean's deep chill and darkness. Hence the 4:18 starting time: sunset.

Dress warmly.

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