neural

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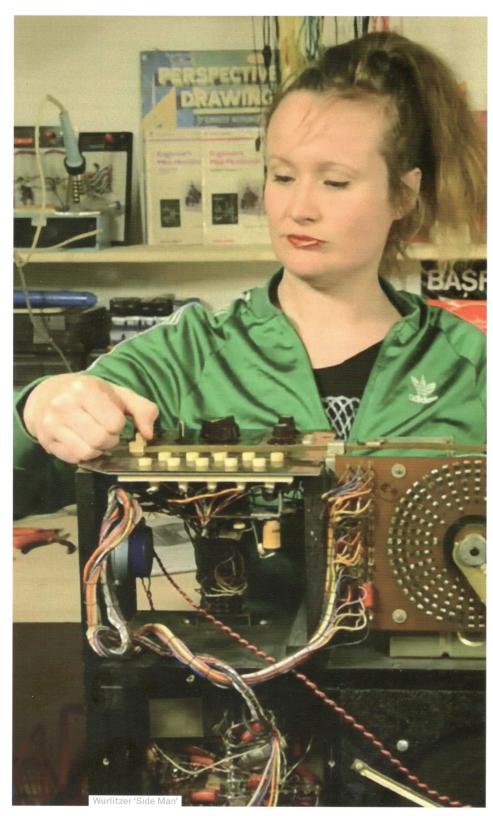## > Making it up

Darsha Hewitt

> interview

Wurlitzer 'Side Man'

You use your physical presence as a medium in your videos, and your consequent performances give a different perspective to the artwork. The tension between your "presentations" and the artwork itself can also be playful and emotional. And your (explanatory) personal drawings reinforce "personal" scientific and performative experience. How do you plan videos and are the (sound) artworks developed independently? Though I consider my presence to be a secondary element in my artwork, making myself part of it does communicate a certain perspective. In performance and on screen I get myself into complex technical situations and share specialized knowledge in an accessible and rather expressive manner. I land somewhere between eager geek and overly energetic home appliance salesperson - this was never planned but it is largely informed by how I act when I am teaching DIY electronics workshops. I don't want people to fall asleep while I am covering technically dense information so I try to keep it lively.

"20 oscillators in 20 minutes" is a live performance during which you build live 20 working oscillators in 20 minutes. Here there's the countdown tension, the playfulness of the failures when they happen, a good dose of self-irony and an accomplished goal. Did you want to create a high-speed theatrical piece on the act of making, or does it come from a personal narrative? And was there any kind of conceptual reference to or inspiration from

Raster Noton's "20' to 2000"?

20 Oscillators in 20 Minutes - is a performance I developed to gain access to powerful sound systems in order to experiment with big volume, space and resonance. These are the factors that came together to make this piece:

1 - My greatest skill is my ability to stand up in front of a crowd and rapidly build electronic circuits while simultaneously having fun and making a fool of myself.

2 - Generally while experiencing a live experimental music performance, after about 20 minutes I start to get agitated and wonder if it is ever going to end.

Though presented in the experimental music/sound art context, 20 Oscillators in 20 Minutes is an odd fit. It is more like an amateur stand-up comedy act / action-sport that occurs within a barrage of square waves. Instead of getting lost in the groove of a nuanced soundscape, the audience becomes part of an increasingly loud and chaotic mess that involves cheering, heckling, time keeping and a surprising amount of hand-wringing as the last seconds of the performance are collectively counted down. There is no intentional reference to Raster-Noton here - although I respect their work, I try to avoid romantic conventions like paying homage to 'pioneers', 'geniuses' or 'grandfathers' of electronic music. It is well known that this field suffers from a lack of diversity. Repeating self-referential traditions that look backwards as a way to reaffirm excellence maintains a homogeneous state, which, in my opinion, does not help us move forward. That said, 20 Oscillators in 20 Minutes is often compared to Loud Objects (Tristan Perich, Kunal Gupta, Katie Shima), another live electronics act. The main difference is that Loud Objects works with powerful drone-like compositions and they look pretty cool because they wear sunglasses to shield their eyes from the light of their overhead projector.

Feedback is present in some of your works (literally or conceptually). Take, for example Feedback Babies, where the audio feedback is orchestrated through a small army of Fisher-Price Nursery Monitors placed at the right distance to generate feedback like "whimpering electronic babies." Here you gave it a poetic dimension, evoking more than showing, but was it your intention to also comment on the inner force and unavoidability of feedback in DIY electronic music? Is feedback's sometimes disturbing and constant presence in audio production also stating its importance to audio perception and conceptually placing it close to noise, and the whole philosophy connected to it?

As with a lot of my artwork, Feedback Babies grows out of empirical, hands-on research with used household electronics. I became fixated on these baby monitors because I was fascinated with how the feedback they produced sounded eerily like crying babies - they were easy to find in second-hand stores so I started to stockpile them. The idea of automating them only came about when I got my hands on a bunch of inexpensive motors from the electronics surplus store. I rarely design or envision a finished artwork in my head. I prefer to work intuitively and extract the expressive capabilities that pre-existing technical systems have to offer when they are deconstructed, repurposed and pushed to their limits. I am happy that my artwork connects to concepts and phenomena explored in electronic music; however, I am more interested in considering how technological effects are experienced within familiar settings. For me Feedback Babies speaks more to the feeling of unease that is sometimes present when living intimately alongside wireless technology than it does to the themes and philosophy present in electronic music and audio perception.

Feedback was also behind another work, DIY Telephone Feedback Performance, where you draw and print posters inviting people to play with the feedback produced by placing their phones in contact with microphones and speakers. With your drawing style and the spreading provided by the workshop attendees, was it meant to be a static (possibly viral) "retro-instructional"? And do you think that in this case you used the poster as a sound medium?

DIY Telephone Feedback Performance was a commissioned poster that was given away to the public as part of the Kontrollmodus Feedback exhibition at Halle 14 in Leipzig. Similar to Feedback Babies, I was interested in connecting with a common encounter with technology - in particular I wanted to demystify feedback by explaining how it works with reference to mobile phones and by turning it into something to be played with. Drafting is a discipline that aims to visually communicate technical information through the use of precise lines and standardized symbols. Though a skilled draftsperson seeks to remove the trace of their hand, in comparison to computer graphics, one can easily detect a line drawn by hand. Though this technique is not seen so much anymore, I choose to work with it specifically to emphasize the human dimension of technology. Further, by illustrating old brick-like Motorola phones within today's period of sleek smartphones, I am pointing to the awkward and heavy nature of technological development.

Another invisible phenomenon, electrostatic, is used in your Electrostatic Bell Choir, where you place light bells close to CRT television sets with all the static electricity they emit, inducing an involuntary and enchanting "choir." Do you feel that finding the right balance in drawing near elements that then produce such an effective result is a gesture closer to alchemy or to DIY engineering?

For me, alchemy, the act of transforming something of little value into gold, has a semi-magical/mythological connotation. With this work, I was trying to evoke the sense of wonder I used to experience as a kid while watching cartoons in my living room and getting up very close to the TV to watch my hair levitate away from my head and towards the screen. At the time, the effects of invisible charged particles seemed very close to magic. So yes, the fact that I am resurrecting obsolete TVs found in the trash to act as generators for this, as you called it, 'enchanting' experience, does align it with alchemy in a poetic manner. The DIY engineering part factored in greatly when I had to spend months trying to figure out how to

capture and amplify minute static charges in an effective and meaningful manner.

Your Disco LED hack (listening live to the interesting sounds emitted by a self-flickering LED in a toy instrument) falls into the aesthetics of accidents, as it was an almost random discovery. In your research, how much do you value the "accident" as a tool and/or a component of the subsequent work?
I do not refer to anything in my process as an accident. As mentioned previously, I rarely take a design/top down approach to art-making. Instead, I rely on dedicated material investigation, where observation and curiosity guide the development of my artwork. With the proper conditions in place, discovery is inevitable. Instead of forcing a piece of technology to behave the way it has been devised by industry, I immerse myself in it at an elemental level and look for its hidden beauty. This approach, which involves hacking, reverse-engineering and pattern recognition, allows me to tap into technology in unconventional ways.

You dedicated a whole year to studying the Wurlitzer 'Side Man,' drum machine from 1959 (apparently the world's first drum machine) after you bought one on Ebay. You spent time reverse engineering it because of the understandable lack of technical documentation. The resulting video seems to be made by a media archeologist with a YouTuber skilled attitude. In the end, do you identify the video as the artwork, or as only a strategic part of it? And do you think that, given the importance of hardware in our contemporary life, technical documentation should be considered as a universal resource, public good or even a compelling 'common', as most historical documents are?
The Sideman 5000 Adventure is a video series where I deconstructed the world's oldest commercially available drum machine for the Internet. It was developed in the art and civic media program at the Leuphana University in Lüneburg. I had two main goals for this work. First, I wanted to make the Sideman 5000 famous. I was very surprised to find out that

there was so little technical documentation and demonstrations available about such a historically significant and crazy beautiful machine. Secondly, as an artist preoccupied with making technology accessible, I wanted to present my artwork online since this means there is a greater chance for it to reach beyond the typical exhibition/festival audience. Making educational videos surrounding the Sideman came naturally as it was pretty much a black box waiting to be opened. To date, this artwork also acts as the most extensive documentation of this machine. Although this work is presented in exhibitions, it was important for me to bring the Sideman to life on the Internet as there is so much valuable information to be learned from it. Having it professionally exhibited and reviewed in media art publications is great, but, it is almost more meaningful for me when it is featured in tech publications such as MAKE: Magazine and discussed online in music technology forums.

The way you define your Personal Soundtrack Emitters is as: "19th century mp3 players," playing with a sort of steampunk anachronism. It aptly describes this old-looking, handcrafted, modified sound amplifier, which amplifies the sounds emitted by the user. Beyond turning the typical isolation induced by personal devices into a self-awareness practice, do you think that establishing new controversial design attitudes connected with the endless possibilities of electronics is a key point for reversing the pervasive and passive fetishism of new, constantly upgraded, industrial devices?
My collaborator Stephanie Brodeur and I made The Personal Soundtrack Emitters in the early 2000s as art school undergraduates - steampunk was not on our radar at the time. We were preoccupied with hacking into things to find meaning and busy improving our skills in the woodshop. When this work was made, iPods were becoming more pervasive and being criticized because they were seen to disconnect people from their surroundings. We tried to do the reverse of this by connecting people to the environment by using amplification and more 'natural' materials. Though these devices can act like stethoscopes for people to

intensify their sound environment, they are just as immersive as listening to music on headphones. In a sense, they swap hi-techno fetishism for low-tech fetishism and I'm not sure if that is really a subversive design, as it is yet another escapist electronic device. That said, I do think that emphasizing the low-tech can lead to more resourceful and sustainable approaches to design.

In most of your works you "unveil" invisible sounds or physicals forces (both invisible by definition) that are already present, framing them in a visible context that can be experienced first hand. Do you think that "making" practices connected to audio are mainly related to this "unveiling" practice? Do you consider it somehow related to the approaches developed in media archeology research practice?
Whether it is in the form of sounds, invisible electromagnetic radiation, or ripples of current occurring at the internal circuitry level, noise is intrinsically tied to electronic technology. Though electricity can be controlled, when coursing through a circuit, it can also be highly susceptible to external forces. One only needs to place a mobile phone in proximity to household speakers to hear the pulsating interference that foreshadows an incoming call. Within media arts, there are artists that seek to glean this noise as it leaks out of communication technology because it can offer critical entry points into the intangible forces at play within technological environments. For me, coaxing these invisible effects out of consumer technology deemed obsolete or dead allows me to do a form of post-mortem investigation. Dissecting and reviving old technology allows me to inhabit the dark mess hidden inside the machines of capitalist culture.

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