

When instruments become architecture : On liquefying frozen music

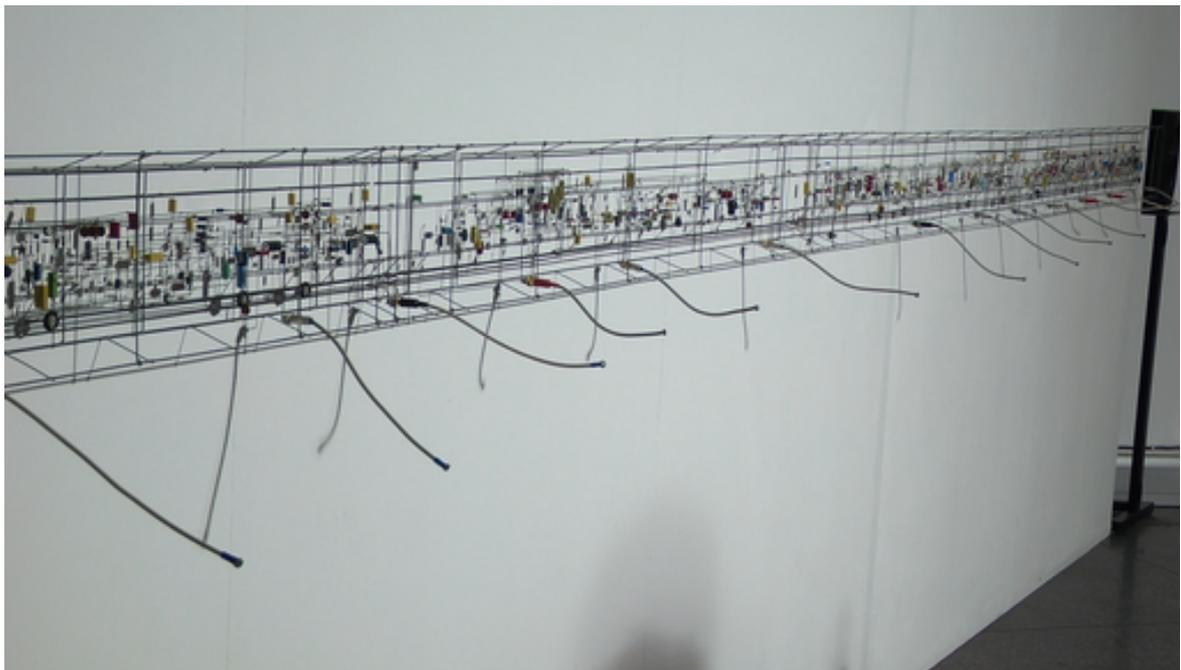
Thor Magnusson

What happens when you aestheticise the musical instrument? Conceive of it as a sculpture? Aesthetics in the design of musical instruments have been an important part of organology since early times. Form often surpassed functionality with diverse decorations and minor details added to the instrument's overall value. However, although the characteristic ornamentation of 17th and 18th century instruments began to diminish (the cellos lost their female breasts for example) acoustic instruments never fully embraced the modernistic design principles we find in 20th century architecture and design. Acoustic musical instruments are still made in the spirit of 19th century design; fossilised in time in their incredibly slow evolution.

Not so in the world of electronic instruments: for more than a century new electronic instruments have been invented, innovated, gained popularity or fallen into oblivion. Tradition is not the name of this game but rather experimentation, pioneering visions, and the revolutionary in terms of human-instrument relations and musical expression. As opposed to acoustic instruments, the design is modernistic, functional, and simple. Key dictates in modernist architecture and design are followed, where function is emphasised through exposing and embracing the active structures of the objects we use or live in. The perfect example of such architecture might be the Centre Pompidou in Paris, where the architects Piano, Rogers, and Franchini decided to invert the building with the pipes, ventilation and staircases placed exterior to the building.



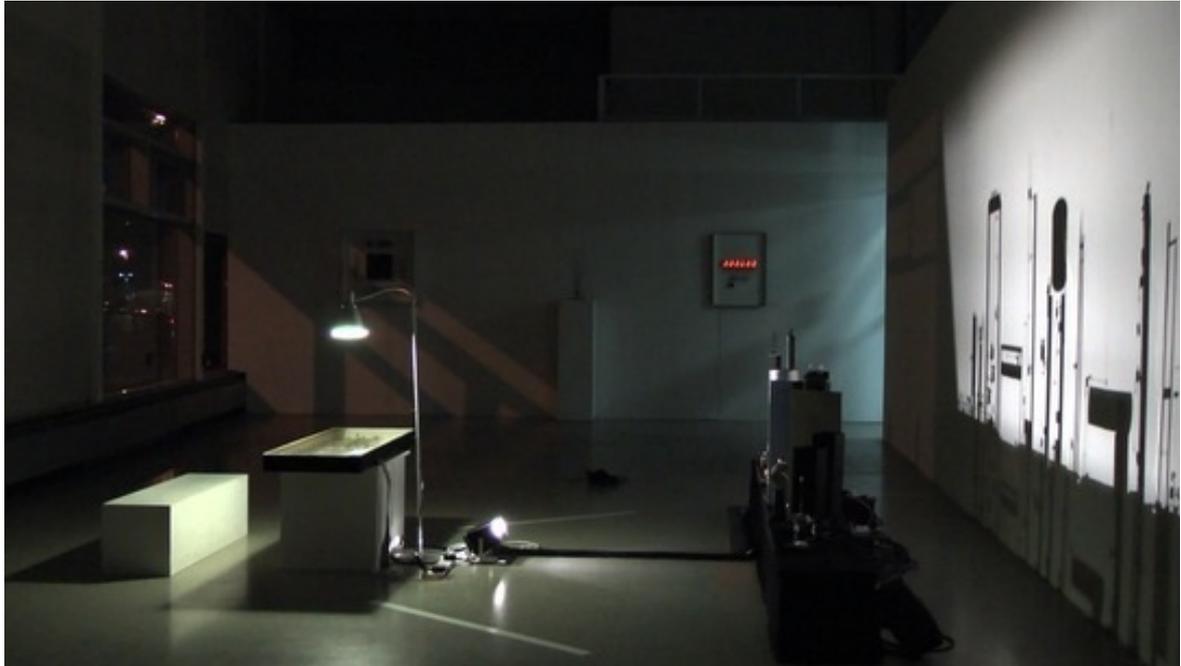
So we may ask the question again: how would we aestheticise the electronic instruments of today? A clear and direct attempt in engaging with this question can be found in the work of Peter Vogel. His work need not necessarily be defined as musical instruments, but they are certainly objects of sonic interaction. The objects are functional and spatially laid out. Ornamentation is absent, yet the pieces exude beauty. Every sensor, cable, transistor, capacitor, or speaker are visible and architecturally placed in a nervous system of electricity that feels alive; as a system of sonic consciousness or a homeostatic cybernetic being. The instrument has been inverted, expanded in space, and as a result become a sculpture.



Due to their sculptural or architectural nature, these instruments are not to be packed in a bag and played in the typical pub gig. They are rather to be placed on walls, on the floor, or on podiums where the audience explores the instrument through engagement and interaction. The observer becomes a player of a piece that is both visual and musical. Indeed, the sculptures themselves reference musical scores, as the elements of capacitors, transducers and such, equally represent the sound, just like notes on staves, but at an abstract level. The sounds are typically simple low-bit waveforms, resulting from the rough and primitive electronic ingredients used in the works. The speakers are small, placed on walls or wires, without a body that could emphasise the deeper sound frequencies. Emphasising the location of sound in space becomes an important element: speakers point in different directions or are placed far away from each other, creating attractions and forcing the audience to move through the space in order to engage with the work.

Vogel's art encompasses both temporal and spatial dimensions. Even in his robotic music ensembles, largely appearing as non-interactive, the three dimensional form of the robot musicians are reduced to two dimensional drawings through the use of light and

shadows. As listeners, the audience is tempted to approach the robots and explore them, but as spectators they have to stay behind the light source, or else breaking the play of shadows. This delicately maintains the traditional stage/auditorium, performer/audience division, but only accidentally since the interested viewer can enter the space between light and robots thus joining the play of shadows, once again placing interaction as an important element of the work.



Vogel's pieces are thus characterised by a certain triangle of instrument design, sound, and interaction. As such, the label of sound art would be a limiting definition of his work: in his case most labelling is bound to be reductive since the work involves sound, music, instrument design, sculpture, architecture, choreography, cybernetics, interaction, and more. Initially the spectator is faced with an architectural structure supporting a cybernetic system, but when engaged with, the focus on physical form is moved into that of immaterial sound that reacts to the audience behaviour. Not instruments, not sound art, not mere interactions, Vogel's work extends beyond such definitions in its embracing of sound and silence, light and shadows, sonic and physical movement, kinaesthetics and aesthetics, temporal and spatial dimensions, control and autonomy.

~~ A commissioned essay written for Peter Vogel's *Sound of Shadows* Exhibition ~~

~~ Brighton, 2011 ~~