ARTSLANT Los Angeles

Closed Circuits and Bodies Electric

by Janet Oh

For *Maize Mantis* at The Kitchen this past October, Sergei Tcherepnin created an amalgam of dance performance, musical composition, and theatre. In this project drawing partly from Sergei Diaghilev's production of *Feu d'Artifice* and incorporating paintings by Lucy Dodd and Kerstin Brätsch, the audience witnessed a host of characters—including wolves, jellyfish, and basketball players—whimsically navigate a landscape of light and sound. At the sonic height of the work, small metal sheets attached to transducers lowered into the audience, creating a force field of sound that reverberated throughout.

This multi-media performance illustrates a greater sensory and transformative experience that results from the involvement of human bodies within a closed technological system. Here the transformation occurred at a metaphorical level—with the artist "turning paintings into characters"—and at a physiological level—with audience members acting as secondary repositories for the sound already transferred from transducer to speaker (i.e., the metal sheets). As felt in this performance, the body acts as an agent that receives and thus allows these processes to occur and serves as a necessary component in an artistic circuit embodying technology, audience, and sensory experience.

Sergei Tcherepnin, *Ear Tone Box (Pied Piper Recedes)*, 2013, Microsuede, wood, copper, silk, transducers, amplifier, iPod, 16 x 16 x 18 in / 41 x 41 x 46 cm.

Image courtesy of Murray Guy, New York

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Tcherepnin largely employs transducers, displayed in simplistic sculptural forms, and various everyday objects, such as a subway bench, to orchestrate acoustic and physical experiences. *Ear Tone Box (Pied Piper Recedes)* (2013) invited visitors to sit on a chair and place their heads inside of a box immersing them in various pitches. When heard in synch, the physiological phenomenon of perceiving differential tones occurred. Also known as Andreas Sorge's or Tartini's tones, this "third" tone can be heard when two pitches sound simultaneously and at the requisite intensity. The number of vibrations of this physiologically produced tone is equal to the difference between the two primary tones. Here the sitter experienced an element of the work that exists solely with and within the body and its sensory systems. Tcherepnin's oeuvre considers how sound is not only experienced and received, but made different by its own internal systems.

The alchemy of transforming one thing to another to complete a process plays out in the work of Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer as well. In his well-known *Pulse Room* installations, for example, viewers touch an apparatus that takes their pulse. In response, an adjacent light bulb blinks on and off, matching the rate of the latest visitor-participant's heartbeat, before advancing down the queue of hundreds of other bulbs. Other installations, like *Wavefunction* (2007) and *Under Scan* (2005), use motion sensors to track viewers' movements, and the artworks behave accordingly: a grid of 50 to 100 chairs mimics the gesture of the passing body, moving up and down in waves; bodies projected on the floor follow visitors as they walk around a room.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Levels of Nothingness, Performers 1*, 2009, Guggenheim Museum, New York City, New York, United States.

Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kristopher McKay

Indeed, Lozano-Hemmer's artworks operate in the space where the viewing body becomes the performing body as it encounters his technological interventions. These artworks also leave room for productive error. In his 2009 performance *Levels of Nothingness* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, language spoken by the performer or audience member through the funnel of machine translation provided input for the theatrical lighting in an auditorium. This work drew from Wassily Kandinsky's *Yellow Sound*, the artist's Gesamtkunstwerk not realized until 1982, well after his lifetime. From the podium Italian actress Isabella Rossellini read a selection of key philosophy texts on perception and color, all while a computerized mic worked in real time to gather information on her pitch, amplitude, speed, accent, and intonation. The collective data then cued colorful lights aimed into the audience while viewers could read the text interpretation on a screen. Though not intuitively evident in the light show, the misunderstandings that occurred manifested themselves in translated text, underlining the ever-present inability of machines to fully understand human language with its variations and individual character. The misalignment of the voice-to-text translation in time with Rossellini's live reading produced an imperfect, mechanical synesthesia—that is, assuming synesthesia could ever be perfect in nature.

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Tcherepnin and Lozano-Hemmer stand in a long line of artists who have united the body with sound, gesture, and circuitry. In more distant memory, frequent artistic partners Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman utilized technological apparatuses to process input in their Fluxus performances. Comprised of two miniature TVs fashioned as bra cups, their seminal collaboration *TV Bra from Living Sculpture* (1969) integrated the human body into technological media in what appeared at first to follow the vein of classical music performance. By playing her cello, Moorman could feed sound through a processor that would generate and transform it into live images on the screens. The high-voltage wires added an element of danger not usually associated with the functional undergarment, portraying Paik as a mad scientist at work. "*TV Bra* is one third of [the piece], I'm one third of it, and my cello is one third of it. When we're all together, the work is complete," Moorman expressed in 1976.

Charlotte Moorman, *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, 1976, Performance at Art Gallery of New South Wales, 5th Kaldor Public Art Project, Sydney, Australia. © Art Gallery of New South Wales. Photo: Kerry Dundas

Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974) considers technology and bodily presence from a more meditative stance. In this installation, a Buddha sculpture sits in front a TV monitor projecting an image of the Buddha back to itself through closed-caption video. Ancient deity likeness and evolving technology meet face to face in an endless loop of looking and being seen. In 1974, Paik himself sat in place of the antique immortal, implicating himself in this circuit and reflection on humans' not-quite-resolved relationship with technology.

The presence and participation of body as agent, medium, or receptacle in artistic, technological circuits provides for more than just a compelling experience. These works, among many others, go beyond merely requiring a performative act and instead allow a human figure to play a vital part in experiencing, enabling, translating, or transforming completely a gesture or sound. Skeptics might worry about the place of physical bodies in an increasingly plugged-in techno-dependent landscape. But, as artists like Tcherepnin and Lozano-Hemmer demonstrate, technology doesn't have to alienate, and in many ways it's subject to wonky limitations, as humans are; instead, it can create wonder, intimacy, and a deeper awareness of our physical bodies. And artists—enlisting their bodies, and ours—can provide a platform for greater and oftentimes unpredictable possibilities. *Stay tuned*, they might say.

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