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ELEKTRA, BIAS Communicating Vessels: The Mechanics of Cultural Reappropriation

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P erhaps because of its association with the new International Sound Art Biennial, the 16th edition of the Elektra International Digital Festival seems to have expanded its usual scope to a number of other venues. Aside from Elektra's headquarters at Usine C, where most E16 events took place, one could see and hear works associated with BIAS at the Cinémathèque québécoise, the de Gaspé Complex, Phi Centre, and the Society for Arts and Technology. The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal was one notable addition this year. Whether intentionally or not, *Post-Audio* mirrored the theme of *The Post-Photographic Condition* embraced by this year's Mois de la Photo à Montréal (2015). Going beyond the boundaries of categories and disciplines now seems a well entrenched practice in both the visual and sound arts.

E16 and BIAS did not merely present an exploration of how sound is perceived on its own but also how it is perceived in relation to the image, to our sensorium in its entirety, and, ultimately, to our psyche. This expanded understanding of the listening experience came in a diversity of formats (concerts, installations, performances) and approaches (audio-visual, sound, multisensory, immersive). E16 was very broad in scope and presented works by over 30 international artists who work in the digital realm on the fringes of the sonic and the visual, combining DJ culture with experimental, high and low brow cultures, and traditional music. BIAS[1] assembled an eclectic mix of sound art practitioners, most of whom seemed totally at ease operating in an open concept format, in which cultural or disciplinary boundaries, when there were any at all, were increasingly permeable. It would seem that we have reached a critical mass. There is now an open exchange between disciplines and high and low cultures for practitioners of electroacoustic music, sound, and visual arts.

The erosion of disciplinary boundaries, major and minor genres, or high and low brow forms has been at play in the Western fine art system at least since the 19th century. At the turn of the 20th century, the Dadaists, Futurists, and Surrealists would spark outrage for their habit of appropriating images, objects, and sounds from mass culture (popular cultural artifacts, objects, and noise music). The emergence of new art forms and multisensory mediums (environmental, installation, performance, video art) in the late 1950s and early 1960s only served to confirm the vision's loss of centrality over the visual arts (or hearing's over music) and the new tendency towards the cross-pollination of disciplines.[2] By the 1990s, when then director of MoMA, Kirk Varnedoe, wrote about high and low cultures in a catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition of the same name,[3] these two phenomena were already well established in visual arts practice. Parallel to this, and very much beholden to this collapse, sound art had arisen in the early 20th century, developing further from the 1980s onwards.[4] In the current context, even though questions regarding categories such as pre-analogue and analogue, audio and post-audio, digital and post-digital still persist (as was evident at Montrealissimo's panels on digital art), free trade between categories and genres asserts itself as one of the main characteristics of the moment.

One of the most salient examples of this is the use of the staging, apparatus, and audio-visual vibe of Electronic Dance Music (EDM). EDM was long viewed as a European phenomenon that never quite made it across the pond and was relegated to the fringes in North America. Today, however, EDM and rave culture have gone mainstream.[5] Early on, rave culture favoured populous, multisensory, immersive and prosocial experiences in which uninhibited ravers, their limbic systems all jacked up, danced the night away in a throbbing, affectionate sea of bodies. At over 125 BPM, the pulsating EDM rhythm now beats at the heart of Elektra/Mutek and, to
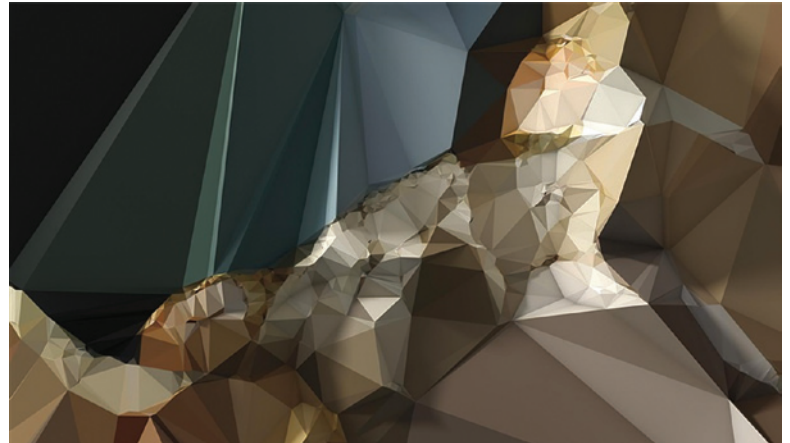
Quayola, *Topologies - Tiepolo, Immacolata Concezione*, 2010.
HD video, stereo sound, video play.

a lesser degree, of BIAS as well. Whatever its antecedents, high and low cultural practitioners have adopted EDM. Like rap and hip hop before it, EDM is burrowing its way into the fabric of most musical genres. This is an unstoppable global phenomenon, affecting everything in its wake.

Some questions arise post-E16/BIAS: How can we measure the impact on our bodies and minds of the synthetic stream of stimuli targeting our senses on a daily basis? Furthermore, has the global dissemination of high and low cultures through the same social media led to their fusion?[6]

With these thoughts in mind, I considered Paul Prudence's *Lumophore II*, a guided tour inside the heart of an atom, which was presented at the Satosphere. Best-viewed sitting or lying on the floor, this immersive experience could easily have fit in at Coachella, Glastonbury, or Osheaga, under the heading of miscellaneous synth-psychedelia. It should be noted that most of the works presented at E16 focused on a high level of connectivity between sound and visual components, which is hardly surprising in this context. For example, Alpha presented a controlled live experience, playing with the boundaries between perceptual fields, which emphasized visual and sound spatiality. The very dynamic collaborative performance between Diamond Version + Ito was a huge hit with the crowd. As EDM is a genre that originally favoured synth keyboards and drum machines over guitars, it was particularly surprising to watch the reintegration of a guitar-like solo instrument. Seen in this digital context, Ito's riffs on the Optron (a modified fluorescent tube device) seemed like an exponentially digitized version of *Guitar Hero,* but one requiring much greater skill.

Of the works produced by duos, *Bosozoku* by DUB-Russell and Yasuyuki Yoshida was for me one of the most significant works of E16. One of the video's sources of inspiration is *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, a science fiction novel in which the author, William Gibson, reappropriated the concept of *bosozoku* and cyberpunked it. The title also refers to tribes of disillusioned teenagers, former kamikaze war veterans, who channelled their daredevil impulses by running in biker packs and creating mayhem wherever they went. Yoshida's visual contribution attests to the numerous neological shifts that the term, and cultural phenomenon, have undergone. The music video is alterable and Yoshida modifies sequences in real time using patch-throughs. DUB-Russell's sonics offered a greater variety of beat patterns

than the usual "four-on-the-floor" uniformity of EDM, revving up to a good 140 BPM (beats per minute). The video portion borrowed heavily from high and low Japanese culture: images collected from the Internet (manga and theatre characters, Buddhas, and of course the obligatory canines and felines). Yoshida improvised with this street aesthetic (popular icons, idioms, and kitsch) in a perpetual stream of endless variations at bosozoku[7] speeds and in an infinite regress.

Quayola presented two video works entitled *Topologies*, which are based on paintings held in the Prado's collection: *Las Meninas* by Velazquez (1656) and *Immacolata Concezione* by Tiepolo (1767-68). Having spent much of my career teaching perspectivalisms and how to identify diagonals, horizon lines, and focal points in paintings, it was such a pleasure to watch his videos demonstrate the logic, structure, and mathematical properties of a composition through triangular tiling. The work attests to the artist's great skill at establishing links between centuries and scopic regimes. Just as the videos gradually made visible the compositional elements of the paintings, so too the synth sound seemed to mimic the gradual uncrumpling of aluminium foil, the Zen atmosphere thus contrasting sharply with the higher octane BPM heard throughout many of the Usine C events.

Part of BIAS, but presented at Usine C, Myriam Bleau's *Soft Revolvers* was a dream-like work. It consists of four specially designed spinning tops that wirelessly transmit data to a computer using special software, each of which can be played like a distinct instrument corresponding to a sound or voice. Spinning the haloed tops in stops and starts, the artist cited hip hop scratch culture, varying the degrees of speed and intensity, thus affecting the legibility or quality of the sounds produced. The accompanying live video feed taken from a camera placed above the performance table was reminiscent of a cooking show setup. It gave the performance a very high level of immediacy and allowed the audience to be privy to the artist's manipulations in real time, thus offering a surreal, hypervigilant take on the EDM DJ trope.

The trend towards interdisciplinarity and the democratisation of cultures was still very much in evidence on the evening I visited the Studio Multimédia of the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal, during which two professors, Louis Dufort and Martin Bédard, presented an evening of *Nouvelle musique numérique*. The program was comprised of young composers experimenting with visualized, multi-track electroacoustic music,[8] some of whom would have easily felt at home in the EDM context of E16.

While many of the works in BIAS integrated artifacts from quotidian and low culture, they remained, for the most part, more conceptual in nature and closer to high culture. The first BIAS event was a dramatic staging of a work entitled *Nyloïd*, CodAct's giant, torsion-propelled insectoid. I imagined the post-arachnid progeny of Louise Bourgeois' *Maman* (1999) as having finally emerged from its capsule and attempting to walk on its own, unsuccessfully, for the first time. A sound track comprised of a number of fragments evoking infantile babblings seemed to accentuate this impression.

Several works borrowed alternately from pre-analogue, analogue, and digital modes and periods of production. Nicolas Bernier's *Frequencies (Friction)* demonstrated the beating pattern phenomenon by combining the signal produced by an analogue oscillator stabilized at 479.5 Hz with the sound of a tuning fork resonating at B-480 Hz. For the artist, this friction occurs not only between frequencies but also between disciplines (sound art and physics) and historical periods of sound experimentation.[9] A difference of only 0.5 Hz will produce an interference beat every 0.5 seconds. The resulting compression and rarefaction of air will cause the listener's eardrum to vibrate wildly. These beats are produced during the act of hearing, the act of perception and reception of the work. By juxtaposing a tuning fork and an oscillator, Bernier underscores the importance of the beating pattern in the advent of the diatonic scale, the well tempered keyboard instrument, and Western musical tradition in general.

Both Bernier's *Frequencies (Friction)* and The User's *Coincidence Engine One* hark back to the rich history of experimentation in electroacoustic music and sound art. *CEO* is an homage to Ligeti's *Symphonic Poem for 100 Metronomes* (1962). Twelve hundred identically designed clocks are arranged in the shape of an amphitheatre. They tick away until the batteries run out (up to eight months), lasting much longer than Ligeti's metronomes (20 minutes). The resulting clatter is much like a mechanical rainstorm. The disquieting familiarity of the work is inextricably linked to the ritual evoked by the alarm clock. Here, its principal function has been subverted. These clocks won't wake anyone up.

While the concept of high brow art and music has not been entirely eliminated from E16 and BIAS, the categorical opposition between high and low, and even more so, the taboos once associated with popular culture have been abolished, allowing for a more eclectic range of references on either side of these divisions. The participating artists all seem to draw from, add or subtract to the same source, producing a constant flow of remixes. As in communicating vessels, the various elements, whatever their point of origin, seem to reemerge as one liquid substance, in a remarkable demonstration of the mechanics of cultural reappropriation.

Francine Dagenais

Nicolas Bernier, *Frequencies (Friction)*. Photo: Isabelle Gardner.

Francine Dagenais has worked as an essayist, theorist, and art historian in the field of visual and media arts for over twenty years. Her essays have appeared in many specialized magazines, such as *Art Tomorrow* and *Intermédialité*s, and recently in *Drone*, a publication put out by Mois de la Photo à Montréal (2013). As a curator, she has organized several events and exhibitions for artist centres, universities, and organizations such as ISEA. She lives in Montreal.

1 Underlining the first BIAS, which ran from May 13 to 17, 2015, was a gentle educational approach, integrating round table discussions (with The User), the very interesting, mindful listening series Immerson, curated by France Jobin at Oboro, along with other mediational events. For example, the video installation *Resonant Architecture*, realized by Nicolas Maigret, Jeremy Gravayat, and Nicolas Montgermont and shown at the FOFA Gallery at Concordia University, assembled a sumptuous videographic archive of ambitious sound architecture projects, set in both industrial and urban landscapes, that referred to the architectural and sculptural underpinnings of sound art's inception.

2 For further reading on visuality and scopic regimes, see art historians Jonathan Crary and James Elkins.

3 Gopnik, Adam, and Kirk Varnedoe. *High and Low: Modern Art, Popular Culture*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991.

4 The term "sound art" can be traced back to the exhibition "Sound/Art" organized by William Hellerman at the Sculpture Center in New York. See Hellerman, William, and Don Goddard. *Sound/Art*. New York: The Sculpture Center, 1983.

5 Bainbridge, Luke. "Acid House and the Dawn of a Rave New World." *The Guardian*. 23 Feb. 2014. Web. May 29, 2015. < http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/feb/23/acid-house-dawn-rave-new-world>.

6 By committing space belonging or contiguous to the MACM, the institution conferred heightened cultural significance to EM16 (Elektra & Mutek) and BIAS. This also seems indicative of a new mediation strategy that goes beyond the didactically conceived crowd-pleasing blockbusters, long favoured by the MBAM and MBAC, to festival-based, ambiance-generating events that address a younger demographic.

7 These images from Japanese popular culture are familiar even to Western audiences. For instance, who hasn't seen a *maneki neko* (a beckoning cat) somewhere at the door of a Japanese restaurant or boutique?

8 The line-up of composers for the evening was Simon Chioini and Félix Gourd, Simon Chioini, Michèle Bernier-Martin, Samuel Béland, Xavier Madore, Guillaume Cliché, Fernando Alexis, Matthew Schoen, and Line Katcho.

9 In this case, Bernier was particularly interested in his experiments with oscillators, *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969) and *Crossings* (1982), in which tones and sine waves are made to generate interference beats.