

Media Methodologies: Mystery or Definition in Technological Artworks?

Sid Volter

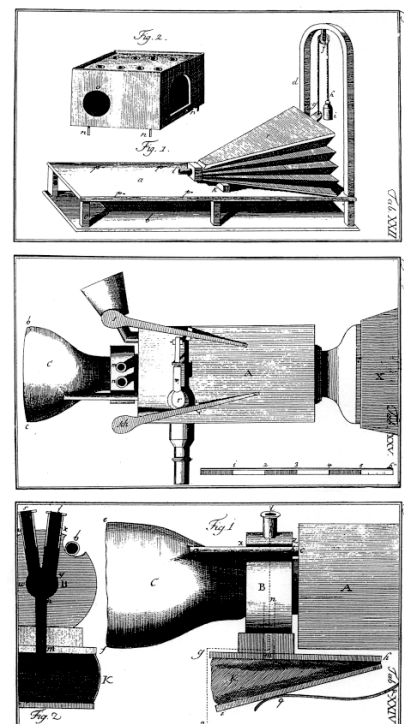
Introduction

In his lectures of 1950, compiled as the essay “The Question Concerning Technology”¹, the philosopher Martin Heidegger attempted to question the “essence” of technology. In the essay he sees modern technology as a ‘challenging’. It ‘sets upon’ the energies of nature, and stores this energy to be accessed. This is called *Bestand*, or ‘standing reserve’. In this way, in our entire worldview we see everything (not just technology – even people are included) as a resource, ready to hand, accessible. Now words like ‘access’ and ‘storage’, ‘speed’ and ‘efficiency’ are common when talking about computers. We judge how good a thing is by how efficient it is at doing whatever job it is defined as doing. A mug, for example, should be able to hold liquid and be very accessible. In contrast, a mug from another culture with different values may be highly decorative, like a Viking mug made out of bone which cannot be put down.

The most intriguing term he uses is *Ge-stell*, which is translated as “en-framing”. It is a complex word that is hard to summarise in a few sentences. *Ge-stell* is used partly to suggest a bookcase – things are named, archived, ordered, ready-to-be-accessed. Technology by its very nature sets out to define things. They are pinned down, defined in every more precise ways (high definition?). They are put into position, called when accessed, and judged at how well they fit in this definition. It is perpetually defining things. It is this tendency of defining things that I am interested in when dealing with technological artworks.

Early Technical Works: Speech Synthesis

In 1791 Wolfgang von Kempelen detailed his speaking machine² – a contraption designed to replicate the phonetic function of the human lungs, mouth, and nose. It was one of the first inventions that synthesised the human voice – a voice came from something that was not alive. It was a small wooden box with a bellows, the sound came from manipulating the ‘mouth’. The sounds came phonetically, unlike today’s modern computer speech synthesisers. The act of speaking was made deliberate and conscious – different to how we speak in real life, which is effortless and without thinking about the form. Kempelen himself was very much a showman, seen as a bit of a quack³, and the device never really caught on.

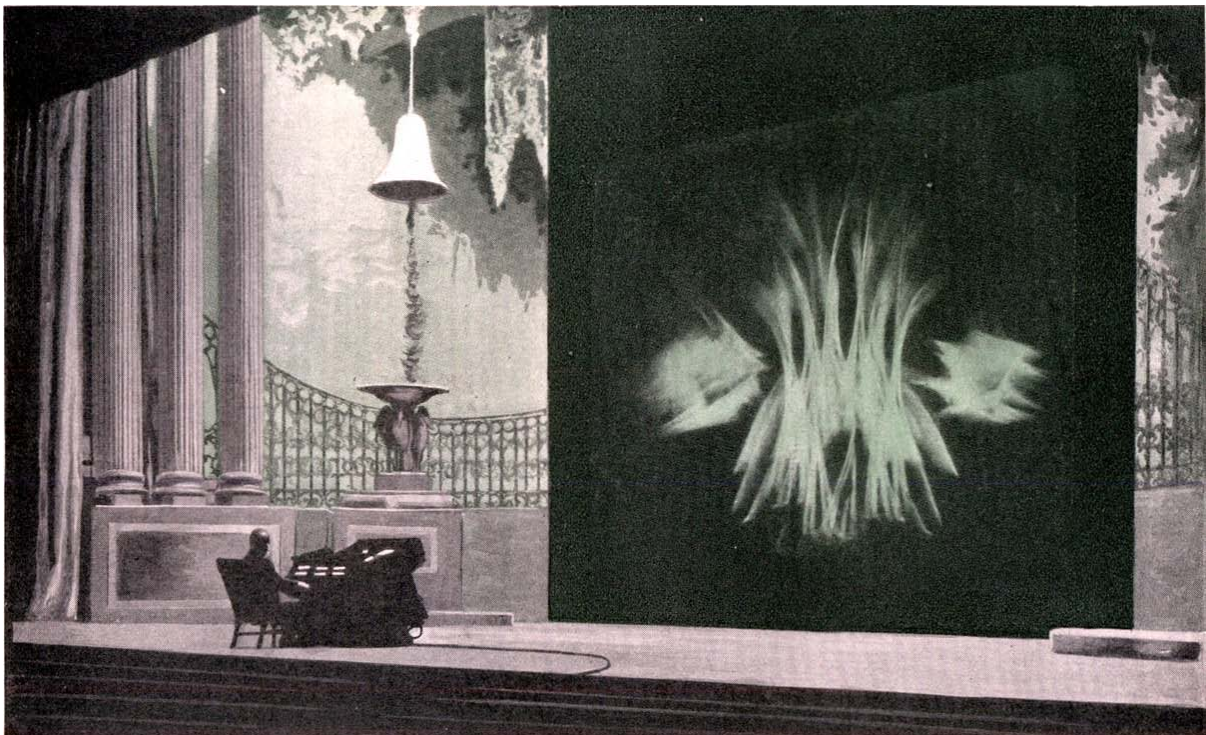


Colour Organ

The colour organ is an invention that has been tried many times in different forms. Basically it is an organ whereby colours are created by pressing the keys. The most successful have been Arthur Rimmington's and later Thomas Wilfred's Clavilux (1930). By pressing keys or numerous combinations, colours are called up in front of you and your audience. Scriabin, a Russian composer and reputed synaesthete, wanted one to play for his specially-designed piece *Prometheus : The Poem of Fire*, and suggested his audience wear white to accentuate the colours. Most interesting are the performances demonstrating the Clavilux, performed in complete silence (long before John Cage's 4.33'), in order to focus on the complex forms made by colours and prisms. Later perhaps succeeded by the video synthesiser, and now contemporary VJ performances (a push of a button or key plays a video / image)⁴



*Images of Wilson's Clavilux. The prisms would slowly move to form shapes and colours*⁵

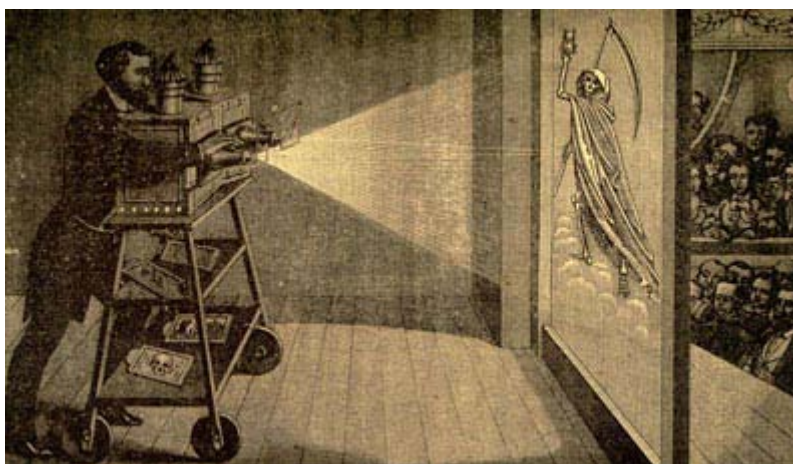


Phantasmagoria

The magic lantern has been recognised as the forerunner to the modern projection, the first 'slide projector' – an image with a candle behind to illuminate on the wall. Like the speaking machine, it appeared around late-18th century, often these were part of a much greater performance – the phantasmagoria, in which ghosts, angels, demons would 'appear' and frighten the audience. In the book 'Media Art Histories' Oliver Grau mentions this as a precursor to modern day 'immersive', sometimes interactive art⁶. I would however, like to note an important distinction. The 19th century audience would have had a shared consensus of belief – a time where electricity and radio-waves had supernatural connotations, and most were Christian so had a shared idea of what an angel and demon was. The show would be introduced by a stage performer, a practiced orator, who established a mood, a setting. The beliefs and emotions of the audience would be drawn upon, brought out and directed towards the projections, smoke, lights, smells. The mood would be set so that their thoughts of the supernatural would be expressed in the room. In turn, the technology would bring about that very definition, the shared consensus, of 'a ghost'. A modern interactive / immersive installation is far from this experience. Now we have multiple understandings available to us, we look at things intellectually, we seek to re-define meanings and re-interpret interpretations. In his book *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* Grau concludes:

*Utilising contemporary image techniques, immersive art very often visualizes elements that can be described as Dionysian: ecstatic transport and exhilaration.*⁷

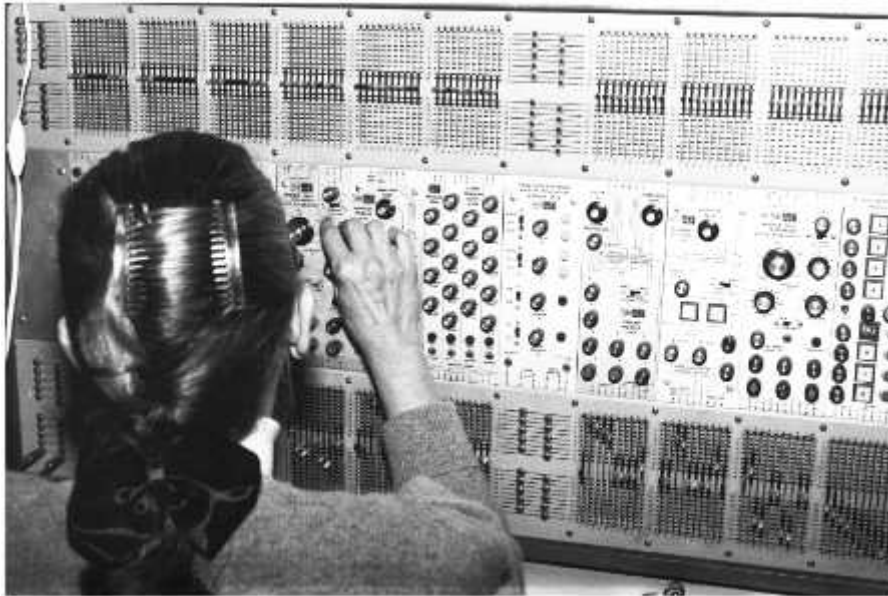
While Grau is very useful in tracing a much-needed genealogy of technological art forms, and he is developing a discussion here rather than making a definitive statement; I feel that very often this distinction is missed, which leads to the conclusions above. Judging a typical art installation one could controversially argue that the viewer is in more of a state of 'detached curiosity' than 'Dionysian ecstasy'.



*A projectionist hides behind screen showing archetypal 'death' to the audience*⁸

Eliane Radigue

In a recent article, Eliane Radigue – a composer working since the 1950s, primarily with the ARP Synthesiser – used the title “The Mysterious Power of the Infinitesimal⁹.” I found this combination of words interesting – firstly that power is found in miniscule changes; secondly that this huge amount of control can be seen as mysterious.



Eliane Radigue and the ARP 2500 synthesiser¹⁰

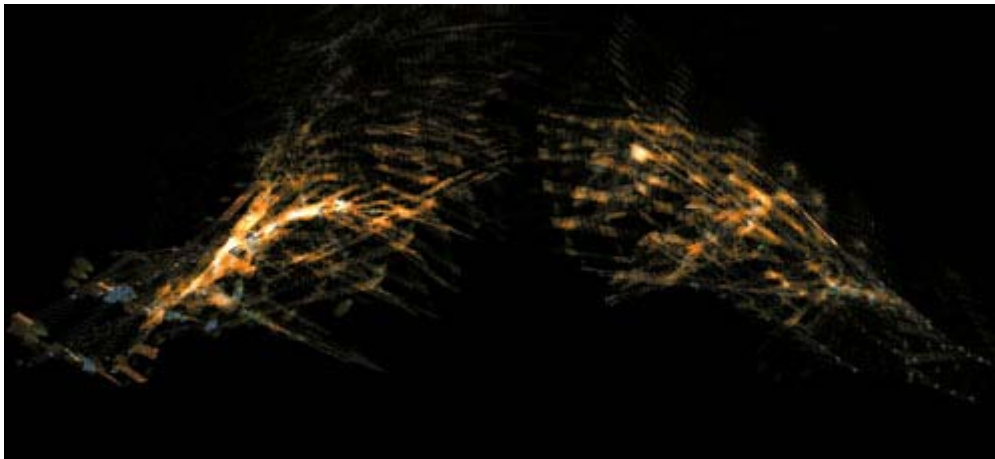
The old analogue synthesisers were large and had many dials, switches, and buttons, and they exemplify technology's quality of defining things by producing a result through supreme control of an audio signal. In the article, she reflects – how does this “mysterious alchemy” become sound, music? Or how does it become understandable as such? Eliane Radigue's compositions are highly methodical and meditative – she found an affinity to Tibetan Buddhism, which is something reflected in her work. It is the co-operation of the machine's access/control and human thought that causes the music. This is shown by Karlheinz Stockhausen's (a prolific 20th century composer of electronic music) use of 'aleatory' in his compositions – chance noises and sounds could occur within the structure of the piece. Rather like the speaking machine, her hands sculpt and form the shape of the resulting audio.

Granular Synthesis

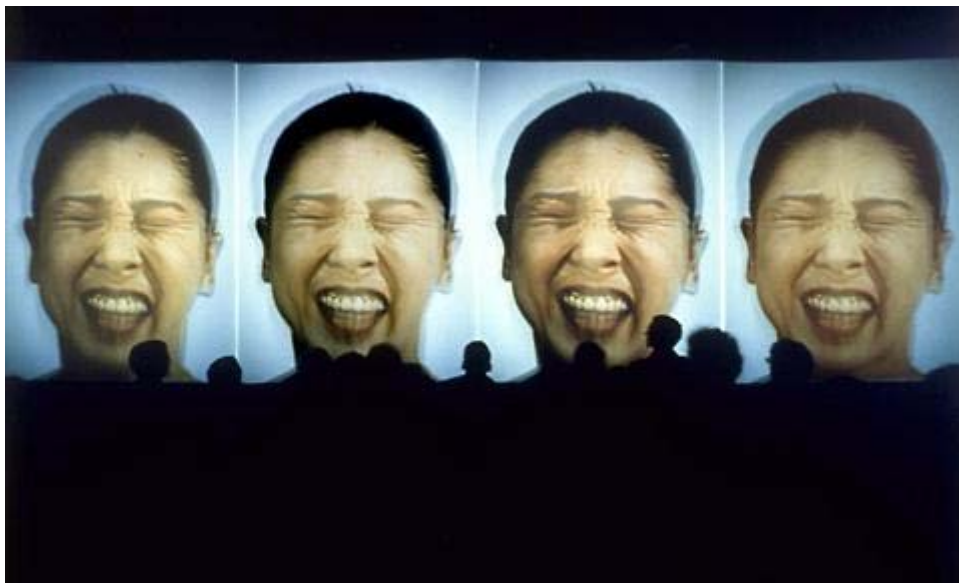
Granular synthesis is when small 'grains' of audio, milliseconds in length are repeated, which is then manipulated by a synthesiser. It is also the name of the collaboration between the artists Kurt Hentschlaeger und Ulf Langheinrich. Their most well-known piece is 'Modell 5' which uses this technique with video and audio. Using multiple projections of a woman who appears to be trapped in expression, the piece assaults the viewer in a barrage of manipulated motion and time. This is different to Eliane Radigue's pieces, based on single tones.

Instead pre-recorded video is cut, and manipulated. The technology becomes perversely analytical, it takes definition of the action to the extreme. There is a different kind of

mystery; it's more scientific, under the microscope – like the programme *'Inside Nature's Giants'* shown on Channel 4 where large animals were dissected for the wonder of the audience. The technological framework works to define something in ever more accurate ways, and the viewer is confronted with this (wo)man-machine form. This 'scientific' viewpoint is a quality in many 'media' artworks. For example, motion sensors help us investigate and redefine motion and perception by translating it into different visual forms. The current works by the Open Ended Group is one example of many. This tendency is precisely what Heidegger meant when he described technology's 'challenging' – of nature as an 'object of research'.



"Loops" (2001) - The Open Ended Group's work with Merce Cunningham studying the motions of dance and body movement¹¹



"Modell 5" (1994) Granular Synthesis¹²

Peter Christopherson / The Threshold HouseBoys Choir – A Time Of Happening (2007)¹⁴

Peter Christopherson is a member of Throbbing Gristle, an experimental “punk” band from the 1970s who used synthesisers and tape loops. He has been involved in many different projects, including the band Coil. He interests me in this context partly because he has always resisted the “arts world” and its associated contexts, which are often hard to escape once you define yourself as “an artist”. In my experience there are many things happening now that are relevant artistically but not always noticed because they don’t exist in the narrative of a respective field – music, art, film etc. Sometimes the need to define things in this way can be a problem. Fortunately however, modern technological art seems to be increasingly cross-collaborative,

Now living in Thailand, his audio work includes modern speech (or rather singing) synthesis and during his shows mixes recorded and live video and audio. This particular video series shows Thai traditions and practices that perhaps to Western eyes would appear strange and alien.



¹ Heidegger, Martin, 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated from German by William Lovitt. New York : Harper & Row

² Traunmüller, H, 2000. *Wolfgang von Kempelen’s Speaking machine*. Available at <http://www.ling.su.se/staff/hartmut/kemplne.htm> [Accessed 10 January 2010]

³ Imre, Angéla, 2004, *On The Personality of Wolfgang von Kempelen*, [Internet] Budapest : Eötvös Loránd University. Available at: http://www.uni-graz.at/ling2www_gls62_imre.pdf [Accessed 17 September 2009]

⁴ Summary of colour organ history available at:

<http://homepage.tinet.ie/~musima/visualmusic/visualmusic.htm> [Accessed 10 January 2010]

⁵ Images available from: http://www.iotacenter.org/store/videos/5_thomas_wilfred and http://davidszondy.com/future/music/clavilux_01.htm [Accessed 10 January 2010]

⁶ Grau, Oliver. 2007. Remember the Phantasmagoria! Illusion Politics of the Eighteenth Century and Its Multimedial Afterlife. In Oliver Grau, ed. *Media Art Histories*. Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2007, pp. 137-161

⁷ Grau, Olive. 2003. *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. Revised and expanded ed. Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, p. 339

⁸ Image available at: <http://www.visual-media.be/visualmedia-index.html> [Accessed 10 January 2010]

⁹ Radigue, Eliane. 2009. *The Mysterious Power of the Infinitesimal* Leonardo Music Journal, Vol 19 pp.47 – 49

¹⁰ Image available at: <http://kalvos.org/radigue.html> [Accessed 10 January 2010]

¹¹ The OpenEnded Group. Available at: <http://openendedgroup.com/index.php/artworks/loops-2001-present/> [Accessed 10 January 2010]

¹² Image available at: <http://www.granularsynthesis.info/ns/?goto=model%205> [Accessed 17 September 2009]

¹³ Rokeby, David *Installations : The Giver of Names (1990-)*. Images available at: <http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/gon.html> [Accessed 10 January 2010]

¹⁴ *The Threshold HouseBoys Choir – Form Grows Rampant 2007* [DVD] THBKK3