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Cultural Panorama

Light Becoming Sound

An Electronic Sensor Instrument in the Tinguely Museum, Basel

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One might expect to find wood and glue in the workshop of a manufacturer of musical instruments. In the studio of Sibylle Hauert and Daniel Reichmuth, however, it is circuit boards and micro controllers that are used to create new instruments.

The electronic instrument 'Instant City', which can be seen now in the context of the Varèse exhibition in the Tinguely Museum, was launched in Basel in 2003 and since then has been presented in different versions in many Festivals, e.g., during last year's Festival for New Music in Rümelingen. For the first time – and as a notable 'luxury variation' – it is now part of an extended exhibition. A new composition especially commissioned in this context would have been appreciated, but wasn't realized; still there are nine existing compositions to be heard, by, e.g., Gary Berger, Birgit Kempker and Daniel Weissberg.

cuboids. Varèse, who complained to 'dear Professor Theremin' that he lacked devices for producing electronic sound, would have liked this instrument. It is played by distributing semi-transparent cuboids or 'boxes' on a playing field under which there are optical sensors. The information of these sensors is conveyed to a well-concealed mini-Mac upon which the compositions and steering software run (written by Volker Böhm). The successive layers of the cuboids and the shadow they respectively cast determine how much light penetrates to the sensors. At first one doesn't notice that the measurement of light is being converted into sonic impulses, however, what is understood quickly is how one loads the different compositions – and exploring their various stylistics is by no means allowed only as a 'soloist': one plays as much with the instrument as with the other participants, or in the case of diverging conceptions of

sound, more so *against* them – with the placement and number of the building blocks a respective kind of ‘embankment’ or ‘fortification’ takes place.

In contrast, the composer is confronted with a much more difficult situation initially. A manual must be studied and the 256 blocks have to be comprehended as sound surfaces before the fine work can begin: the definition of tonal transformations based on the data supplied by the light sensors.

processors. Sensor instruments represent one of the most fascinating fields of electronic music; meeting with artists such as Sibylle Hauert and Daniel Reichmuth even increases this fascination because it’s possible to discuss both microprocessor-commands and artistic visions of human-machine interaction with the same passion. Bits and chip commands, however, are not featured at the center, rather human senses, acoustic, visual and tactile bodily and spatial resistance.

In addition to extending ‘Instant City’ as a kind of self-organizing distribution of sound surfaces, Sibylle Hauert and Daniel Reichmuth are already working on a further large-scale project, the sound and luminous wall ‘trickstr’.

>Museum Tinguely, Basel, until 27. August 2006. www.instantcity.ch

Instant City. Varèse would have liked this instrument. Photo: Annette Boutellier