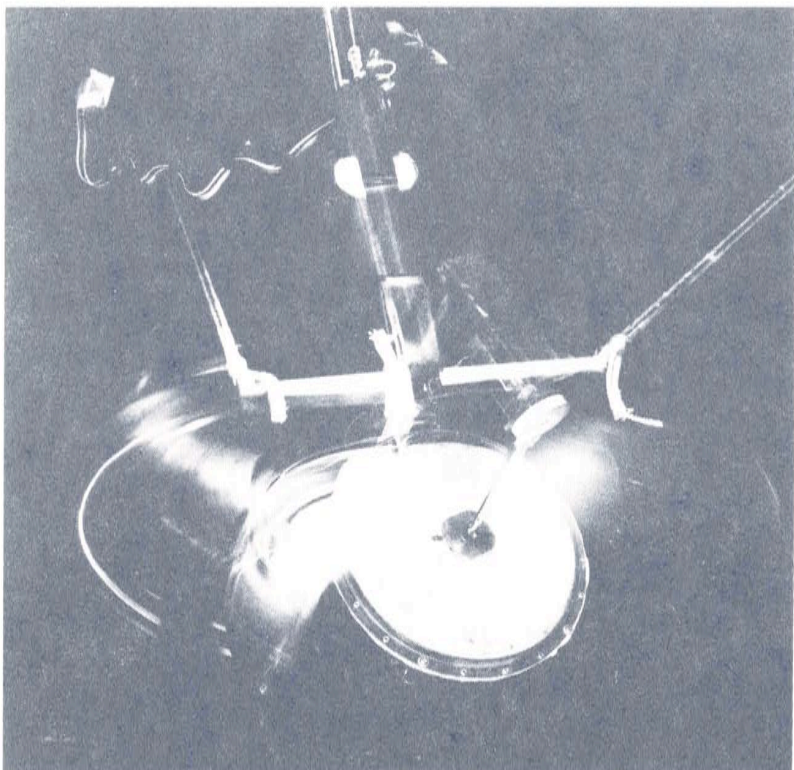


Matt Heckert
MATRIX/BERKELEY 153

University Art Museum/
Pacific Film Archive
mid September - late November
1992

Rotary Resonator, 1990



Matt Heckert's Mechanical Sound Orchestra consists of a variety of computer-controlled mechanical sound sculptures, several of which were created especially for the dramatic space of the University Art Museum's central atrium. While Heckert's sculptures are designed to produce sound, they are equally compelling in visual terms. The artist himself stresses their functional aspect, suggesting that it is their design as musical instruments that distinguishes them from the motion-for-motion's-sake kinetic work of artists such as Jean Tinguely and Naum Gabo.

Throughout the 1980s, Heckert was one of a trio of artists, along with Mark Pauline and Eric Werner, who developed the now-legendary art collective Survival Research Laboratories (SRL). His contribution to SRL's spectacular performances included the creation of various robot-like vehicles as well as the orchestration of elaborate and highly innovative soundtracks incorporating everything from polka music to industrial noise.

Upon leaving SRL in 1988, Heckert embarked on a solo career, focusing on the creation and performance of mechanical sound sculptures. While maintaining the raw, industrial edge that was the trademark of SRL, Heckert has refined an abstract, functionalist aesthetic reminiscent of High Modernist design. His spinning and gyrating circles and discs, for example, recall the kinds of machinery mythologized in Fernand Léger's film *Ballet mécanique*, 1924. Like Léger, Heckert utilizes machine forms in

such a way as to suggest a degree of personality and even dramatic interaction among the various moving elements. Rather than conveying the utopian vision characteristic of the Modernist machine aesthetic, however, Heckert endows his sculptures with simple motor functions that suggest hysterical or Sisyphean behavior.

Among his influences, Heckert cites the writing of Valentino Braitenberg, whose fancifully illustrated book, *Vehicles: Experiments in Synthetic Psychology*, describes simple robot machines endowed with only the most rudimentary perceptual and motor capabilities. Braitenberg argues that our perception of so-called "artificial intelligence" need not depend on the effects of super-powerful microchips, but can be achieved by creating the impression of responsiveness in a simple machine. Heckert shares Braitenberg's imaginative low-tech approach.

The sounds created during a performance of the Mechanical Sound Orchestra are generated exclusively by the machines in real time. Heckert does not utilize pre-recorded soundtracks or overdubbing. He does use computer programs that allow him to layer improvised passages—played on a computer keyboard—over pre-programmed motor sequences stored in the computer's memory. The computer also allows Heckert to control, or "conduct," a broad array of instruments simultaneously. The current installation of the Mechanical Sound Orchestra incorporates a computer program that will "play"

the machines at various times throughout the day.

Far from being simply a barrage of noise, Heckert's compositions have, in the words of one critic, "a harsh lyricism, with percussion and droning repetitive backgrounds blended with occasional and almost melodic choruses."¹ Heckert has described the character of his sounds as replicating those of everyday events in an urban, industrial society: one might recognize the clatter of factory machinery or the chugging drone of a truck engine.

Matt Heckert was born in Kent County, Rhode Island, in 1957. He now lives and works in San Francisco.

Lawrence Rinder

¹ John Voelcker, "Anthems for a Machine Age," *Metropolis*, June '92, p. 25.

Work in MATRIX:

Mechanical Sound Orchestra, sound sculpture installation commissioned by the University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 1992.

Live performances with special guest Stephanie Friedman:
21 September
5 October

Solo performances:
19 October
2 November
16 November

All performances 8 p.m. in the main atrium of the museum. Co-presented by Cal Performances. Ticket information (510) 642-9988.

Selected one-person exhibitions and performances:

San Francisco Artspace, "Mechanical Sound Orchestra" '90; Germans van Eck Gallery, NYC, and Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, NYC, "Mechanical Sound Orchestra" '92.

Selected group exhibitions and performances:

S.F. Arts Commission Gallery, Clocktower, New York, and The Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles, "San Francisco/Science Fiction," '84; CRASHarts Icehouse, Phoenix, Arizona, "Crash Grand Prix" '90; Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, Washington, "Low Technology: Artist Made Machines" '90; Exploratorium, San Francisco, "Tinkerer's Weekend" '91.

McCormick, Carlo. "Man and the Machine," *Paper* (June '92), p. 45.

Dery, Mark. "The Art of Crash, Hum, and Hiss," *Arts and Leisure* (15 March '92), p. 12.

Baker, Kenneth. "Body Sound: Other Music at Artspace," *San Francisco Chronicle* (3 March '90).

Voelcker, John. "Anthems for a Machine Age," *Metropolis* (June '92), p. 25.

Jan, Alfred. "Shake, Rattle and Roar," *Artweek* (8 Feb.) '90.

Bonetti, David. "Life on the explosive edge," *San Francisco Examiner* (14 Feb. '90).

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