

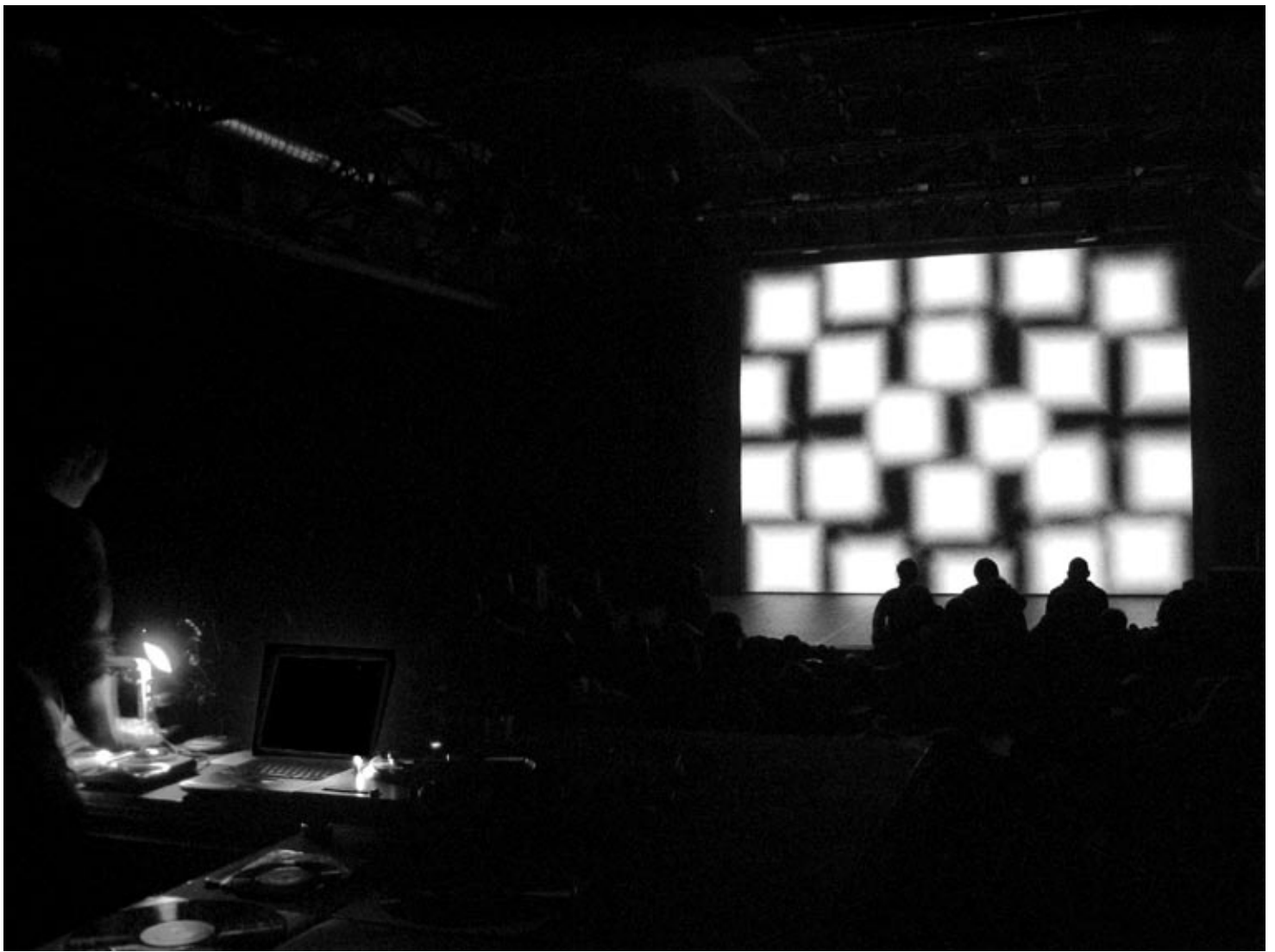


A text by
Maud Desseignes

Attempts to create exchanges and crossovers between different modes of aural and visual expression have occurred throughout the history of art. Sometimes more didactic than artistic, these experiments also provide an opportunity to reconsider the phenomenology of perception.

In November and December 2003, two propositions at the Laboratoires explored the possibilities of interaction between different artistic disciplines. Although the respective forms of these interventions were fundamentally different, both called into question the accepted codes of representation and the automatism of perception. *Surprise* [surprise(d)/plugged-in] was the wryly humorous title given by Michel Guillet and Manuel Coursin to the performance programmed at the last minute for the first public evening at the Laboratoires at the invitation of Marco Berrettini. Even before the show began, the objects¹ laid out before spectators raised questions: placed on a strange Siamese table comprising two head-to-toe parts, a “Petit Robert” dictionary that was just as intriguing because transfixed by female jacks; on the floor, a log, a blob of rubber, a double stool, a stiletto shoe, polystyrene, a microphone and wiring. As is his wont, Guillet composed an installation constituting a rebus of miscellaneous objects, subverting and extrapolating both their shapes and their nature. Each one had its own particularity, a functional deformation, a weirdness that endowed it with a hard-to-place identity.

Guillet was sitting at the controls close to the installation, while Coursin walked on stage. Casually, as if to assert the normality of his actions, he introduced a first wire into



Vincent Epploy/Antoine Schmitt, *Display Pixel 3*, 2003, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Nicolas Lossou

the holes made for that purpose in the dictionary, and began plugging in and manipulating the objects around it. Each action set off a new kind of sound, as if these strange objects were fitted with sensors amplifying micro-sounds that were themselves modulated or exacerbated in keeping with the handler's actions.

Thus interconnected with each other, sounds, objects and gestures seemed to mime hypothetical fictions. But the story was not linear. Actions and reactions followed on from each other without any detectable system or logic. The simultaneity of each act and its aural consequence was not always obvious, and was sometimes out of synch or even non-existent. However, even attentive spectators could sporadically be taken in by the situation: although reason suggested that none of these objects was capable of producing the slightest sound, the coincidence between what was seen and heard seemed sometimes to indicate such an interaction. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains, "perception does not at first present itself as an event in the world to which one might for example apply the category of causality, but as a recreation or reconstitution of the world at each moment."² The mind is "the subject of perception" and the body the "general

instrument of understanding". Because the senses function in an interrelated way, by a permanent play of connection in which each one is dependent on the others, whether by polarity, duality or power of simulation, perception is conditioned in its relation to what surrounds it. Thus, judging by the sight of the sound sources here, a log roared, a stiletto blipped and an eccentric stool functioned now like a theremin, now like an oversize walkman playing a loop of some stifled, rugged-voiced pop singer.

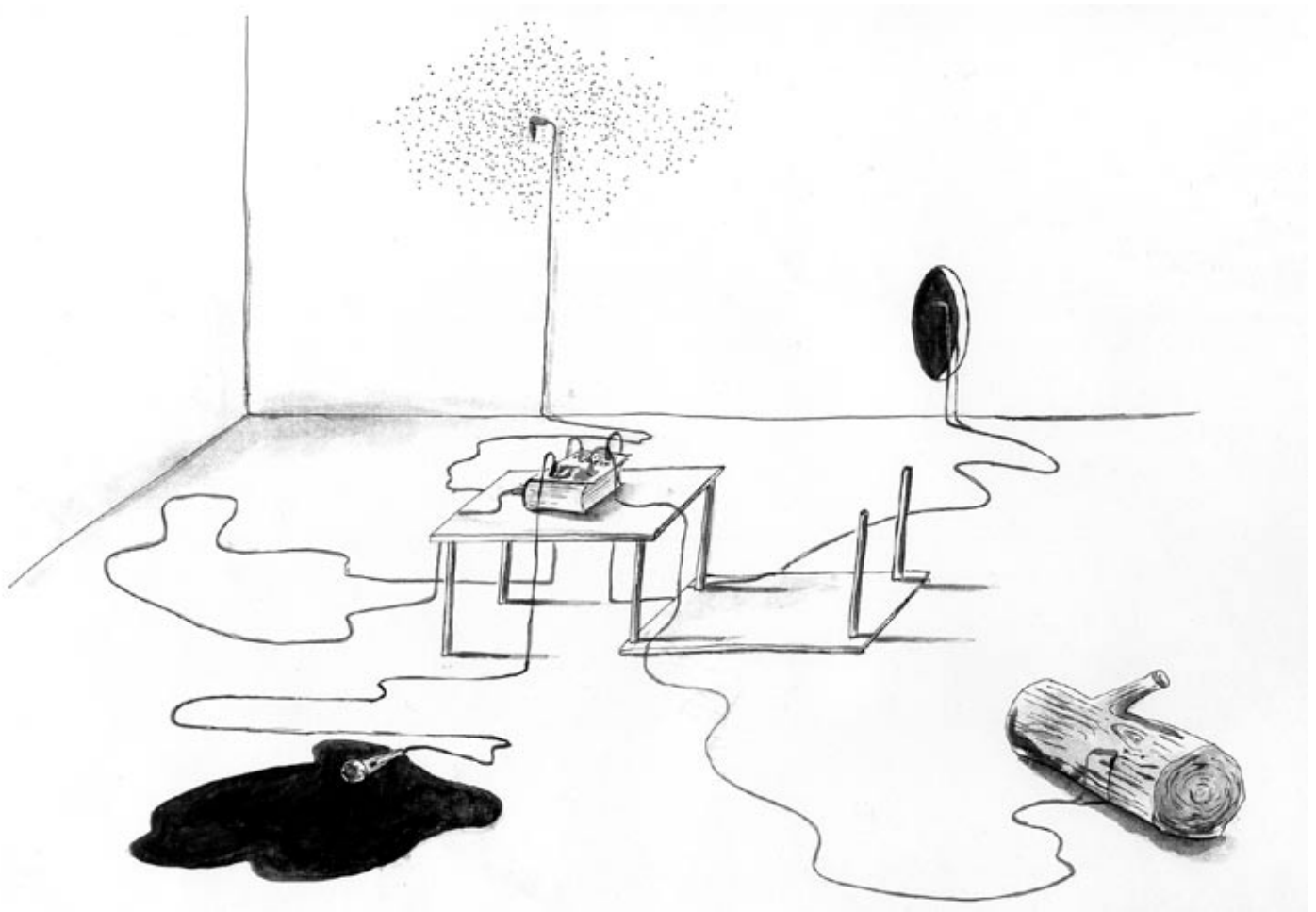
The clever interplay between the two artists created an artificial interactivity, a play of simulation that fooled the spectators' senses, putting them in a state of hesitation and perplexity. For Bachelard, simulation is not, as its etymology suggests, the ability to shape images of reality, but that of deforming images, of making images that surpass reality. Through this universe that contravenes the laws of reality, Coursin and Guillet spoke to the spectators' imaginations. The constantly destabilised mental space between what they saw, what they perceived and what they knew became a surface for projection. This lo-tech set-up—analogue sounds straight from Guillet's sampler synchronised with Manuel Coursin's cybernetic choreography, in a reciprocity waver-

1

These different objects had already been used in the installation *Supersilent* presented by Michel Guillet at Lieu Unique in the exhibition *Actif Réactif* in summer 2003.

2

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 240.



Michel Guillet, *Supersilent...*, 2003, sketching.

ing between efficiency and clumsiness—thus played games with the illusions of perception and questioned our relation to the real and the quotidian.

The synaesthetic set-up created by Vincent Epplay and Antoine Schmitt, *Display Pixel 3*, was of a very different kind. Here, the confrontation of image and sound was taken to such a pitch that we could apply the maxim that appears in the credit sequence of the film *Tönende Ornamente* (Sound Ornaments)³ by Oskar Fischinger: “You hear what you see, you see what you hear”. A mobile form on a screen became a score, the visible trace of the sounds. But beyond this illustrative coming together of aural and visual phenomena, *Display Pixel 3* led spectators into a real synoptic sequence in which the correspondence between the two fields occurred within a process of mutual contamination. Visual, semi-autonomous scenes programmed by Antoine Schmitt were enriched by electroacoustic sounds mixed by Vincent Epplay. They reacted to the sounds, memorising and replaying them. The sounds impacted the scenes, just as the scenes modulated the sound. Each in its own way led the manipulators into an improvised riff, following the feedback between the musician and the successive scenes.

The place occupied by the public, in the centre of the space, was integral to the set-up. The projection of Antoine Schmitt’s abstract forms on the giant screen was reflected back onto the faces of the spectators sitting on cushions on the floor and watching. The control area was at the back of the room, like an off-screen area where the activity of the artists could be surmised if not sensed. A double stereo sound system contributed to the feeling of total immersion by bathing the space in Epplay’s electroacoustic textures. The aim was to institute a moment of privileged listening, to generate signal receptiveness. In many of his pieces, Epplay is as much concerned with the conditions of installation, sound and reception as he is with the musical composition. Whether intended for ears individually (*Les cabines d’écoute*) or collectively (*Sound Corridor*, *Ebruitement des rochers parlants*), his installations constitute singular and utterly new moments of listening that invite viewers to reconsider their perceptual habits. Constant demands are made on the “attitude” of listening in order to make out the play of correspondences that is continually reinvented in *Display Pixel 3*. With names and graphic styles recalling the beginnings of certain video games, the sequences are all distinct and each functions according to its own specific logic. There is for example *Life*, a set of small, moving beads that react only to certain frequencies. *Invaders* takes the form of an aural ghost whose intensity and duration define the volume and duration of the sound. And in *Les Astéroïdes*, big white balls rebound against the sides of the screen and tumble over each other, chaotically replaying aural micro-fragments to the point of rhythmic saturation. The coexistence of aural and visual phenomena in accordance with this process of reciprocal contamination produces

a pixellated world in which abstract forms and sounds combine in a biological ballet. A whole world of sound objects in which the idea of a theatre of representation gives way to a session of radiation by signs, in which the screen serves as a kind of indicial image, an image of the microscopic—or macroscopic—observation of life. Trying to pin down a principle of causality that might govern the sequences, the spectators remain attentive to the effects and repercussions, to the actions and reactions, constantly aware of the complex activity behind them, totally involved in the process, redefining their positions as active listeners for the duration of a concert.

Sur Prise, sound installation by Michel Guillet, performed by Manuel Coursin. Shown at the Laboratoires on November 13-14-15, 2003.

Display Pixel / 3, concert by Vincent Epplay in collaboration with Antoine Schmitt, presented at the Laboratoires on November 20-21, 2003. Production Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers, with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Communication—Centre National des Arts Plastiques. Vincent Epplay is a sound artist, associate artist of the Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers in 2003-2004. He lives in Paris (France).

3
Film from 1932 marking the high point of Fischinger’s research into the interaction between sound and image.