

# THE MUSIC OF THINGS

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## 3. Making as a processual part of performance – Dark Electronics with Kanta Horio

When describing my own practice, I often state: "Performance begins on the workbench and as is extended on to the stage" (Richards 2008, p. 25). This has become my motto. The relationship between the making of musical instrument/sound devices and performing has been an on-going theme in my work as well as providing a rich vein for further research. Such a preoccupation illustrates my attempt to consider how to make sound (making) and what to do with sound (performing) as a holistic practice. Yet, I've continued to scrutinise the relationship between performance, workbench and stage; so, when coming to my final point, making as a processual part of performance, the distinction between these terms become blurred. After all, the performance space can become the workbench or the performance can become the act of 'live' making. Process of making and process music become one and the same.

There are precedents for making as a procedural part of performance in early Fluxus works. For example, Alison Knowles' #2 - Proposition is based on a simple event score with the instructions "Make a Salad"; and #2a - Variation #1 on Proposition "Make a Soup". Both of these event scores present making as 'the work' and involve readymade actions. I've also previously discussed the practice of making circuits on the spot 'live soldering', an example being the performances of the group Loud Objects, and drawn parallels between the field of live coding. Then there is the Breadboard Band who take a prototypical approach to constructing circuits in performance. In my own work, the idea of making as a performance became acute in Dirty Electronics: Solder a Score (2011) that was part of Live Weekends: Notation and Interpretation at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), London. The making and performance took place in the main lower gallery of the ICA over the duration of a week. Gallery attendees were able to watch the construction of circuits as if a living installation. At this stage I could discuss some of these performances and events in more detail. However, I want to focus on something topical and related to my current work.

As part of this visit to Japan, I'll collaborate with sound artist Kanta Horio to create a participatory event for the Sapporo International Art Festival (SIAF).<sup>1</sup> I'd previously worked with Kanta in the UK and Japan. His work combines light and sound, and the exploration of objects - the bringing to life of inanimate objects through generating electromagnetic fields. Through the movement and vibration of objects, sound is made. Kanta's work falls into the category of what could be called performance-installation. This year's SIAF has also been guest directed by Otomo Yoshihide whose aim was to put together a "citizen participatory art festival" where attendees are invited "to just get hands on, to create something with each other, and see what comes of it." (Yoshihide 2017) Many of the works and commissions for the Festival are site specific and seek to engage specifically with the local community.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://siaf.jp/>

Kanta Horio has been commissioned to create an installation for the Festival in an abandoned building in the neon-lit entertainment district of Sususkino, and this is where we also chose to stage our collaboration. Some of the floors in the multi-story building are without electricity, and there is a very dark windowless basement. As well as responding to the idiosyncrasies of the building and its electrical wiring and infrastructure, being in situ, ‘making’ in light, or the absence of light, became our starting point. I also wanted to investigate some of the core themes of my current work, namely making as a procedural part of performance. A simple event score and propositions for the work followed:

Darkness – a room without a window  
Make a sound circuit  
Blow into a whistle to generate electric current, light and sound  
A collective performance

And the propositions: “What happens when darkness descends on our workbench? And mains electricity becomes scarce and precious?” Some ideas for titles were discussed - Nocturne (night music), Night Birds (due to the generator ‘whistle’ and bird-like sounds of the circuits) - but we settled on the title Dark Electronics. I’d explored similar themes in the past, such as in the Dirty Electronics Ugly Weekender (2015), where DIY circuits were made in candlelight. But these works are not concerned with light and darkness per se, but how such limitations highlight the process of making, and change the relationship with materials, tools and other participants. The absence of light also naturally diminishes visual cues and emphasises the senses of sound and touch. This heightened experience could be thought of as a form of ‘acousmatic making’.

One of the main ideas behind working with these limitations was to question optimisation and efficiency in production. Through the reduction of light in the work environment, making a DIY sound circuit becomes a different proposition. The time needed to construct a circuit will be considerably longer. In a recent article, “Slipper Bows and Slow Circuits”, I wrote about slowing down the making of DIY circuits in participatory events to emphasise process over final outcome and to give “more time for reflection and an opportunity to re/connect with ‘musical’ stuff.” (Richards 2017b, p. 30) In this article, I made comparisons to the Slow Movement (Honoré 2004), a movement that rejects many of the trappings of hi-tech, as well as discussing slow tech (Hallnas and Redstrom 2001). In terms of participatory events, “To Do or to Have? That Is the Question” (Boven and Gilovich 2003) has become one of my fixations. With an emphasis on process, there is also a weighting on the experiential versus a finished ‘product’ to take home. This emphasis is a new departure in my work as Dirty Electronics, where I’ve previously designed and run workshops where participants get to make and take home hand-held synths and sound circuits. The recent work, The Construct has no Purpose (2017), a Dirty Electronics collaboration with Max Wainwright and Amit Patel, set out to critique maker culture and tokenistic making prevalent in the ever-growing DIY synth and electronic music workshop scene. In part, this work also sought to challenge my practice. The introduction of constraints for making is also an attempt to firmly align the work with a crafting ideology. David Pye has written on workmanship and risk as a defining aspect of craft (Pye 1995). There is risk in Dark Electronics. Successful completion of the sound circuit is not a foregone conclusion due to the working conditions. I’ve often referred to Brian Eno’s Oblique Strategies (1975) in relation to designing sound making devices and performances. This idea of oblique strategies can also be applied to the making process as is the case in this collaboration with Kanta Horio.

I'd like to draw together some additional themes of Dark Electronics. Simon Schaffer in his recent BBC documentary Mechanical Marvels: Clockwork Dreams discussed the incredible craftsmanship of eighteenth-century watchmakers and their working conditions. Artisans in the 'clock trades' were required to undertake extremely small and detailed work often in candlelight. Dark Electronics is a tribute to such hand skills and a celebration of manual labour. The pre-conditions of the event for SIAF also force the simplification of circuit design and constructs. This form of reductionism is also an attempt to reveal the very essence of the work. Finally, constructing a circuit in such conditions will require the help of other participants. This places an onus on DIT, rather than DIY, which has become central to my practice as Dirty Electronics.

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