

TO SUSPEND THE QUESTION OF MEANING

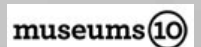
Christoph Cox in Conversation
with Céleste Boursier-Mougenot

The University Museum of Contemporary Art (UMCA) at UMass Amherst is pleased to present a site-specific sound and video installation by Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, the internationally acclaimed French artist, from October 4 – December 2, 2012.

In conjunction with this exhibition, a catalogue containing an interview conducted between the artist and Christoph Cox, Professor of Philosophy at Hampshire College and a critic and theorist of art and music, will soon be published. The interview is reproduced here with the permission of the UMCA, Celeste Boursier-Mougenot, and Christoph Cox.

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Acknowledgements: This exhibition has been made possible through generous support from Etant donnés: The French-American Fund for Contemporary Art. Additional support and coordination comes from the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.



To Suspend the Question of Meaning: Christoph Cox in Conversation with Céleste Boursier-Mougenot

by Christoph Cox, July–August 2012

CHRISTOPH COX: You began your career as a musician and composer. What prompted your move into sound installation and the context of the visual arts?

CÉLESTE BOURSIER-MOUGENOT: I've always been immersed in the visual arts and aesthetic considerations because my family is very connected to the arts. My great-grandfather was a passionate landscape photographer who worked with daguerreotypes. His son, my grandfather, was a painter and illustrator who made some animated films. My father made stained glass for churches, made sculpture and mosaics for public art projects, and later became a sort of garden historian. My parents considered all forms of art and literature to be really important. Their artist and writer friends often visited and stayed with us.

The concept of space (broadly considered) was also a recurrent interest for all of us. One of my brothers, who was interested in mapping, studied engineering and topographical geography. Another brother is a landscape architect. My mother worked as a sociological urbanist. So it's also quite natural that I've considered the notion of space and integrated it into my musical practice.

At home, we listened to all kinds of music (classical, ethnic, rock and pop, experimental, free jazz etc.) and went

to musical performances, art exhibitions, and movies every week. I grew up without a TV. When I was about twenty years old and got my own apartment, I bought my first TV. Instead of working on my music projects, I spent so much time watching it at night that I finally threw it away. I kept in the back of my mind that some day I would do a project that would reverse the passivity of TV watching and pull viewers somewhere else, into a space where they have to identify what they are watching. (This eventually resulted in *zombiedrones*. Many of my works have roots in questions, thoughts, or ideas I had a long time ago. It took me more than 15 years to get the means to start my *index* piano project.)

CC: So your interests in music have always been spatial or sculptural.

CBM: Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to become a musician. But I knew quite early that I wouldn't be a good instrumentalist. I wasn't a good student at the conservatory in town and knew that I was very limited technically. What interested me then (and what still interests me) was the relationship to the instrument as a sonic body [*corps sonore*], a very particular object shape. I felt that the instrument is alive and that I could approach it like a space itself.



Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, *index*, v.4, 2005/2009, Pleyel piano P190 with PianoDisc system, computer and software, 74 1/2 x 59 1/2 x 40 1/2

Sound is almost always the result of a mechanical action. I find it interesting to look at people making music because, even if the sonic result is mediocre, the situation of a player making sound is always intriguing. This is also the reason why I don't make music for loudspeakers or acousmatic works. I need to see and show the mechanism that generates the sounds. I consider this process to be "the score." For two years in the early 1990s, I studied contemporary composing with a post-Boulez composer in Paris named François Leclère. It was very interesting, but I thought his approach to music and the score was not reachable or understandable for most people, who tend not to be very specialized in contemporary music. I've tried in my work to transpose the principle of the score to the material in motion that generates the musical form.

CC: Did you play a particular instrument?

CBM: At home we had a piano, guitars and drums. I took many classes and studied many instruments at the conservatory (drums at 8, alto violin at 13, saxophone at 16). In 1977, when I was 16, I tried to be part of a few rock bands in Nice, where I was born. But I was disappointed by the conformism of the other musicians, who were more interested in imitating their guitar heroes than in making their own music.

I bought my first Revox tape recorder at about this time and eventually had 4 of them that I used to experiment with making repetitive, looped music. When I was in my late teens, I became friends with several students from the art school, and began making sound tracks for their films, pieces, or performances.

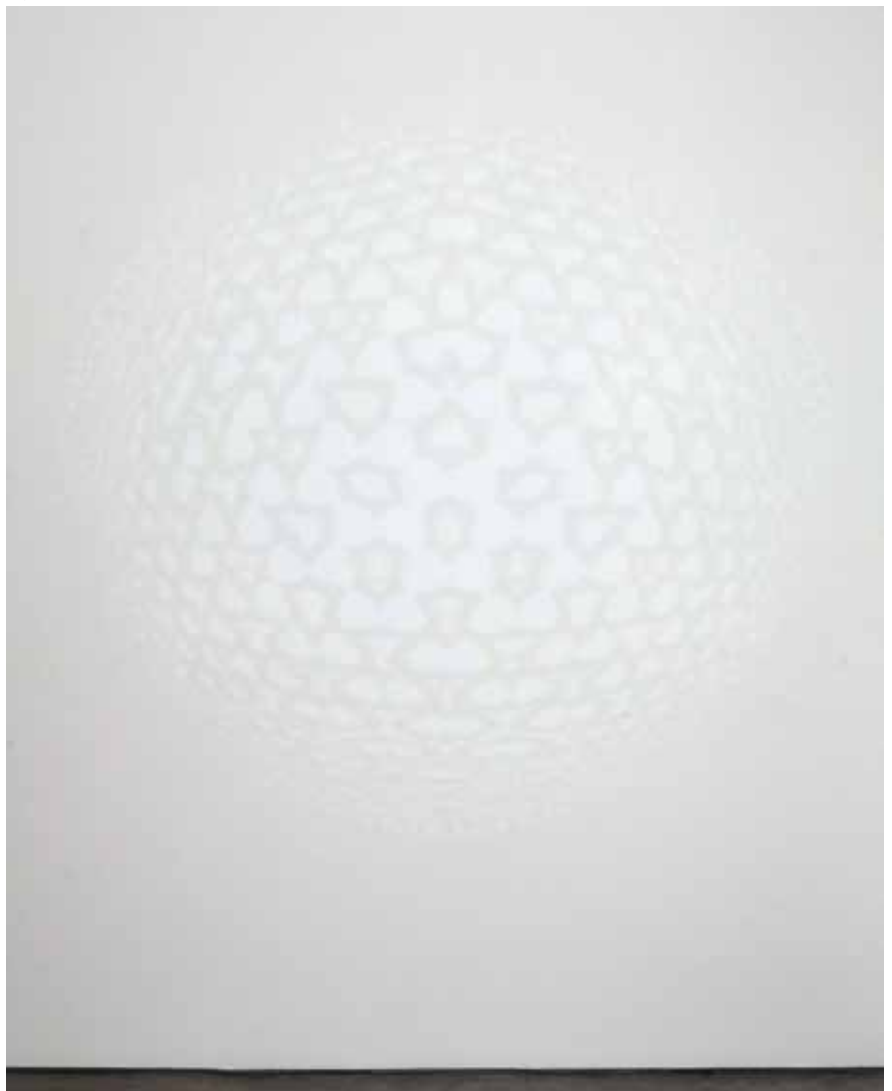
CC: How did your work in theater prepare you for producing sound installations?

CBM: When I was 25, I joined Pascal Rambert's theater company and worked as its composer for nearly ten years. Pascal gave me a kind of *carte blanche* and the means to make a musical project for each new theater production. I wasn't supposed to follow or illustrate the action on stage but rather to develop my own musical projects, fragments of which could be used for the performances. Sometimes I had the opportunity to use the high-tech equipment of the theater where we were working. Sometimes I had a budget to create my own studio, to buy instruments, or to pay musicians to play the music I composed. But I was also welcome to participate in the scenography. For the first project I did with the company in 1985, I suggested that we cover the huge stage of the Théâtre National de Nice with tons of wheat seeds and we did it! In 1994 at the KVS in Brussels for the Jan

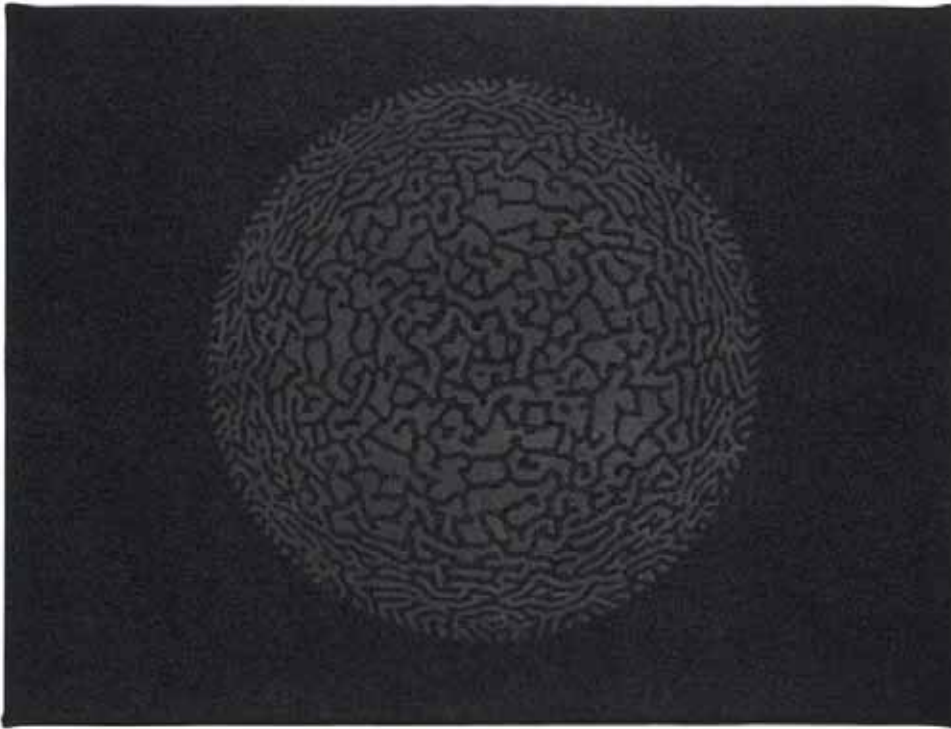
Fabre Festival, I did the lighting of the performance with a dozen old TVs turned away from the audience to make a diffuse, glowing light that dimly lit the performers' naked bodies. In my final collaborations with the company, my music had no beginning or end. It was just diffused as a surrounding landscape when the audience entered the theater and when it left. Sometimes, I recorded sound from outside the theater and mixed it with my prerecorded material, animating or disturbing it with an aleatoric sound event. All my questions had to do with how to make sounds go, appear, or disappear.

These ten years of collaboration with the company formed the background for my current practice because it gave me the opportunity and support to explore different ways to create music, to learn how to get help from technicians, etc. By the beginning of the 90s, my approach and my work were closer to that of a sculptor than to a classical or contemporary musician.

My girlfriend was a student at the university studying aesthetics, and a few of her friends were opening a gallery. In 1995, they invited me to create my first sound installation for an art exhibition. This first experience was great. It gave me the unexpected freedom to organize all the aspects of



Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, virus, 2006, video loop for 4:3 projection on white wall, 22 minutes, silent variable dimensions



Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, solidvideo, blackmandalavirus 57, 2008, spray paint and silkscreen on canvas 12 x 15 4/5 in

presentation for the music. Since the content of the music has changed so much over the last 50-70 years, it was suddenly obvious to me that I was ready to follow this way instead to trying to go back to the music world where I had never really been satisfied.

CC: Your work often involves translation between media or sensory modalities – for example, the translation of the visual into the auditory, or vice versa. What are you after with these sorts of translations and what compels you about them?

CBM: A “real” translation would imply that we could recover the original message by reversing the process. In my work, it’s rather about a *transduction* or a *transposition* that causes a loss of meaning, allowing one to focus on the transposition of flows and to reveal their modulations. In my case, the meaning is in the process. The original message is never restored, and there is no possibility of recovering the original flux.

Transduction or transposition accomplishes something that has always interested me: to avoid or to suspend the question of meaning. With music, the part that delivers a clear meaning remains rather evanescent; it is rather the physical or emotional relation that is perceived. As a teenager, I was interested in phonetics, but was disappointed to find out that, at a certain point in its historical evolution, phonology connected phonemes with meanings. For me, they were free atoms of the language that could be reorganized without any meaning or symbolic reference, but as pure sound material. I was very impressed with Romance poetry, such as the sestinas of Arnaut Daniel (Ezra Pound wrote a book about this), where the poem is a play of constraints that exhausts the meaning of the words according to their polysemy via strict

rules or pre-established processes. In this way, the poem becomes fanciful, almost “surrealist”. I like the idea that a corpus of logical or rational operations applied to a situation or to a phenomenon can end in a kind of aberration or paradox that reaches a kind of beauty.

The Fluxus artist Milan Knížák once said “there is some music under my nails.” I suddenly understood that everywhere there is music waiting to be revealed. A long time ago, I conceived a project to take some very structured music, such as a Bach fugue, and reduce it to a single, pure sine tone that would move in the space between several loudspeakers, recreating the durations and intensities of the notes while translating their pitch as motion in the space. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity or time to begin the physical experiments that would allow me to transpose musical intervals in space.

I could continue with memories, but I’ll stop by saying that I’m very interested in cooking. So here’s a question: could we translate a Chinese dish into a German, Spanish or French dish?

CC: Why does the loss or elimination of meaning interest you? Is it that subtracting meaning reveals the raw matter of sound – the “pure sound material” – that underlies or precedes meaning?

CBM: If the chosen material is, for example, a text, it’s going to carry the message of the text that will be understood as the meaning of the work. If it’s a political or social text, the public will pay attention to this meaning. If it is a poetic text or a famous text by a well-known writer, we will be in the field of interpretation. In my works, the meaning lies in the use of this or that material and in the process of transforming it.

For example, piano music generally involves an intimate relationship between a pianist with a musical intention and the instrument as his alter ego. If I connect the piano to customers checking their email through the computer network of a web café (as I did for almost two years between 2009-2011 in the Théâtre de Gennevilliers), I determine a new use for the piano. With *index*, the musical material intended for the piano results from a collective source and without any musical intention. I don’t control the inputs. I don’t choose a text from a famous writer to support my work. From this flow of material, I determine rules of filtering to try to make the piano sound as I like. Obviously this kind of music is not made to be listened to in the traditional situation of piano music for the concert hall with a beginning and an end. (1)

This work develops an approach I began more than twenty years ago (in a radio drama produced for France Culture) that

I often say that I'm a techno-animist, and that my work is dedicated to the "living."

<i>Ut queant laxis</i>	So that your servants may
<i>resonare fibris</i>	with loosened voices,
<i>Mira gestorum</i>	Resound the wonders
<i>famuli tuorum</i>	of your deeds
<i>Solve pollute</i>	Clean the guilt
<i>labii reatum</i>	from our stained lips
<i>Sancte Iohannes</i>	O, Saint John.

involved the transformation of text into music by reverting to a medieval Latin system of naming musical notes. The first syllables of each line of a hymn to Saint John the Baptist served as mnemonic devices for the tones: *ut, ré, mi, fa, sol*, etc. I applied this logic to some other systems of notation (English, German, Hungarian . . .) that are alphabetic, syllabic, or both, and then to parameters of dynamics or intensity (*pp, p, mp, mf, f, ff* etc.) and other pianistic indications.

I considered the relationship between text and music. I also considered the material components, the extracted modulation of which can condition the material itself. In the same way, when I use a video signal (its luminosity in connection with movement in the frame [as in *videodrones* and *zombiedrones*]) to modulate an audio signal, I take a stand. The meaning of my works can't be reduced to these methods, but I do want them to be noticed. My subject is the music and the means to make it as the way to present it. This music does not illustrate something else (images, text etc.) or deliver a direct message about some other thing, but rather comments on the musical action and the listening process. The idea I've had for a few years now is that, with different means, I almost always produce the same music.

For the presentation of *indexes* in Amherst, stock options feed the computer program. This virtual material is not understandable for most people; but, at the same time, the world economy conditions our society and our individual lives. I like the idea of using this material otherwise, as I've done with video surveillance or TV. (If stock trading goes badly or well, this won't change the sense or intensity of the piano music with a crescendo, etc.) These devices exist, and the question is how to use them differently to make music or works. The pieces I consider most successful are the fruits of very long periods of listening and progressive adjustments to reach a point where the music can disappear from our perception and reappear suddenly, giving us the feeling that the music is listening to us.

CC: When you transpose or transduce one form or media into another, the two forms have to be linked closely enough that the transposition doesn't seem arbitrary; but they also have to be distant enough so that something

surprising or enigmatic is revealed in the process. How do you balance between these two constraints?

CBM: Yes, you're right, constraint is the master word of my practice. Usually I restrict myself to one material and one process to extract the sound or musical field of the work. The architecture of the presentation space is also an effective constraint by which works can be transformed. The Amherst exhibition is the first to present a set of my works in the same space.

CC: Earlier you quoted Milan Knížák's claim that there is music waiting to be revealed everywhere. But how much of this is *discovery* and how much of it is your own *creation*? Words can be transposed into a score for piano (*index*), and video signals can be made to generate sound (*zombiedrones*). But is sound or music really *in* the words or the video signal? Isn't it, rather, *put there by you*?

CBM: About the relation of text to music, everything began when I wanted to compose music for voice. I had the text ready and then had to compose the music to which the text would be sung. If we look closely, we notice that the relationship between text and music is always a collage: the collage of two autonomous fields. A melody can merge successfully with a text to become a famous work. But we can stick another text on a famous melody or compose a different melody for the same text, as various composers have done with the same poems by Baudelaire, for example. There are also many examples of composers who have found inspiration in great books by Dante, Joyce, Homer, etc. But what relation of necessity is there in these choices, which take the same texts or facts and transform them by way of the particular interests of the composer who adopts them? Here, we see that the musical tradition is full of arbitrary choices that tend not to be understood as such.

After undertaking various manipulations with images and sounds, I thought about the interest in sticking this music to that image or that text and arrived at the conclusion that it's a question of *air du temps* (2) and taste. We stick this music on that image in the same way that we match these pants with that shirt. Most people consider it completely justifiable to stick things together like this. In the consumerist atmosphere, they're right. There are some masterpieces and a lot of crap massively produced in our audiovisual world. Stick any music to any image, and it works 99% of the time. It may be more interesting to explore the contradictions between moving images and sound, while avoiding bad taste.

As for me, I understood very early that I was very limited from the perspective of academic standards. But I also quickly understood that many interesting artists were also at one moment or another considered to be bad or unfit.

I always distrusted the justification or validation of the work by speech, however intelligent that speech is.

CC: Both *virus* and *flamByframe* use feedback techniques and recursive recycling. Are there important differences for you between the “feedback” works and “transposition” works such as *index* and *zombiedrones*?

CBM: There are several fields in my practice that are complementary, but my method is always more or less the same. Most of the time the works that use feedback are in real time (for example, *scanner*, *recycle*, *harmonichaos*), as are most of the works that use transposition (*videodrones*, *zombiedrones*, *fishyedrones*, *index*, *indexes*).

The case of *flamByframe* is different. For an exhibition at the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne in 2006, I wanted to create, in real time, a pretty dangerous machine that would have the flame from a blowtorch controlled by a video camera that was filming the flame. The video image of the flame was converted into audio and sent through a subwoofer that excited the air and blew the flame. A detection system was supposed to relight the flame when it blew out. But I didn't have time to finish the project before the opening, and so I decided to put off producing the physical work and instead presented a video of the piece I had made as a test. Everybody thought the video was great, so I accepted this opinion and was satisfied with the work.

We could widen the notion of feedback to include what happens in the aviary that constitutes *from here to ear*. The visitors who enter the aviary have an effect on the behavior of the finches. Their presence can be considered an input signal and their reactions to the sounds produced by the finches can have an effect on the attitudes and activities of other visitors.

With the transposition works, I looked for a way to produce music that has an inherent link to the image or the text without being redundant, illustrative, or tautological. The text for *index* or the image for *videodrones*, *zombiedrones*, or *fishyedrones* becomes for the audience like the score-in-progress; just as the physical elements and the motion of the porcelain bowls in *untitled* become both the instruments and the score itself. My purpose was to give to the audience a way of understanding where the music was coming from and how it was made, as well to extend the notion of the score to the physical aspect of the generating system.

CC: Many of your works are generative structures that establish a situation and then leave it to operate on its own. This makes me think of experimental composers such as Steve Reich (e.g., *Come Out*) and Alvin Lucier (e.g., *I Am Sitting in a Room*) who, in the 1960s and 70s, developed an interest in generative music. Are those figures influences for you?

CBM: I've been influenced by so many artists' works that to speak about these ones instead of others seems to me unfair. I think that the domain of influences can remain private. Research into causality or paternity doesn't really interest me. (I have my own father and am myself the father of four

kids!) The feedback effect in my practice in a way tries to disrupt this line of thinking.

It seems to me that concrete stories or memories about the works are often more interesting than theoretical references. It's also that I've been disappointed by certain artists who constantly refer to established works, but whose own work is not as interesting as their talk about it. If an art critic or historian sees a correlation, that does not disturb me. But I like it when people can have an aesthetic experience without reference to art history.

CC: The idea that there is music waiting to be revealed everywhere seems to me to connect with a recent artistic and curatorial interest in animism and the life of things.

CBM: I often say that I'm a techno-animist, and that my work is dedicated to the “living.”

NOTES:

(1) See “Listenings Working: Céleste Boursier-Mougenot in Conversation with Samuel Bianchini,” *Céleste Boursier-Mougenot: états seconds* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2008), pp. 127-131.

(2) *Zeitgeist*, or, more literally, what's “in the air.”

BIOS:

Céleste Boursier-Mougenot is an internationally acclaimed French artist whose innovative work merges the realms of the musical and the visual. A native of Nice, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot was born in 1961 and currently lives and works in Sète, France. His work has been exhibited in venues such as the capcMusée, Bordeaux, France (1997); the ITT InterCommunication Center, Tokyo (2000); the Herzliya Museum of Art, Israel (2001); Pinacoteca Sao Paulo, Brazil (2009); Musée Chagall, Nice (2009); and the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (2010); and in the group exhibition *Notations: The Cage Effect Today* at Hunter College Art Gallery in NYC (2012); Boursier-Mougenot presented solo exhibitions at the Barbican Center in London, the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia, PS1 (MoMA), NYC, and FRAC Champagne-Ardenne in Reims, France. He recently took part in the 3rd Moscow Biennale and was a nominee of the Marcel Duchamp Prize (2010). His work is in major public and private collections around the world, including the Israel Museum, Jerusalem; the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris; MONA (Hobart, Tasmania); the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia; and La Maison Rouge, Paris.

Christoph Cox is a critic, theorist, and curator of art and music. He is Professor of Philosophy at Hampshire College where he teaches and writes on contemporary European philosophy and contemporary art and music. He is also on the faculty at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. He is currently at work on a philosophical and historical book about sound art and experimental music.

LIST OF WORKS DISCUSSED:

untitled (1997 –): In an inflatable pool half-filled with water float several dozen pieces of everyday crockery: different sorts of bowls, plates, china, and stemmed glasses. An immersed water pump produces a gentle current that causes the objects to bump into one another, producing sound on contact. To favor the resonance of the objects, the temperature of the water is maintained at around 30 degrees Celsius.

from here to ear (1999 –): The exhibition space is turned into an aviary filled with live finches. Several electric guitars plugged into amplifiers and placed horizontally on chrome stands serve as perches for the birds, whose movements excite the guitar strings. Viewers are invited to walk through the space amidst the birds, guitars, and guitar cases filled with birdseed and water.

videodrones (2000-2002): Several video cameras placed outside the exhibition space monitor passing vehicles and pedestrians, producing a real-time stream of images projected inside the gallery. The video output of these cameras is fed into an audio amplifier to produce a continuous hum that is modulated by the luminosity of the camera images and the speed and size of the objects that cross their frames.

harmonichaos (2000-2006): Various small diatonic harmonicas are inserted into the nozzles of thirteen vacuum cleaners, which produce sound via suction. Each vacuum cleaner is fitted with a microphone, a guitar tuner, and an on-off switch governed by the tuner. The multiple sound sources confuse the tuners, which turn the vacuum cleaners on and off in unpredictable ways.

flamByframe (2006): This video loop presents a blowtorch flame altered by the camera filming it. To construct the piece, the video image of the flame was converted into an audio signal that was then sent through a subwoofer that excited the air and eventually blew out the flame. The silent video presents the slowed movement of the flame during the minute before it is extinguished.

index and indexes (2006 –): A piano is played by a software system that, in real time, translates text (or other information) into a musical score. In earlier iterations of the project, the text was supplied by computer keyboards in the vicinity: the typing of museum staff, patrons at an internet café, etc. For the exhibition at UMCA, the piano score will be a translation of stock market data from business news and financial information websites.

recycle (2006): Cameras focused on a tree outside the exhibition space detect the subtle movements of leaves that rustle in the wind. A modulator registers this movement and uses it to direct the action of nine air fans affixed to a wall inside the gallery. A video image of the exterior foliage is visible on a small surveillance monitor placed near the fans.

scanner (2006): Directed by air flowing from a fan placed on the floor, a helium balloon drifts around a gallery space encircled with loudspeakers. Attached to the balloon is a wireless microphone that generates feedback when it approaches one of the speakers. This feedback is transformed in real time by a sound processor that eliminates its stridency and translates it into a form of aleatoric music.

virus (2006): This video loop consists of a continuously morphing image produced by a video feedback system: a video camera placed facing a monitor that reproduces the images filmed by the camera. The largely white image is projected onto a white wall and adjusted to the limit of visibility.

zombiedrones (2008): A plasma screen is placed in front of a leather sofa, encouraging audience members to sit down, watch TV, and change the channels as they like. But this TV encrypts the images, editing them so that only the moving elements of each frame appear on screen, while the non-moving elements disappear. The image is thus emptied of its message, leaving only ghostly figures. The humming soundtrack is the result of a translation of the images into sound.

fisheyedrones (2011): Hundreds of goldfish are placed in a tank in the gallery space. Their movements are filmed and projected onto a screen; and these same movements are registered by a computer program that translates them into sound.