

Marko Batista

The techno-sublime in DIY electronics

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The sublime, as a concept of aesthetics, is elevated above the sheer perception of the beautiful and it denotes the sentiment between pleasure and pain. In contemporary art, the role of the sublime belongs, above all, to technology that produces the so-called techno-sublime¹ and, elevated above the beautiful, transpires as an intense experience for the viewer involved in an art event. The tension of the experience of Marko Batista's microrobotic machines is the product of an almost invisible technological revolution,² which takes place in art studios, living rooms, garages, media labs and ad hoc fab labs.³ In the 21st century, when a billion of people have access to high-tech equipment, the initial enthusiasm for technology, which was bound to ever new and ever more efficient gadgets, has come to an end. We have reached the point where the DIY community, with joint forces and persistent activities against the closed-source system, has developed open operating systems and software tools to such a degree of stability that we can perform uninterruptedly all functions of closed systems without any unwanted collapse. At the same time, because of better access to information, the fear of invasive technologies, changing behavioural and cultural patterns in society, has numbed; now, it is limited to the level of political and corporative manipulation of data, while it has disappeared, to a large extent, from the level of society and culture. The time has come when the DIY community is slowly moving from the field of constructing the basic functions of open-source systems and programmes to the field of interfaces and hardware. Compared to the former, the latter is even more effective at the epistemological and semiotic levels, for it is interfaces, above all, that determine the system of categorisations, which has by now developed to the level of hypertextuality. In turn, artists, such as Batista, as well as theorists are developing systems in which – with purposeful glitch, circuit bending and the introduction of chemical and organic elements into electronic circuits – they expand the limits of interface outputs and hardware functions. With its dynamic interfaces, Batista's work contributes towards the critique of conventions, which encourages the replacement of established screen format, the sequence of letters on the keyboard, the layout of buttons on the mouse, menus, browsers, applications, to change radically the mode of using computers and technological tools. The basic building blocks of the artist's media installations and audio-visual performances are based on open-source, free hardware and software, which generate unpredictable situations, glitches in the transmission of image, noisy sound effects at the edge of all meanings. Electronic and digital transmissions of this kind are metaphors for the information processes that take place in the post-information age, when the machines, using the analysis of the semantic tools of web 3.0, sometimes know individuals even better than their fellow

¹ The term techno-sublime has been attributed to Kittler's work *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* by the interpreters of Kittler's media theory, even though the author himself does not use precisely this term; rather, Kittler talks about technology that, due to mechanical reproduction, causes "the boundaries of the body, death and lust, leave the most indelible traces" (Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 55).

² On account of my conversation with Luka Zagoričnik, I must admit a certain measure of immoderate optimism regarding the meanings produced by the DIY community; for the latter, too, uses electronic components produced, on the one hand, by corporations and, on the other hand, by the underpaid and exploited labour force in East-Asia. In this context, the DIY community faces a similar paradox as the ecological movement.

³ A fab lab is a smaller workshop offering (individual) production of digital elements.

human beings do. The production of DIY sound transmitters is an anti-consumerist gesture based on simple, cheap and unstable electronic systems, which makes possible open use and access for the DIY community as well as the gallery audience. The former uses and upgrades practical results, while the latter consumes an extremely different version of technological products; instead of generic products, it experiences all the ugliness and beauty, the pleasure and pain of DIY sounds and electronics. This is a rejection of the existing systems and processes, which would depend on the established social structures; for the sensitive individual experiences the greatest unease precisely when facing shiny corporative goods, which are the product of careful market and psychological assessments, for they prescribe desires, results and modes of application in advance. "Their instincts tell them to rebel against this "obedient" mode in which artists – like everyone else – are pushed into continually buying, from ever-growing corporations, the latest computer and the latest software packages and then spending a vast number of hours learning how to use them. There's an inescapable love-hate ambivalence about working as an artist with hightechnology tools."⁴ Batista prefers to use this time for the exploration of electronic circuits, learning about the physical properties of sound and other laws of physics and chemistry. The building blocks of his systems are based on a logic that is part of alternative DIY, dynamic systems. While doing so, he forms a hypothesis about (computer) hardware, which will be infinitely more efficient and will have lower consumption, a specific purpose and an open system, which would stimulate heterogeneity and personal contact with systems, in contrast to uniform systems, which develop generic interfaces. Two products of this revolution are the Raspberry Pi computer and the Arduino microcontroller, which Batista integrates into his works. However, the greatest part of the electronic skeleton of microrobotic machines is based on smaller and less complete derivatives of this technological movement. Even though such systems by no means affect the changing of economic relations directly, they do raise consciousness, which encourages thinking that differs from the self-evident tracks of the current consumerist relations of capital.

Excerpted from: Ida Hiršenfelder, "MicroRobotic Machines", in: Andreja Hribnik, Ida Hiršenfelder, Jurij Krpan, Luka Zagoričnik, *Marko Batista: Temporary Objects and Hybrid Ambients*, (Ljubljana: Aksioma - Zavod za sodobno umetnosti & Slovenj Gradec: Koroška galerija likovnih umetnosti, 2014), pp. page 61-65.

⁴ Collins, *Handmade Electronic Music*, op. cit., pp. xi-xii.