Tastes Like…

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ABSTRACT
“Tastes Like…” (a composition for two monitors, mixing board and human body) is an interactive audiovisual work implemented without computers and common sound/picture synthesis/processing techniques but exclusively with low-tech analogue equipment. Basically it can be perceived as a new instrument, representing a product of creative misuse and combination of objects mentioned in the subtitle. The monitors, mixing board and the player’s body are connected in a specific constellation, which causes an audiovisual feedback, activated only through the presence of the artist and controlled by the location of his body inside the two dimensional, electrodynamic field, created by the two right angle positioned monitors.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.5.1 [Information Interfaces and Representation]: Multimedia Information Systems – audio input/output, video

General Terms
Design, Documentation, Experimentation, Human Factors, Measurement, Performance and Theory

Keywords
Analogue Oscillations, Conduction, Feedback, Imperfection, Interaction, Resistance, Transformation

1. CONCEPTION

1.1 Artistic Motivation
The idea of this piece is to treat electrons as the most basic objects of art and to develop a form of artistic expression by consciously determining and manipulating the electrons’ paths inside an electronic circuit. It is this circumstance that makes it fall into the category of electronic art, although it should clearly be distinguished from the most common electronic artwork: a compensation of traditional art practice with the latest technology. It was not my intention to manufacture another product with an (objective) aesthetical value but to question the position and function of art and the artist in today’s society. The work is an abstraction of different situations, political regimes and constellations of social systems dealing with the presence and absence of creatively thinking individuals (artists). How can you alter the perception of reality if you look at the most ordinary things, pieces of technology, conceptions, attitudes or philosophies from a slightly different point of view, than you were told to look at?

1.2 The Audio – Visual Transformation
Although two TV sets are involved, they take over the function of radiating electron sources in the first place and visualize the sounds as a consequence of an input error, which is actually not such a bad side effect at all and could be a competent visual answer to the common electronic music question and problem of the embodiment of synthetic sounds, respectively. The actual embodiment is the artist himself, who is not sitting behind the computer, playing the mouse and deepening the mystery but exposing himself “naked” to the “listener” – as it was the case with traditional instruments throughout the history – demonstrating a passionate but well articulated instrument playing.

1.3 Central Artwork
It is difficult to see the true essence of the work since it is dealing with raw and almost uncontrollable source material. “Tastes Like…” is the first composition for this instrument but since the performing is improvised, it is not really a musical composition and at the end it is not even music that is being generated. It can be perceived as an inaugural overture or an exposition of expressional power and variety. The real artwork is not happening
at the time of performance but long before – when the essential idea emerged – not as a result of an experimental approach but as a consequence of pre-empirical cognition of empiricism, based on elementary understanding of simple physical laws. Therefore the central artwork focuses on the conceptual thinking process, which is simultaneously representing the key for an authentic and comprehensible artwork experience.

### 1.4 Compositional Aesthetics

The goal was to search for aesthetical values in the hardware itself. The implementation of this particular altered constellation of mixing board and TV set produces unusual results, which could be understood as purely immanent material but on the other hand they are just deliberately provoked, common aesthetical disruptions or system malfunctions, shifted from a negligible fringe to the center of attention. In a perfect world these would certainly generate a specific, foreseeable behaviour but since a series of electronic components, especially amplifiers and even the buildings electricity network – unavoidably introducing noise as a natural “random” source – are involved, also mistakes of mistakes may occur. As already mentioned, music (a product of conventional employment of audio technology) does not play a role in this composition, however due to the previously defined phenomenon of “mistakes of mistakes” (errors of errors) the instrument has the potential to produce recognizable passages of “music”. The electronic circuit closes after a series of potential obstacles and indirect (amplified) junctions, resulting in a nonlinear and audible circuit twist. Complex harmonic and rhythmic patterns create the illusion of temporarily recognizable musical structures, which are not intentionally targeted but as they have the power to create a confident, socially and historically enforced certainty and thereby positioning a bright spot amidst the confusing mess of a voluminous sonic sculpture, they are certainly qualified to represent a substantial carrier of aesthetic significance.

### 1.5 The True Purpose of the Interface

Creating unconventional interfaces for musical expression is my strategy to pave the way for an unprejudiced perception of the vast variety of manifold audio art - usually approached with ignorance. A new interface establishes a form of “white space” where cause and effect are not engaged in polemics and new sounds are ready to be experienced with an augmented awareness for the detail.

### 2. TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

#### 2.1 Original Constellation

In this specific situation the presence of an artist has turned a mixing board and a TV set into a huge, interactive oscillator. The powerful but rather primitive interface for audiovisual expression is designed to explore and showcase the effects of a possible physical manifestation of artistic presence, producing an instantaneous location conditioned response. A simple camcorder was used to document and simultaneously generate the source video material for the performative process. The distance between performer and TV screen is the main adjustable parameter and represents a variable potential barrier, which the electrons from the radiating screen have to cross. When they hit the artist, they run through his body and out through the cable in his mouth, inducing an immediate physical sensation i.e. a painful “taste” of electricity, which “forces” the artist to preserve a natural balance of tension and resolution throughout the piece. The noisy signal continues its “journey” into an oscillating audio mixer (input connected with output) where it gains a distinctive frequency and is finally combined with the original video signal. The location of the player inside the two dimensional, electrodynamic field created by the two right-angle positioned monitors controls both the audible pitch and the distortion of the video signal. Eventually the audio, video and a strange combination of both signals end up in a fragile feedback chain, producing complex audiovisual events, virtually without any concrete input. Two monitors allow a two dimensional approach (two oscillators => two voices controlled with the position of one hand).

#### 2.2 User Friendly Constellation

The instrument can also be mounted like an interactive installation, where the spectator is invited to take of his shoes and step on two conductive metal plates, placed in front of the monitors. This setup avoids the rather painful and inconvenient oral connection and enables additional control options by allowing the user to manipulate the size of the feet contact surface. The main principle remains unchanged – the feedback circuit gets established as soon as the visitor gets in contact with the plates – the (weak) electronic current flows through his body, “entering” at a body part closest to the monitors and draining off through his feet.

### 3. RELATED WORK

Toshimaru Nakamura’s *No-input Mixing Board*, where the inputs are directly connected with the outputs of the mixing board and no external sound source is supplied. At “*Tastes Like…*” the instrument is extended with a TV set and includes a continuous oscillation of the audiovisual metamorphosis. Scott Sinclair and Joe Musgrove (*Bothorg*) – are creating a complex feedback web of audio and video mixers, screens and camera. The crucial difference at “*Tastes Like...*” is the artist’s physical inclusion into the electronic feedback chain, introducing a third transformation: [:audible > visible > sensible:]. Stelarc’s *Split Body: Voltage-In/Voltage-Out* – one of his several pieces investigating the collision of electricity and human body, however he uses electricity to move and manipulate his body, which is just the opposite of “*Tastes Like...*”, where the body is used to manipulate the electronic circuit.

### 4. CONCLUSION

By experimenting with a utopian interplay of cause and effect “*Tastes Like...*” shows an exaggerated picture of artistic presence and absence. The sounds and pictures are genuinely honest and expose a different face of popular technology and the entertainment industry. So, how does the perspective of a common weltanschauung change if you add an artist? It is obvious that there is always another dimension waiting to be discovered if it is just approached with an open mind, considering a balanced amount of curiosity and preconception.

### 5. REFERENCES
