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MSHR

with Brenna Murphy &
Birch Cooper

by Ka Baird

MSHR (pronounced “Mesher,” or just “M-S-H-R”) is the collaboration of artists Brenna Murphy and Birch Cooper. Through ritualistic performance, the duo plays with their own intricate feedback system that produces an ecstatic, frenzied overload of light and sound. Utilizing their own handbuilt “sculptural synthesizers” and light sensors, MSHR directs a cycle where light modulates the sound and then the sound determines the intensity of the light. During a MSHR performance, they dress in black with sunglasses and move through space in an almost Butoh fashion as they trigger sound and light in a dense mesh of fog and lasers. The ritual often culminates in them using their own bodies to transmit sound by controlling the frequency of an oscillator that is controlled by the amount of current that passes between their own two bodies. The shapes they incorporate into their synth encasings bring to mind a visual representation of Carl Jung’s collective unconscious while the driftwood and conch shells they use to house various circuitry add to the mystique of such an equally embodied and disembodied experience.



You have said that although your work has a visual component, the work is more about the virtual realm. Could you expound upon your own relationship with the virtual world, how you define it?

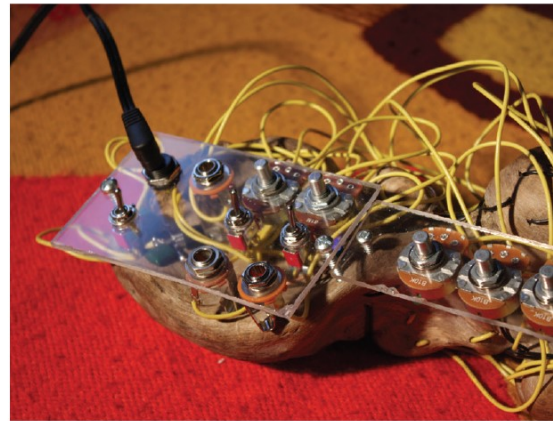
We made that statement about virtuality because we wanted to highlight the fact that although our musical performances contain a good deal of visual content, there is also a hyper-dimensional virtual structure being generated through our interaction with the physical and electronic systems. When we are able to play music in a truly deep way, this is what we're focusing on. Physically, our bodies are kneeling in an array of sculptural sensors and speakers are vibrating airwaves, but these material circumstances can act as a catalyst to enter pathways into virtual realms. Virtuality is the realm of the mind; a dimension built on physical space but with different format and rules. Spending time moving in that dimension can be a way of feeling out the parameters of the mind.

Your tools in performance, the analog synthesizers, are not only amazing systems functionally but are totally beautiful—these gems of light-audio feedback encased in such things as a conch shell or sitting on a piece of driftwood. How do they work, how does the light affect the sound, your personal relationship with this synesthesia? The alchemy of putting a piece of driftwood together with such circuitry?

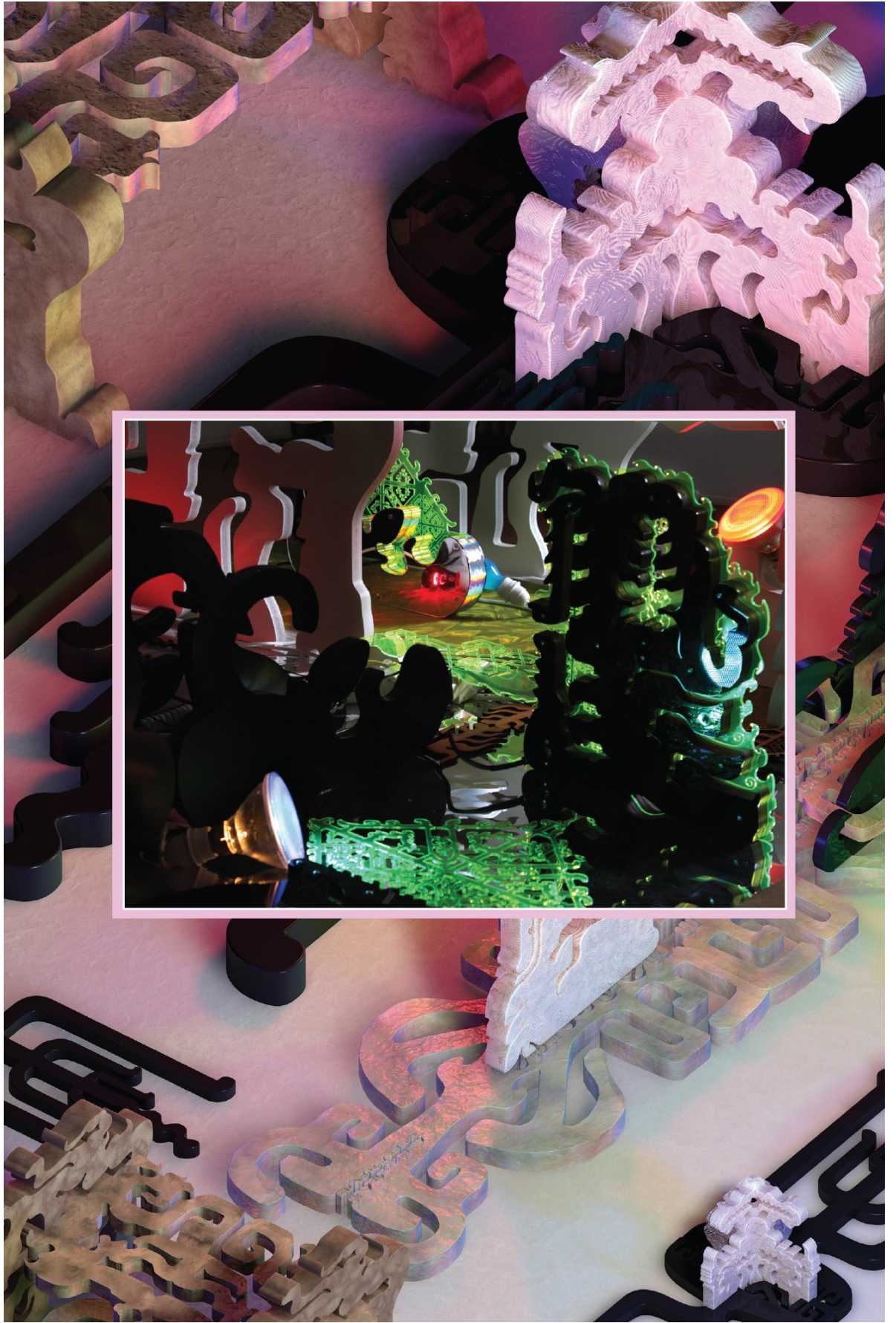
In the light-audio feedback systems that we use, synthesizers are placed in a symbiotic relationship with circuits that fade up groups of lights when they receive sound input. The sound produced by the synthesizers is modulated exclusively by the amount of light reaching its sensors and the brightness of the lights is modulated by the volume of the sound coming from the synths, which turns on groups of colored light bulbs based on the frequency of the sound input. We use incandescent bulbs because of the beautiful, fluttering quality created by their filaments. Coupled with analog photo resistors, this gives us a richer timbral palette than our primitive electronics could produce otherwise.

In addition to being a dynamic performance technique, we use feedback in our music to ground its framework in a universal structure. The organic materials that we use in our instruments reflect feedback in their physical forms— the recursive form of a seashell or the fractal convolution of a piece of driftwood. Embedding these organic materials with electronic systems points toward the interlocking nature of technology, biology, art and the evolution of human consciousness. Using organic materials also has a functional side. Once we started building with these materials we realized how useful they are for housing electronics. Jacks and switches mount perfectly right on the shell and driftwood

works very well as a controller wand. Shells and driftwood also serve as symbols of the coast. The Oregon coast at night represents a really altered scape for us, almost like what you would expect to find in a virtual environment— a flat plane stretching on forever, with dunes on one side and an ocean on the other. The coast is a fractal computer made of air, sand and water: very basic and very psychedelic.



You have described the resonant symbols you work with as human consciousness, a form of meditation, or “accessing states of pattern consciousness”— what was the process of synthesizing the shapes you use and how do you go about mutating them, evolving them over time? I see imagery that is very time specific and other imagery/symbols that have some timeless quality to them.








The symbols that we use are generated intuitively and algorithmically, by interacting with digital vector and 3D programs. We also study the forms generated by many different cultures throughout time and let that inform our designs to a degree. To make them, we typically “get in the zone,” plug into the program and start improvising. We try to make many shapes, one after another, see what stands out and then edit meticulously. Our goal is to manifest designs that reflect fundamental shapes of consciousness. Shapes that feel like an entity, a tool, a monad. We’ve built a sort of lexicon of these shapes that we can draw from to make new compositions. We use digital fabrication techniques to bring these designs into physical existence. In physical space our shapes need to be structural enough to stand up and not break, so our digital designs are often influenced by consideration for how they will be manifested. It’s nice to bring these parameters into our digital workflow because it can give the work a greater sense of materiality.

The combination of your tools and process facilitates such a transcendent experience, your performance acting as a kind of ceremony~ what is the relevancy/ importance of learning from earlier cultures and their relationship with nature and the divine and how to contextualize that into our modern techno society and if there are any inherent clashes therein?

In every culture throughout history, art, music and ceremony have always been portals to ecstatic states. Growing up participating in the underground music scenes in the Pacific Northwest, the relationship between punk shows and ancient, fundamentally human transcendentalism was obvious. House shows are a modern ritual— in our work, we’re trying to start with the basics and build from there, so approaching our performances explicitly as ecstatic ceremonies feels appropriate. Before MSHR, we were in a five person art collective called Oregon Painting Society. In OPS we came from diverse artistic backgrounds so we combined all of our personal mediums and worked totally collaboratively. We built immersive installations, took psychedelics, embodied characters and enacted group rituals. OPS functioned as an art collective, a band, and ultimately a sort of coven. After OPS disbanded, we formed MSHR on the same principles.





We believe in the art-collective/band/coven model as an effective contemporary method for nurturing a holistic relationship with higher dimensions and transcendent experience. Artistic collaboration is such a beautiful way for people to jack into each other's brains, and a network of minds is much more versatile and powerful than a single mind. The DIY aspect of our work is important because the homogeneity of mass culture often renders authentic transcendent experience totally meaningless. Starting from scratch and building a personal toolkit for transcendence with your closest friends is a solid and direct route toward a sustainable and expansive engagement with "the beyond."

Are there any traditions or person(s) that continually and deeply inform your practice? A few of your inspirations?

We're deeply influenced by David Tudor's organic hands on approach to building and playing unique electronic instruments. His designs are often simple from an engineering perspective but conceptually rich, sonically complex and infinitely variable with an emphasis on feedback.

La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's Dream House has also been a constant source of inspiration for us. The installation is an elegant framework of sound and light frequencies that offers visitors a hyper-sensory experience of time and space.

Talk about how you influence/challenge/complement each other?

Collaborating lets us mutate quickly while retaining a sense of self, keeping the shared world and mission of MSHR intact. It's a very organic process and it always comes back to fostering and supporting a rich internal logic and group mind. Our collaborators are our biggest influences! ♦