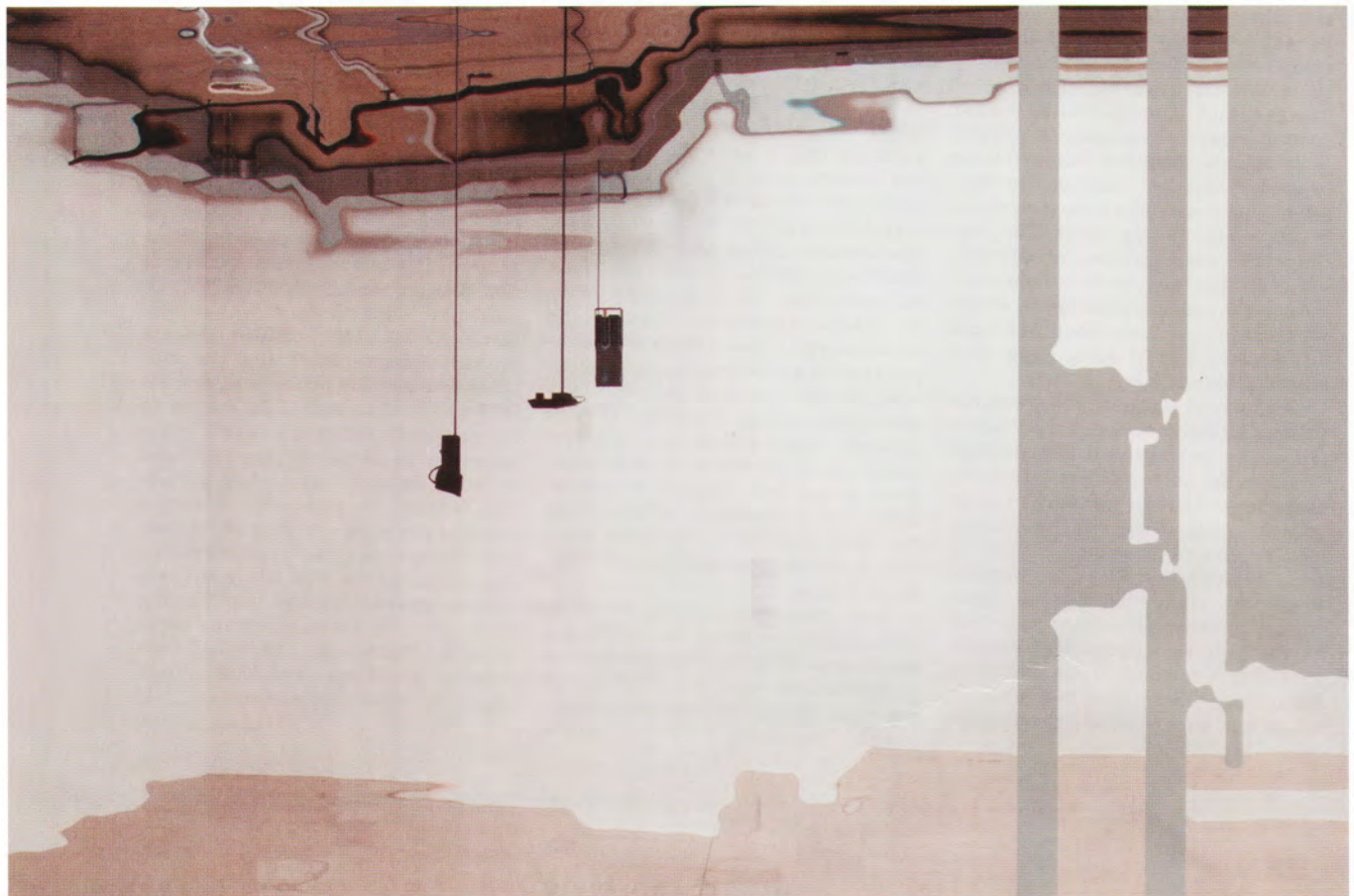




Florian Hecker:
Chimerization
and *Hinge*, both
2012, simultaneous
sound installations.
Courtesy Sadie
Coles HQ, London.



A photograph
from Hecker's
installation
3 Channel Chronicles,
2010-12, C-print,
7 7/8 by 11 3/4 inches.
Courtesy Sadie
Coles HQ.

SIGNAL AND NOISE

Within the amorphous field of sound art, Florian Hecker's compositions stand out as much for their conceptual rigor as for their aural inventiveness.

by William S. Smith

FLORIAN HECKER'S SOUND installations can appear deceptively austere. Visitors to the recent exhibition "Soundings: A Contemporary Score" at New York's Museum of Modern Art (through Nov. 3) encountered the German artist's *Affordance* (2013), whose visible components were three small but powerful speakers hanging from the ceiling near the museum's Bauhaus staircase. But if the piece was visually spare, it brimmed over with baroque sonic flourishes. Hecker's compositions feel precise and highly structured even as they threaten to devolve into guttural synthetic noise or ecstatic digital screeching. The immediate experience of *Affordance* can be overwhelming (and at times physically uncomfortable), yet even the untrained ear can grasp the presence of an underlying structure. There is an unshakable sense when listening to Hecker's work that every electronic beep could be footnoted, and that every moment of sound has been calibrated by the artist to invoke some musical tradition, scientific study in psychoacoustics, nightclub subculture or precedent in Conceptual art.

It is appropriate, then, that the chimera has become a central concept informing several of Hecker's recent projects. A mythical creature composed of three entirely different species, the chimera denotes hybridity, paradox and, of course, something monstrous. *Chimerization* (2012), which

Hecker initially presented at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, is a collaboration with the Iranian philosopher Reza Negarestani, who composed a libretto titled "The Snake, The Goat and the Ladder: A Board Game for Playing Chimera." The libretto has a recurring tripartite structure. Negarestani's rhythmical words, which the philosopher characterizes as "a topological hymn to the abyss," were recorded in English, German and Farsi by three different speakers of each language, creating a total of nine renditions.

While hints of that initial scheme persist in the final work, the "board game" has been elaborately reshuffled. Hecker recorded the vocals under pristine conditions in a soundproof, echoless anechoic chamber at MIT, where he was a visiting artist. Yet after being processed, filtered and chopped up with custom digital tools, the voices sound as if they were recorded by a restless HAM radio operator picking up scattered long-range broadcasts from Germany and Iran. Low pulsing sounds and piercing tones interrupt the vocals; some of these electronic warbles are familiar from science fiction movies, while others could have originated on another planet entirely.

For Hecker, who holds degrees in computational linguistics and psycholinguistics, the chimera is also a technical description of the digital sound that he produces. Writing in *Chimerizations*, a 2013 book published by

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
Hecker's *C.D. -
A Script for Synthesis*
will premiere on
Nov. 9 at the
Guggenheim
Museum, New York,
as part of Performa 13.



Two spreads from Hecker's book *Chimerizations*, 2013. Courtesy Primary Information, New York.

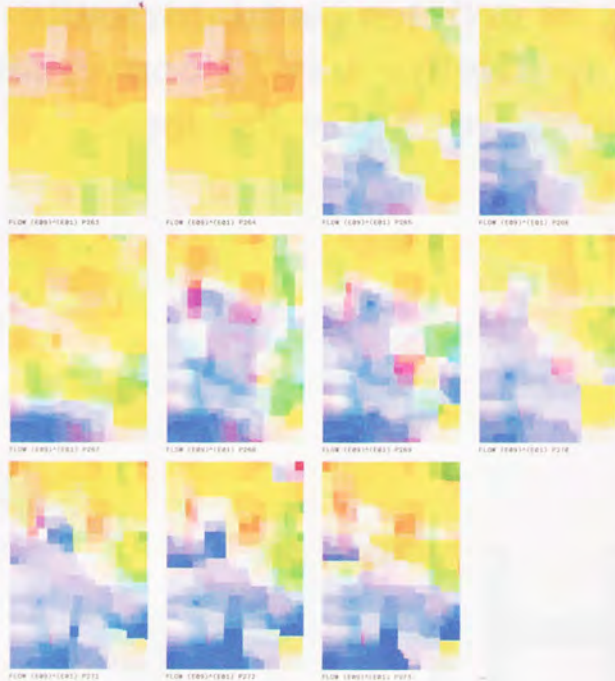
Primary Information to document Hecker's recent work, the MIT anthropologist Stefan Helmreich defines auditory chimeras as "sound events realized through a technical practice of sieving one sound through another—pressing the 'fine structure' of one sound (the second-to-second pitch and texture) through the 'envelope' (overall attack, sustain and decay profile) of another." In this sense, the aural characteristics of a drum beat and a piano can coexist in a single sound: a counterintuitive proposition that finds an analogue in the scientific definition of genetic chimeras—creatures with multiple distinct DNA profiles.

Hecker has explored this alien sound space in several pieces, including *Hinge* (2012), a "sequel" to *Chimerization* that he recently realized as an installation at London's Sadie Coles HQ gallery. An earlier inkling of this hybrid sensibility can also be found in his album *Acid in the Style of David Tudor* (2009), which slots the bouncy riffs of acid house music into an erratic structure evocative of the American pianist and composer's aleatory compositions. Like Art & Language's series of conceptual paintings from 1979-80, "Portraits of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock"—rip-offs of the American artist's distinctive canvases labeled as depictions of

the Russian revolutionary—Hecker's splicing of the nightclub and the concert hall could be dismissed as a clever one-liner for the over-educated. Yet just as Art & Language superimposed two representational modes in their abstract take on a socialist realist subject, *Acid in the Style of David Tudor* is a remarkable achievement: a single piece of music that manages to mimic popular and elite forms of music simultaneously, without ever fitting comfortably into either category.

Discussing Hecker's work can easily turn into an exercise in source mongering. Any given piece could be supplemented with a list of works cited, as Hecker makes myriad sonic references to composers, DJs and audio technicians throughout compositions that might seem simply chaotic to the uninitiated. Instead of a bookish pursuit, however, Hecker's approach is more like that of a mad scientist; he creates new, mutant sounds by synthesizing his broad knowledge of electronic music in all its forms.

Hecker still performs in fog-filled, laser-lit nightclubs, and the numerous albums he has released over the past five years have been reviewed on popular music websites, albeit relegated to niche sections for "extreme noise." It might be possible to chart a trajectory of increasing inaccessibility in



Hecker's practice, running from the Munich clubs where he got his start in the 1990s, to the niche record labels where he released frequently earsplitting albums, and then finally to the museum gallery, where a new cultural chimera was born by presenting the "fine structure" of electronic music within the "envelope" of sound art.

One indication of this shift is that the pictorial documentation of Hecker's work has become more elaborate. Using a process based on the SIFT flow algorithm, Hecker distorts the digital photographs of his gallery installations in ways that offer a loose optical parallel to the aural experience. Similar processes informed the design of the Primary Information *Chimerizations* book; images appear warped and degraded, and the digitally processed typography hovers in places between legibility and pure abstraction. Hecker's work in the gallery setting also bears strong connections to the legacies of Minimal and Post-Minimal art. His speaker installations not only resemble the spare forms of Minimal sculpture; they also invite the kind of critical awareness about space, perception and architecture that many artists and critics of the 1960s and '70s sought to inspire in viewers.

In *Chimerization*, the three channels of audio are central to this effect. According to Hecker, that tripartite configuration is the simplest way to complicate—and draw attention to—the act of listening. In contrast to stereo recordings, which sound rich and natural by appealing to our two ears, three-channel compositions can be profoundly unsettling because the sound being emitted from the speakers actually exceeds our natural ability to perceive it. Listeners' perceptions of the piece change as they move around the gallery space or even tilt their heads. The experience of *Chimerization* is contingent on the location of the listener's body, which effectively becomes a fourth element of the work. While this means that the piece could be infinitely renewed—generating a different experience every time—as always in Hecker's practice there is a counter-proposition, as listeners may be alienated by the knowledge that they will always be missing something. This is the risk inherent in Hecker's compositions, and in the hermeticism of the source material that he employs. But the potential payoff is high: expanded possibilities for sound, a new relationship to the very act of listening. ○