

Stephen Kelly – Open Tuning

Insofar as an artwork involves or consists of a system, its most characteristic feature is the modulation of phenomena over time. Identifying this modulation as a site of authorship is central to understanding the artist's intentions.

The components of a systems artwork can be described, but the effects they produce can only be experienced when the system is in operation. A systems artwork becomes knowable through an accumulation of evidence about its behaviour. *Open Tuning* involves an apparatus of loudspeakers, motors and metal armatures through which the activity of an underlying system is made perceptible.

As a system, *Open Tuning* continuously transforms information (telemetry data from buoys that register changes in ocean wave characteristics) into sound and movement patterns. Yet these patterns are not the mechanistic index of an external stimulus. In proposing an artistic, non-instrumental use of data that changes unpredictably, Stephen Kelly assumes responsibility for interpreting abstract, seemingly arbitrary changes in number values, and rendering these as concrete and engaging phenomena. While driven by an uncontrolled input, the work has an overall experiential form that is adjusted and 'tuned' using an approach informed by musical composition and sound sculpture.

Kelly's compositional process involves both the iterative design of software parameters that influence how varying data is interpreted and transformed into sound by filtering sine waves and pink noise, and an intuitively crafted adjustment of the audio-kinetic expression produced when this sound is diffused through the work's physical apparatus. Discrete streams of data independently influence each loudspeaker's movements and sound emissions. Attached to freely moving armatures, the loudspeakers' asynchronous movements produce complex patterns of displacement and phase shift.

An independent physical system in their own right, these patterns exceed any practical prediction or modeling, analogizing rather than indexing the ocean's movements. While at a certain level unpredictable, *Open Tuning's* patterns are by no means unintended or uninfluenced. The work's varying oscillations reflect a creative insight on Kelly's part: rather than privileging the random or the arbitrary, a strategic unpredictability serves to underline the intricacy and interconnectedness inherent in complex systems.

Tim Dallett is an artist, writer and curator with a particular interest in the role of time-based media in installation practices. He lives in Montreal.